

11-1-1950

Sermon Study on Is. 40:1-8, for the Third Sunday in Advent

A. von Rohr Sauer

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sauer, A. von Rohr (1950) "Sermon Study on Is. 40:1-8, for the Third Sunday in Advent," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 21, Article 75.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol21/iss1/75>

This Homiletical Help is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

May 27	1 S. a. Tr.	Deut. 6:4-13	(Use God's Word for His Sake)
June 3	2 S. a. Tr.	Prov. 9:1-10	(The Life of Christian Prudence)
June 10	3 S. a. Tr.	Is. 12	(God's Care for the Lost)
June 17	4 S. a. Tr.	Is. 65:17-25	(The Life of Trust)
June 24	5 S. a. Tr.	Lam. 3:22-32	(God's Blessing on Christian Witness)
July 1	6 S. a. Tr.	Ps. 1	(The Life of the New Man)
July 8	7 S. a. Tr.	Is. 62:6-12	(The Fruitful Christian Life)
July 15	8 S. a. Tr.	Jer. 23:16-29	(The Importance of True Teaching)
July 22	9 S. a. Tr.	Prov. 16:1-9	(God's Help Against Temptation)
July 29	10 S. a. Tr.	Jer. 7:1-11	(The Grace to Overcome Evil and Serve God)
Aug. 5	11 S. a. Tr.	Dan. 9:15-18	(God's Mercy Our Sole Support)
Aug. 12	12 S. a. Tr.	Is. 29:18-21	(The Glory of the Gospel)
Aug. 19	13 S. a. Tr.	Zech. 7:4-10	(God Fits Us for Work in His Service)
Aug. 26	14 S. a. Tr.	Ps. 50:14-23	(The Fruits of the Spirit in Worship and Behavior)
Sep. 2	15 S. a. Tr.	1 Kings 17:8-16	(God's Unfailing Help)
Sep. 9	16 S. a. Tr.	Job 5:17-26	(God's Help for Every Trial)
Sep. 16	17 S. a. Tr.	Ps. 75:4-7	(Forsake Self-Righteousness)
Sep. 23	18 S. a. Tr.	2 Chron. 1:7-12	(The Supreme Importance of God's Gift of Himself)
Sep. 30	19 S. a. Tr.	Ps. 32:1-7	(The Greatest Gift: Forgiveness)
Oct. 7	20 S. a. Tr.	Prov. 2:1-8	(God Gives Ability for Service)
Oct. 14	21 S. a. Tr.	2 Sam. 7:17-29	(Because of God in Christ Our Life Grows)
Oct. 21	22 S. a. Tr.	Prov. 24:14-20	(Forgiveness Begets Forgiveness)
Oct. 28	23 S. a. Tr.	Ps. 85:8-13	(The Battle of Flesh and Spirit)
Oct. 31	Reform.	Ps. 46	(God Our Sole Help)
Nov. 4	24 S. a. Tr.	Ps. 39:4-13	(God's Healing for the Believer)
Nov. 11	25 S. a. Tr.	Job 14:1-5	(Time and Change Drive to God)
Nov. 18	26 S. a. Tr.	Ps. 126	(God Will Save Through Every Trial)
Nov. 25	27 S. a. Tr.	Is. 35:3-10	(The Deliverance of God's Saints)
Nov. 29	Thanksg.	Ps. 34:1-8	

R. R. C.

Sermon Study on Is. 40:1-8 for the Third Sunday in Advent

The propers for this Sunday are focused on the Advent message that the Lord is coming: "The Lord is at hand" (Introit); "by Thy gracious visitation" (Collect); "until the Lord come" (Epistle); "Stir up Thy strength and come" (Gradual); "Art Thou He that should come?" (Gospel).

In view of the coming judgment the penitent Christian may take courage in the fact that the Lord came and still comes to visit His people with His grace. I. The Christian rejoices alway because the Lord has been favorable to His land, has brought back the captivity of His people, and has lightened the darkness of their hearts

by His gracious visitation. II. Because the Lord is at hand, the Christian strives for moderation and confidence by preparing his heart in true repentance and by praying fervently. III. The Christian is so mindful of his own weakness that he bids God come to him through the strength of His Word to lead him like a shepherd and thus to save him.

