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## “Comfort and Joy”

BY PASTOR JOHN HILLMER

The message of Isaiah is clear as a bell: comfort and joy! Little wonder then that “God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen” has been ringing in my head all week long as I’m looking at these words and carrying them around in my heart and mind, getting today’s sermon ready. That’s how sermons are born! The words of Isaiah from the last half of the book are all about this “turn” from comfort to joy. “Comfort, comfort ye my people” - Isaiah 40 last Sunday – “speak tenderly to Jerusalem, says your God”. They’d been through a “tough patch” – they’d been through the mill – their country and nation had fallen apart, and their land was being governed by a foreign power.

But still – there is reason to hope! Word of restoration and return. “Build a highway for our God – right through the devastating wilderness”. Joy is coming! In fact - it’s a journey to Joy. Today’s passage from Isaiah, keeps it going.

*“The spirit of the Lord is upon me...to bring good news to the oppressed;  
to proclaim liberty to the captives...*

*to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor..*

*to comfort all who mourn. (there it IS - COMFORT!)*

*to give them the oil of gladness, instead of mourning.*

*They will be called “the OAKS of righteousness”.*

*(like a mighty Oak! The great LIVE OAKS of old Florida!)*

*The planting of the Lord.*

*Therefore, I will greatly REJOICE... (there it is – JOY!)*

*my whole being shall exult in the Lord.*

**Comfort and joy!**

And so Isaiah is a perfect “way maker” as his words help us to build a road -- a road to build up to the hope of Christmas.

The Psalm does the same thing!

*“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion – we were like those who dream!  
(dreamers!)*

*our mouths were filled with laughter, and our tongues with shouts of Joy.*

*We mourned and sowed tears of sorrow, but we reaped songs of joy.*

*We go weeping, carrying the seed of sorrow -*

*but we return with the joy of the harvest. A harvest of joy.”*

### **Comfort and Joy!**

The Christmas carol captures the words of Isaiah, and the hope of Christmas perfectly!

*God rest ye merry gentlemen  
Let nothing you dismay  
Remember Christ our Savior  
Was born on Christmas Day  
To save us all from Satan's pow'r  
When we were gone astray  
Oh tidings of comfort and joy  
Comfort and joy  
Oh tidings of comfort and joy*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ku7ohU1IGIs>

Words of comfort, very often (so naturally) result in leading us to JOY.

- Irma. When we were given word (yes, we left town for the hurricane) when we heard that our house was still standing, and no trees had fallen through the roof – we were comforted by this good word -and the result was - joy. Great joy!
- When parents of a missing child are comforted with the words that “she’s ok” “she has been found” – the resultant effect is JOY.
- Even in a situation of grave illness... when a person is facing their last days on earth; there’s no sense mincing words; the family gathers; prayers are prayed; hospice may be called; when the time comes and they have breathed their last – to know that a person has died in peace, and in faith - surrounded with the love of family – oh what comfort! And that comfort often leads to Joy. Joy and Thankfulness.

When Israel, is comforted by the words of Isaiah, that their land is still standing and is being returned to them - such JOY!

**+Comfort and Joy+**

When John the baptizer comforts the people with words of forgiveness - not violence and destruction -not retaliation but reconciliation - FORGIVENESS! - coupled with the powerful image of water washing those sins away - there is such great joy.

**+Comfort and Joy+**

That's why John is so important; his role and example is crucial.

He speaks with authenticity; Truth; and points to the Coming One. More – he LEADS us there.

I think it's really, really easy to forget that leadership is always in service to something else, something larger, grander, and more important than yourself. Make no mistake. John is a leader. Why else would the religious authorities come out to question him? He was a leader, an influencer, and therefore a potential ally or threat, and so they come out to interrogate him, perhaps to challenge him, perhaps to woo him, or perhaps to discredit him.

And none of this bothers him in the least, because he knows who he is. And he knows who he's not. He's not the light. He is the one pointing to the light, crying in the wilderness, serving first, foremost, and finally as a witness. John knows who he is, and that includes knowing who he's not.

Which is why I wish there were more leaders like him right now. More folks who didn't imagine that everything revolved around them. More leaders who recognized that the office they hold is not set up to serve them, but that they hold that office to serve others. More folks who understood who they are and who they're not.

Amazing book: The Art of Possibility, Rosamund Stone and Benjamin Zander. It is possible to "lead from any chair" (pp. 66-77). Their analogy is from an orchestra, where there is a "first chair" – the leader of the violin section, for instance – and "second chair" and then all the other chairs. They give example after example, in contrast, of folks who lead their sections – in music, business, education, medicine, and life – from a variety of places. In short, anyone can lead from anywhere in an organization. The key to leading from any chair is the fundamental commitment to the enterprise, the idea, the group of which one is part rather than simply to one's own role.

*"Who are you?" they asked. And he confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." "Then who are you? What do you say about yourself?" "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord!'"*

There is something incredibly empowering about knowing who you are, and "whose" you are - *The One who brings comfort and Joy.*