

“GOOD NEWS FOR BAD TIMES”
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, Mark 1:1-8, Isaiah 40:1-11
December 5 & 6, 2020

(Begin with preparation for Communion at the end of the message.)

“A Young Lady one day was speeding through a small Georgia town. She was traveling 70 miles per hour in a 55 mph speed zone. The police pulled her over and wrote her a ticket that would cost her \$100. She didn’t have the money to pay it and ended up having to go to court over the ticket.

“In the courtroom, the judge said, ‘You were found guilty of going 70 miles an hour in a 55 mile speed zone. You have to pay \$100.’

“The young lady said, ‘I’m guilty but I can’t pay it. I don’t have \$100.

“Well, if you don’t pay the ticket, we’ll have to lock you up for the weekend.’

“I can’t pay the ticket, but I don’t want to go to jail. Can you please just have mercy on me?”

“The judge mater-of-factly replied, ‘I can’t change the law. The law says that you’ve got to pay \$100 or you have to spend the weekend in jail. Those are the rules, and I can’t change the rules.’

“Starting to tear up she spoke in a small voice. ‘Isn’t there something you can do? I can’t pay it, but I don’t want to get locked up. Have mercy on me.’

“The judge looked down on her, pushed his chair back from the bench, zipped down his robe, and took it off. He went over to the side, picked up his jacket, and put it on. He walked down and stood beside the girl, reached in his wallet, and brought out a hundred-dollar bill. He put the \$100 bill on the bench, took off his jacket, then went over and picked up his robe. He zipped his robe and got back behind the bench.

“Young lady, you’ve been found guilty of going 70 miles an hour in a 55 mile-per-hour speed zone. The law is the law. I can’t change it; the law says you must pay \$100, or spend the weekend in jail. Ah! But I see somebody else has already paid the price.”

This is the season to remember how much God loves us. “God saw us speeding down the highway of sin. He zipped down the independent use of His deity and put on the jacket of humanity.

He came down, died on the cross, and paid the price that you and I could not pay. He picked up the tab, rose from the dead, zipped up his glorified body, and ascended up to heaven. The good news of the Gospel is that a bill we could not pay has already been paid. It has been paid by God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ. Isn't that good news!"¹

And we hear that Good News throughout our Scripture lessons today. In Psalm 85 we see how God has had mercy upon His people, how He has made us prosperous again after a time of plague and despair. We see how God forgives us of our sins in order that we might be free from the bondage to sin and death, but rather live freely forgiven in His mercy and grace (85:1-2).

Then, in the lesson of Isaiah 40 we hear this Good News in Bad Times. Listen to verses 1-11. (READ Isaiah 40:1-11).

Here we have the great Good News, "*Comfort, comfort my people, says our God*" (40:1). It's a message of pardon; it's a message of promise; it's a message of security and it's a message of hope.

The people of Israel had been in captivity for 50 years in Babylon. They had become a despised people by the Babylonians. They were a displaced people, having been taken from their land as captives. They were disgruntled about being so far away from home, but not being able to do anything about it. And they were discouraged, thinking that their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had abandoned them. They were in Babylon because of their rebellion against God. Because they had abandoned God, He no longer protected them and allowed a foreign nation occupy their land. It was certainly bad times for the people of Israel, but God calls Isaiah to speak words of encouragement to them. "Comfort, comfort My people, says your God."

Isaiah goes on to tell them that the punishment of their sin had been paid for, that their sins were now forgiven. This is the **Good News of Mercy and Pardon**. This was great news for a people who had suffered much at the hands of their oppressors. They had been faithless to God by worshipping other gods, they had practiced so much social injustice that caused the rich to continue in their obtaining

¹ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publications, 2009] pg. 138, #416)

wealth, but the poor only grew poorer. They had done great immoralities and for 50 years they had paid their penalty by being under the control of a foreign government, forced to serve a hated people. But their time of punishment was fulfilled, completed, and redeemed. GREAT NEWS!

We Americans are very similar to the people of Israel in Isaiah's time. We have sinned greatly against God in so many ways. Billy Graham once made the comment, "If God does not judge the United States of America, He will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah."

For the last seven decades we have been chasing after other gods, abandoning the Lord God in pursuit of our own pleasures and delights. We have pursued the gods of money, possessions, fashion, fame and fortune, and all kinds of sexual desires and misconduct. We have looked at government to take care of us through laws and appropriations. 19% of all the people in the U.S. are living in poverty – that's over 59 million people. The federal budget for those on welfare in 2018 was \$851 billion. There are the extravagantly rich, and there are the desperately poor.

September 11, 2001 began God's great judgment of our nation so that now we are under the curse of Covid 19. We struggle with civil unrest with riots and demonstrations. We are facing the destruction of property because of militant extremists. We are being forced to accept socialism as the norm. Public school classrooms, as early as kindergarten, are teaching our children that they can choose which sex they want to be as they grow up. And we are experiencing the greatest national division that our nation has ever seen in the political arena. When once we were facing 95% employment records, now we face severe unemployment due to statewide shutdowns and government mandates. We too, are suffering for our sins because we have forsaken God.