Parallel thoughts are emphasized in the Old Testament passage selected for this day. This text stresses: 1) The comfort of forgiveness—the Lord came, vv. 1-2; 2) The need of repentance—the Lord will come, vv. 3-5; 3) The remedy for weakness—the Lord comes now, vv. 6—8.

"Comfort ye, comfort ye My people!" says your God; "speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her period of service is at an end, that her guilt has been paid, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins!" Vv. 1-2.

Dispensing with introductory remarks in his usual way, Isaiah goes directly to the heart of his message: "Comfort ye, comfort ye My people! says your God." The Prophet sees the people of Judah languishing in the Babylonian Captivity. In this situation the Lord summons His prophets to comfort His forsaken people. Almost every word of the initial summons is one of cheer and encouragement. The double *nachamu, nachamu* emphasizes not only that comfort was sorely needed by the oppressed people, but also that the Lord was exceedingly eager to give them such comfort (A. Pieper). God calls Himself '*Elohechem*, "your God." In the divine name '*Elohim* God's power and majesty are normally the dominant elements. But when this word is used with personal suffixes, my God, your God, it signifies the God of grace and mercy. God refers to the exiles as "My people." The exile had served as a poignant reminder that Judah had ceased being God's people. With the captivity the covenant relation between God and the people as a whole had been terminated. The believing remnant, however, receives the assurance that it is still God's people despite the chastisement which it shared with the impenitent majority. Very appropriately the pronouns *your* and *My* have been called "the hinges on which the door of this new temple of revelation swings open before the long-expectant people" (G. A. Smith).

The prophets are further bidden by the Lord, "Speak ye to the

heart of Jerusalem." These words indicate how very tenderly the Lord approaches His people. Speaking to the heart is an idiom that was used of a man who was wooing his beloved. Shechem spoke to the heart of Dinah (Gen. 34:3). Hosea pictured the Lord as a husband who in his efforts to win back his unfaithful wife (Israel) spoke to her heart (Hos. 2:14). Whispered overtures of love, softly uttered expressions of affection and attachment—those are words to the heart.¹ The whispered address is intended to gain access for the Lord in the hearts of the people of Jerusalem. When such access has been assured, however, the subdued voice is to become that of a shouting herald: "Proclaim to her that her period of service is at an end." The emphasis in this proclamation and in the two that follow is on the three verbs which are placed at the beginning in the Hebrew: *ended, paid, received*. All three are prophetic perfects and indicate that according to God's view and the Prophet's view these events have already transpired, although they will actually take place at some future time. All three proclaim the advent of the great "at last" for which the people have waited. "Her period of service" is an allusion to the time spent by young men in military service; the same word is used in a derived sense of the misery and suffering of human life; applied to the people of Judah, it means all of their wretched experiences in the Babylonian Captivity. This God-appointed time of chastisement will soon reach its end, the seventy years of captivity will soon be past (cf. Jer. 25:11; 29:10; 2 Chron. 36:21; Zech. 1:12). "That her guilt has been paid." Many scholars hold that this means that the people themselves had paid the penalty which God inflicted on them, namely, by the suffering which they endured in the Exile. Lev. 26:41-43 is appealed to as evidence that the guilty people could thus work off their penalty and be acquitted. It must be remembered, however, that both the curses and the blessings listed in Leviticus 26 are terms of the Mosaic Covenant, of the Law. Perfect fulfillment by men of the demands made therein was as impossible then as it is now. That this was also Isaiah's view is shown by his statements in vv. 3-5 about the weakness and impotence of human flesh. The

¹ The idiom has also been rendered "Speak over the heart" and understood as a covering up of the heart with words in order to bring it to rest after it had been caused to beat excitedly by sorrow and anxiety. (E. Koenig.)

