

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale  
Sunday, July 25, 2021

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## **Isaiah 40:1-11**

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

This is the word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Well friends, it's beginning to look a tiny bit like Christmas here at Idlewild with our first advent hymn this morning and this passage from the prophet Isaiah. Now 'People Look East' is probably my favorite advent hymn so I will use any excuse to sing it and it is tied very closely to this text from Isaiah today. I'm drawn to 'People Look East' because of its joyful longing toward a promised hope and a restoration; as well as its declaration that we the people have a part to play. We are to prepare and to share the good news. The text from Isaiah is filled with the gentleness of God's good news; and that's why we hear it nearly every advent here in our Christian churches; and truthfully this text is so ubiquitously tied to advent that it's difficult sometimes to separate it from that mindset. I mean, who doesn't hear the words 'comfort, comfort ye my people' and hear the strains of Handel's Messiah and a soaring tenor voice.

But the 40th chapter of Isaiah is a stark departure from the first 39 chapters. The book we know as Isaiah was written in parts most likely by multiple authors which we see demonstrated in the clearly distinct approaches the text takes in different sections. Chapters 1 through 39 are prophetic texts written foretelling the downfall and destruction of Israel; written and prophesied

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before and anticipating the Babylonian exile; and, as such, they are full of declarations of judgment and wrath and destruction. And chapter 40 and following as I said sets an entirely different tone. You can hear it from the beginning the focus on ‘comfort, comfort you oh my people.’ Chapter 40 starts a word of hope; in particular, a word of hope to a people in crisis. These are people still in exile, or at the very most, making their way home after generations in exile. Think of it for a minute. Everything they've known and everything they've loved is gone. Their past has been demolished and their future is still unknown. Thus the 40th chapter of Isaiah is focused on restoration. The relationship between the people and God is being restored because God makes it so. Just as from Isaiah’s perspective God punished the people for violating their covenant relationship. God also gathers the scattered flocks, nurturing them and comforting them. And while the people are like grass, fickle and frail, as witnessed by their unfaithfulness and by their destruction. God is eternal, the word of our God stands forever. God for the people hearing this text is the author of their salvation, God is the center of it all. In verses 3, 4, and 5 we hear an echo of the promises made and completed in the exodus from Egypt. Once again God is rescuing the people from bondage in a foreign land, and God is bringing people through the wilderness of the desert into wholeness and prosperity. This is a word that our world desperately needs to hear today; that the cries of the people do not go unheard; that the way that the machinery of our society devours creation and destroys people is not the only way to exist.

The text promises that God hears, and God responds with gentleness and with loving kindness with a different way to order and organize our lives.

God's demand is that we live this gentleness, love, faithfulness, kindness, patience, generosity peace, and joy, these fruits of the spirit in all things.

At times I think it's hard for us to conceptualize gentleness the way we see it practice in our scriptures. Gentleness is something that our culture does not prize very much. To be fair it's something that the ancient Greek or roman cultures didn't prize either, and yet we find it on Paul’s lists of the fruits of the spirit in Galatians. Too often gentleness is written off as weakness.

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In the stories we tell in our culture, in the books and movies, and in our interactions, gentleness is relegated to the realm of motherhood, or even more broadly womanhood, where we mouth praise of the virtue of gentleness while at best mocking and at worst abusing those who practice it in our dog-eat-dog world.

Culturally, we align gentleness with mildness of spirit, with meekness, and we try our best to keep it as far away from us as possible.

Now to be clear, gentleness as a fruit of the spirit is not tied to a specific gender identity. It is not weakness or passivity. It's simply an attentive approach to interacting with the world around us. You can be gentle while being strong firm and clear. Any preschool teacher will tell you that. That's the kind of gentleness Paul is talking about when he urges us to speak truth in love in the letter to Ephesians. This is the kind of gentleness that we see demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who called people to account all the time but welcomed them into relationship as well. There's a reason that Isaiah and other parts of scripture use the imagery of shepherd. How many of you have actually ever worked with sheep? Okay, despite our modern sensibility of Jesus with a lamb on his shoulders meek and mild, shepherding is a very hard work. Shepherds need to be gentle in order not to scare the sheep because sheep have very strong fight or flight but no fight at all just flight in them. But shepherds are not meek nor are they mild. It takes considerable strength firmness and will to wrangle to protect them and to care for them.

Gentleness, as we see it practiced in our scriptures, is being aware that other people are human beings with feelings also. Gentleness means treating those people and their feelings with the same care and forbearance that we would desire for ourselves. It is truly due unto others.

It means to understand that others are not cogs in a machine or simply here to be of use to us and our desires. Gentleness is recognizing the spark of God in every person and welcoming that spark even in disagreement. Gentleness is counter cultural in a world that says only the individual matters. Gentleness is madness in a world that is driven by scarcity where everyone is out to get theirs before everything is gone. But scarcity isn't the model for our God. God promises abundance in all things, and God calls us to live our lives practicing that abundance in all things. We have been recipients of the abundant gentleness and grace we see demonstrated in

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our scriptures, and we bear the fruit of gentleness when we live that spirit in all that we say and all that we do.

Like all of the other fruits of the spirit we have to practice gentleness. And so how do you do that? There are three things that come to mind for me, habits of what it means to live with gentleness. The first is active listening; not listening to wait your turn to talk and tell your story or your joke but listening to truly hear the other person. Gentleness means being present for other people you're in conversation with.

Another habit of gentleness is forgiveness, the willingness to forgive and to ask for forgiveness that allows room for healing and change rather than us staying in destructive ruts that we have made for ourselves. I think another habit of gentleness that we see witness to by Christ is vulnerability; to open ourselves to others. It is impossible to be gentle without making space for others to affect us without being open to their present.

Christopher Wright reflects on biblical gentleness this way in his book *Cultivating the Fruits of the Spirit* which has come in quite handy for me writing these backyard bible studies every week. Christopher Wright says “humility comes a lot easier when you really know yourself; when you know the weak and flawed person who is living inside the shell you have on the outside. Then out of that deep well of self-knowledge and gratitude for the grace of God that has rescued you from your own failure comes humility before God and gentleness towards others.

When we know ourselves as forgiven and redeemed, we bring that gentleness to the world. This is one of the reasons that I think our text from Isaiah is such a powerful message of gentleness that stands the test of time. It is a reminder that we are forgiven and redeemed; our penalty has been paid. Because i believe in a very real sense we are also in exile, friends; and that exile is to a great extent one of our own making. We have not kept covenant with God; we have not loved our neighbors; we have not heard the cries of God's people; and yet here we are comforted by God in order that we might go and do those very things. We are equipped to recognize where we have fallen short, and to still go out and try and try again.

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So, friends, that leaves us with our central question today: who among us needs to hear god's word of comfort; who is lost forsaken, cast down, or hungry in our community or in this very room; who is stuck in neutral on a path going nowhere? Where are god's people in exile today?

Because Isaiah's word of comfort and gentleness is our watchword as we are sent out to share the song of joy and longing that is the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are forgiven, and we are called to serve God and love one another with gentleness, compassion, and humility of spirit.

Friends, may it be so this day and every day.

Amen.