

10 more days until Christmas! Just 10 more days. Is your shopping all done? Preparations all made? House all cleaned up for company? Presents already wrapped and under the Christmas tree? Maybe you are a lot more organized and on top of things than our family. But let me just share with you... we've got a long way to go yet. In fact, I can guarantee you a wave of anxiety just shot through my wife as I asked these questions. We're not ready, and we really need to be further along. Even if you are really on top of things for Christmas, I bet you can remember a time when waves of anxiety hit your stomach at a time when you were not as prepared as you would like to be.

But the real preparations for Christmas this time of year aren't the shopping, wrapping, decorating, cleaning and cooking. No, the real preparation needs to take place in our heart. Christ is coming. Are we ready? No, really think about it. I'm not just talking about a heart ready for the Savior born in Bethlehem. Those peaceful images of a gentle baby lying in a manger are something we're always ready for. What I'm talking about is: Are you ready for Jesus to come into your heart today? Or maybe the scarier question: Are you ready for Jesus to come in judgment? Are you ready to stand face to face with the Holy and Just Creator of the Universe? If I said to you, "Jesus *will* return in glory with all the angels TONIGHT." Would a wave of anxiety make your stomach?

If so, you are not the only believer to feel that way. The people who originally heard the prophet Isaiah's message from God were surely feeling the same way. Isaiah lived roughly 700 years before Christ. These were evil days in the southern kingdom of Judah where Isaiah conducted his ministry. The people often led by the kings were wicked and idolatrous. They turned their backs on the one true God and chased after the gods of the nations all around them. You can imagine how a husband or a wife feels when their spouse is unfaithful to them and takes another lover. They are angry, devastated, disappointed. This is how God felt when his people (his chosen people whom he had protected and preserved and made promises to) were unfaithful to him. They cheated on him by running after false gods... gods that didn't even exist. What a slap in the face to faithful God.

And so much of Isaiah's prophecy is God's lament. God's anger at Judah's rebellion and disobedience. He speaks a great deal about God's impending wrath and judgment. Isaiah foretells the attacks of the Assyrians on Judah. He also foretells the ultimate defeat of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. The people would be taken into captivity.

Now, imagine you were one of the few faithful believers listening to these words from Isaiah! Wouldn't your heart sink? Wouldn't you feel waves of anxiety come over you? Wouldn't you wonder if there was any hope? If you would survive God's judgment? If God would or could love you and forgive you?

It's not hard for us to imagine feeling this way, because I bet you've felt that way before. And if you haven't felt that way before, God is calling you to repentance today. You see, we tend to have this unhealthy view of our ability and morality. God addresses that in our text today: "**All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass.**" In Palestine, in April and beginning of May there can be beautiful fields of grass and

wild flowers. However, in May a hot, dry wind comes from the east. One day a field can be lush and beautiful, and the next day the strong, hot wind kills the grass and flowers. People are like grass. God wants all people to realize that our achievements are fleeting. Our morality is worthless. Our lives are short. We are born, we flower, and we die.

We're not as amazing as we make ourselves out to be!

- How amazing when man makes huge *skyscrapers* and long bridges spanning several miles! But they are nothing compared to the beauty of a massive snow-capped mountain towering over the valley below.
- How amazing when we think about the speed and intricacy of a computer! But it is nothing when compared to the speed, intelligence and complexity of the human brain created by God.
- How beautiful are the paintings artists can draw! But they are only making a two dimensional image of an actual object created by God.
- How amazing is modern medicine and man's knowledge of the inner workings of the human body! But this is nothing compared to the amazement we should feel when we consider the one who designed and created those amazing bodies. **All men are like grass.**

We also tend to overestimate our morality and goodness. But compare our best days in the pure light of God's law, and we find we've fallen far short of God's holy expectations. And although we more often than not fail to see our horrible disobedience, God *always* sees it. Nothing is hidden from him. The breath of the Lord blows on our hearts and lives, and that hot, pure, holy wind lays bare every lust of our heart, every improper attitude, every angry word, every self-righteous thought. It reveals our cold, dead hearts.

I'm looking out right now at a bunch of grass and flowers. How long before the grass wither and the flowers fall? How many days do you have left on this earth? Not many. Not many. The wages of sin... is death.

Like the people Isaiah wrote to, a wave of anxiety should have come over every one of us by now.

Now listen to what our God says to you today:

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.” Our Lord God loves you dearly, and so he wants you to listen carefully today to this word of comfort and joy. They are soft, gentle, loving words. Your hard service is ended. Your sin is paid for completely. You receive full pardon. In fact, instead of punishment for your sins, you receive blessing from the Lord's hand. And not just blessing, but double blessing!

But how? Why does God forgive and pardon?

A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” A prophecy of John the Baptist. He prepares people's hearts for the coming of the Lord by calling them to repentance. The high places of sin and pride must be made low. The low places of despair and hopelessness must be raised up. The rough ground of sin and disobedience made level. See your sins for what they are: Death deeds. Now is the day to repent.

And then look. Isaiah foretold that the glory of the Lord would be revealed and all mankind would see it. Look into the manger in the stable in Bethlehem and see it... the glory of the LORD, hidden in a helpless baby. God made flesh, entering our world to stage the most amazing rescue mission the world has ever seen. The angels sang and proclaimed to the shepherds that evening: "Here is your God!" Dear fellow believers, look! For **here is your God**, humble and lowly. Watch him grow up and be amazed at his goodness. All he does is right. We find no fault in his words. He heals, he raises the dead, he proclaims good news to the poor in spirit. This is your Savior Jesus. **His reward is with him.** For his holy life, and his death for your sins means Jesus has sufficient reward for every single person on the planet. His reward is with him, freely offered to all: forgiveness! Life! Salvation!

"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." Are you feeling exhausted? defenseless? Burned out? Are you just... done? Feel the Good Shepherd lifting you up in his arms. He's placing you close to his heart, and he's saying, "It's okay! I've got you. Everything's going to be okay. I'll get you home safely. I'll lead you there myself, and carry you if I have to.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to them" says your God. Your hard service is done. Your sin has been paid for and pardoned. You have received from the Lord a double blessing in exchange for your sins, through Christ's saving death and perfect righteousness. These are delivered to you in Baptism, the Lord's supper and the enduring word of God.

Comfort and joy are yours from your God who loves you dearly... yes, even you. Amen.