text does not indicate by whom the people's guilt is to be paid. But certainly the Prophet has that Agent in mind whose work he describes in such vivid detail in Chapter 53, the suffering Servant of the Lord, the Messiah. Upon this Substitute the Lord was to lay the iniquity of all the people, with His stripes they were to be healed, His chastisement was to be the medium for the removal of their guilt. Such a payment alone could render sufficient satisfaction for the people's huge debt to God. "That she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins!" The question to be answered here is this: Does the word "double" refer to double retribution or to double compensation? If double refers to the more than sufficient punishment which Israel experienced during the Exile, then it must be shown how this message was to serve as a comfort for Israel. This has been done by saying that the world powers whom the Lord used to punish Israel went too far, that they inflicted twice as much suffering on Israel as the Lord exacted of her, and that this fact should serve as a comfort to Israel. It has also been proposed that God Himself chose to regard those sufferings as sufficient to pay twice for the guilt of His people, wherefore Israel should take comfort. Neither view of the double retribution adequately explains the word "double." If, on the other hand, "double" is understood as a double reward of grace that is still in store for Israel in the future, then the word "double" not only makes more sense, but the last nine chapters of the Prophet's book (58—66) may also be appealed to in support of this view (A. Pieper). The subject matter of these closing chapters has to do with just such a double blessing which Israel will receive from the Lord (61:7). And the double portion of grace is described as remuneration or compensation for the chastisement which Israel previously has endured (60:15 ff.; 61:7; 62:8 ff.). The fact that the double reward is so prominent in those chapters points to the fact that the Prophet also had it in mind here. Thus the three clauses introduced by "that" in v. 2 are connected as follows: Israel's guilt is to be paid for in full by the Servant of the Lord; therefore, her suffering in the exile will soon be over; therefore, too, she will be repaid with double glory for all her sins.

Israel's captivity in Babylon is a type of man's enslavement under sin. For centuries after the Fall man had only God's promises of

deliverance to cling to. The Advent message brings words of comfort: the great "at last" has come. God has turned from His wrath, speaks kindly to His fallen creatures, calls them His children once more. In Christ our forgiveness is achieved. He paid for our guilt. Therefore our time of service, the years of affliction and cross which God has appointed for us here on earth, will soon be over. And after this affliction a double reward of glory will be in store for us in God's eternal kingdom. That is the comfort of forgiveness which the Advent message proclaims.

Hark! Someone is calling (in the wilderness): "In the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God! Let every valley be filled in and every mountain and hill be made low! Let the hump become even ground and the high terrain a valley! Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see (it) together; for the Lord's mouth has spoken (it)." Vv. 3-5.

The Lord's summons in vv. 1-2 to proclaim comfort to His people is obeyed. A voice is heard calling in the wilderness. The voice bids the people to build a highway for the Lord in the wilderness.² When a royal personage undertook a journey in ancient times, the way on which he was to travel was carefully prepared in advance so that he might have no difficulty in traversing it. Thus here a level right of way is desirable for the Lord. To assure a level road the same technique of filling in low places and cutting down high places, which is so familiar in modern highway construction, is to be followed. But what is the road for? Where is the Lord going? The answers, not explicitly given in the text, must be supplied. The wilderness way is to be a road leading across the Arabian Desert, which separates the homeland of the Jews (Palestine) from the land of their captivity (Babylon). The Lord is going to come along this road from Jerusalem to Babylon to free His people from their captivity and to lead them back to their homeland. If the way is a difficult one to traverse, His coming to redeem His

² "In the wilderness," though expressed but once in the Hebrew and made to modify "calling" in both the LXX and Matt. 3:3, must also be attached to "Prepare a way" because of the obvious Hebrew parallelism: prepare in the wilderness; make straight in the desert. The caller was not only situated in the wilderness, but also urged that a way be cleared in the wilderness." (E. Koenig.)

people may be delayed. Therefore all obstacles are to be removed, and the pathway is to be made perfectly clear so that His speedy arrival may be facilitated. This is, of course, figurative language. It aims to assure the exiled people that their God is indeed coming to deliver them. But at the same time it admonishes them to prepare their hearts for His coming by removing all of the obstacles which might hinder Him from carrying out His salutary work. In other words, this voice calls upon the people to repent of their sins, for the Lord is coming!

But whose is the voice that is heard in vv. 3-5? First it was the voice of the Prophet Isaiah himself, who was calling the people of Israel to repentance; it was the voice of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and other Old Testament preachers of repentance. All of these were preparatory voices in the wilderness, types of a greater voice to come. *The* voice, however, *the* preacher of repentance, *the* way-preparer in the full sense of the word was John the Baptist. It was his message: "Repent ye! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2) which marked the culmination of Isaiah's prophecy.

"Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed." It has been maintained that the revelation of the glory of the Lord consisted in this, that the Lord came to deliver His people from the Babylonian Captivity and that all the nations of the world were witnesses of this restoration (J. Bewer). This deliverance from the Exile was indeed a manifestation of the glory of the Lord, but only one of the many preliminary manifestations that are referred to in the Old Testament. To understand the term "glory of the Lord," it is necessary to look at the physical phenomenon which the Old Testament frequently associates with it. This phenomenon is described in the greatest detail in the first chapter of Ezekiel. Two of its outstanding features may be mentioned here, namely, the fire which was visible in the center of the phenomenon and the rainbow which enclosed it. The fire symbolized the destructive power of God's holiness (Ex. 3:2 ff.; 24:17); the rainbow typified God's grace and love (Gen. 9:12 ff.; Rev. 10:1). The immediate effect which the appearance of the glory of the Lord had upon those who beheld it was indeed a terrifying one (Is. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; Luke 2:9); it moved them to despair of survival in the presence of the holy God. But that initial

fear was only temporary. The consuming fire was surrounded by the reassuring rainbow; the holy God was enclosed in a mantle of grace. Thus He revealed Himself to man not in order to destroy, but to save him. Beginning with the flaming bush at Horeb, all of the Old Testament revelations of the glory of the Lord pointed to that climactic manifestation which the shepherds witnessed on the fields of Bethlehem, the vision in which the birth of the Savior was announced. Jesus Christ is the personal embodiment of that grace with which God finally visited man to effect his salvation. That does not mean, however, that the gracious God has ceased being holy. The fire continues to be a destructive one for all of those who reject God's grace. For that reason the glory of the Lord has been defined as "the holy grace or the gracious holiness" of God and equated with the Savior's words: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (A. Pieper). "And all flesh shall see (it) together; for the Lord's mouth has spoken (it)." Even as all flesh (nations) witnessed the glory of the Lord as it showed itself in the deliverance of Israel from the Babylonian Captivity, so all the nations of the world were to see the glory of the Lord revealed in the incarnate Christ, namely, through the Gospel which was preached unto them. A view of that glorious vision was guaranteed to all by the very fact that the Lord promised it with His own mouth.

The glory of the Lord has been revealed to all the world in the person and work of the Savior Jesus Christ. Within a short time the birthday of this holy Child of grace will again be commemorated. On this day, however, the thoughts of the Christian center on the second advent of his Lord, on His last coming in the full revelation of His glory, to lead His faithful people home to the heavenly Jerusalem. Because the Christian regards that coming as imminent, he makes every effort to prepare the way for the Lord. That calls for repentance, for clearing out of the way all of the sins that stand between him and his God, the mountains of pride and self-righteousness and indifference, the valleys of negligence and hypocrisy and injustice. The Christian approaches the second advent with a heart that is contrite and conscious of its many sins, but also mindful of the comfort which the Lord brought at His first coming. In calling his flock to such repentance the Christian

pastor serves as another voice in the wilderness, he follows in the footsteps of a John and an Isaiah.

Hark! Someone is saying: "Preach!" And he said: "What shall I preach?" (Answer): "All flesh is grass, and all its excellence is like the flower of the field. The grass is dry, the flower withered, for the Lord's breath has blasted it. Even the people is grass. The grass is dry, the flower withered; but the Word of our God will abide forever." Vv. 6-8.

It is left to the reader to determine whose the voices are that are engaged in this dialog. The voice that says: "Preach!" is no doubt the commissioning voice of God. The answering voice is that of Isaiah.³ The Prophet inquires of the Lord what the theme of his new message is to be. The Lord's answer is introduced without repeating the "And He said": "All flesh is grass, and all its excellence is like the flower of the field." The word that is translated "excellence" is a common word for grace or mercy in the Old Testament (*chesed*); but this is obviously an unsuitable meaning here. The LXX and 1 Peter 1:24 translate "glory." What apparently is meant is everything with which man prides himself, the noblest and best that he has achieved, his most noteworthy accomplishments. The whole human race and whatever excellent things it may produce are comparable to grass and flowers. The point of comparison is the impotent, transitory character of these plants, their inability to withstand the powerful forces of nature: "The grass is dry, the flower withered, for the Lord's breath has blasted it." It is quite possible that the Prophet had the luxuriant growth of the plains of Sharon and Jezreel in mind, that he saw these fields of lush grass and beautiful lilies and anemones completely ruined by the hot east wind that suddenly blew over them. Then he applied what he saw to the lot of men. As these plants were too frail to withstand the force of the wind, so corrupt mankind is too weak to stand before the power which God brings to bear upon it. As the Lord's physical breath destroyed the flowers, so the Lord's spiritual breath, the holy fire of His glory, has a devastating effect upon sinful man. This spiritual breath began to blow with deadly force as soon as man fell into sin. Throughout history it has continued

³ The LXX translation "And I said" instead of "And he said" is based merely on a different pointing of the Hebrew vowels.

its activity, reducing mankind and all its glory to withered grass and faded flowers. Not even God's own people escaped from it: "Even the people is grass."⁴ That "the people" is not a general term covering all of the people in the world, but rather a particular reference to Israel is shown both by the definite article and by the introductory "even." Despite its covenant relation with God, despite the mercy that had been shown it, Israel too was withered grass because of its sinfulness. The conditions of the Exile showed this: the people were without a king and a temple, priests were not functioning, festivals were not being held, the glory of the past was gone. "The grass is dry, the flower withered, but the Word of our God will abide forever." The repetition of these same words which the Prophet had used earlier serves to emphasize the truth that mankind, including God's people, is nought but withered grass and faded flowers. But it does more. It sharpens the contrast between this truth and the following one: the eternal character of the Word of Israel's God. The Word of *our* God is the Word of grace, the Word of comfort which Isaiah was bidden to bring to his people, the "Word to the heart" which assured them that God was coming to deliver them. This is the Word of promise which was given to the Israelite fathers and then repeated throughout their people's history, the divine assurance that a Messiah was coming who would save His people from their sin. This Word of God was challenged by the nations with whom Israel came into contact: Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt. These kingdoms of the world, these powers of the flesh persisted in their efforts to prevent the Word of Israel's God from being fulfilled. But according to the closing words of the text their efforts are doomed to failure and disaster. Babylon, which is holding God's people in captivity, will fall just as surely as Assyria fell before it. All flesh will perish, but the gracious Word of God will abide and prevail, His fiats will certainly be fulfilled, His salvation will become a glorious reality.

The times between the Lord's first coming and His second advent are trying times also for the Christian, because he still dwells in the

⁴ The fact that this clause is missing in the LXX does not mean that it was not in the original Hebrew. It is worthy of note that the linear text of the newly discovered Isaiah MS corresponds to that of the LXX; but the additional material of the Massoretic text is entered between the lines and on the left-hand margin of the new MS.

earthly tabernacle of his flesh. He lives in a body that has been blasted into weakness and impotence by the breath of the Lord's holiness. He lives in a material world that gives evidence of the constant decadence to which the Lord's spirit has reduced it. He lives among men whose goodness, kindness, and love have to a great extent withered like grass and become as faded flowers. The Advent message, however, assures the Christian that he has one solid rock on which he can stand, namely, the abiding Word of his God. Through this Word the Lord comes to him now to support him in his weakness, to help him overcome all of his frustrations and disappointments, to direct his attention beyond all of the vanity that surrounds him. This Word is the rod and staff with which the Shepherd of Israel comes to guide His flock out of the desolate wasteland of this world to the more pleasant pastures of eternity.

SUGGESTED OUTLINES

Theme: Comfort Ye My People!

1. For the guilt of the past. Vv. 1-2
2. For the judgment of the future. Vv. 3-5
3. For the weakness of the present. Vv. 6-8

Theme: Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord!

1. Accept His grace. Vv. 1-2
2. Amend your life. Vv. 3-5
3. Trust His Word. Vv. 6-8

Theme: The Glory of the Lord Shall be Revealed

1. It brings forgiveness *when* it comes. Vv. 1-2
2. It demands repentance *before* it comes. Vv. 3-5
3. It promises strength *until* it comes. Vv. 6-8

Theme: The Word of the Lord will Abide Forever

1. The justifying Word. Vv. 1-2
2. The sanctifying Word. Vv. 3-5
3. The sustaining Word. Vv. 6-8

A. v. R. SAUER