Yet for a people in this condition, there is a message from God through the words of God to Isaiah. It is the message that God will forgive our sins when we turn to Him once more. When we cry out to Him from the depths of our souls, "Lord, have mercy upon us," God assures us that there is peace and comfort to those who earnestly repent of their sins. There is forgiveness in God. For "*the Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to*

perish, but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Isaiah also has Good News for us living in Bad Times that comes in the **Message of a Promise**. It is the news of a warning and promise that He is coming to us. We hear God tell Isaiah, *“Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord! Clear the way in the desert for our God! Fill every valley, level every mountain. The hills will become a plain and the rough country will be made smooth. Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind will see it”* (Is. 40:3-5).

When the people of God are in distress and danger, God hears their voices calling out to Him, and He comes to their rescue. When they were in Egypt, suffering terribly as slaves to the Pharaoh, the people called out to God, and God supplied salvation to them from their suffering. Then, there in Babylon, the people were in captivity and they cried out to Him for deliverance, and the promise is given, *“Get ready for the coming of the Lord!”* And God knows our situation today, and He calls for us, like the people of Israel, to get ready for His return, to deliver us from all our sins, and to rid us of all uncleanness.

Yet, how many of us take Him up on His word? How many of us truly believe that the Lord God will deliver us from all this mess we are in? Instead of becoming aware of all the turmoil and struggle we are in because of our sins, we’re being told, *“Don’t worry! Be happy!” “Eat, drink, be merry and gay! Who cares?”* And because we refuse to heed the warnings, because we don’t listen to the call for preparations, we go on living our lives as if nothing will ever go wrong, and we end up paying for our reluctance to trust in God’s Word.

So the message of God’s coming again can be good and bad to us depending upon how we respond to it. It is good news to those who repent and call out to God to *“Save us!”* So God called Isaiah to start getting the world ready, by getting the highways ready that lead straight to the Lord. God wants to come to our rescue, but we must begin to prepare ourselves so that when He does come, we are ready for Him. He is not going to come to our aid and help us unless we begin turning to Him and seeking His guidance and following His commands. While we are still in rebellion against Him, God

will not actively seek us out to help us. When we turn to Him, He turns to us.

That means that we need to repent of the sinfulness in our lives. It means to stop sinning and start following the straight and narrow road that leads to the Lord our God. We have the good news of Jesus' return, but are we going to heed the warning and get ready for it? Don't put this off! Don't wait until tomorrow. Today is the day of repentance to begin. Today is the day of Salvation.

The Good News for Bad Times continues with a **Message of Security**. Again Isaiah is called upon to "*Proclaim a message!*" (Is. 40:6). What message is that to be? That "*...all mankind are like grass; they last no longer than wild flowers...grass withers and flowers fade, but the word of our God endures forever*" (Is. 40:6-8)

The fact is that life is always changing and it is never certain. All of us change; our ideals, our dreams, our morals and even our concept of truth. Just this year we were told by one of our UM clergy of Wisconsin that "truth changes." I'm not sure what truth he is referring to, but our concept of what is true and what is not true certainly changes. But God's truth never changes!

But think about this – how many of you have gone back "home" after being away for some time? Is everything ever the same? No! Buildings change, roads change, people change, businesses change, and even the schools change. Nothing stays the same.

And look at the stock market! Every day it goes up and down like a see-saw, one day losing millions of dollars, and the next day gaining it all back. And what about the jobs we have? We can never be sure in this unstable time if we go into work one day and not be laid off the next day.

All of this takes us into a deep sense of insecurity, not knowing from one day to the next what will take place. Can we rely upon anything? Is there anything that is safe and secure anymore? Even in those places that we think are the safest in the world are subject to change and overthrow.

Sadly, the state of our nation lies in a balance between remaining a free democratic republic and changing into a socialistic establishment based upon restrictive rule. Where capitalism was once lauded and appreciated, now there are some demanding that everything be divided evenly and equally, no

matter how hard you work or what you do. Those not working should have as much as those who are working. Those owning companies that they grew from the ground up are now being called to have no more than anyone else. Our society is in danger of crashing around us, and it scares me to death.

And with all the “surprises” that have taken place in my life recently, it’s a wonder that I’m still sane. Sudden infections and diseases attacking ones that I love, the death of my mother, the irresponsibility of people, and this crazy pandemic have just about knocked me to my knees. And I find that God is working through it all in order to convince me that I have much to repent for, much to give over to Him, and much change in my life. So being on my knees is not a bad place to be when I depend upon the Lord for my strength. But if anyone happens to know where I can get a slice of a tree trunk that is 3 or 4 foot in diameter, let me know. I have a sledge hammer that would love to try to reshape it.

And in the midst of all of this uncertainty, there is only one absolute safe and secure place. Isaiah tells us that “*the Word of the Lord endures forever!*” (40:8). Pastor John Brokhoff said it this way, “The Word is as sure and certain as God Himself, for the Word is God. No worldly affair, no outward circumstance, no time change can remove or diminish the Word of God. It is the focal and eternal point of time and eternity. God’s truth in the Word, which is the Bible, is everlasting truth. What was true a million years ago will be true a million years from now. The Word of God contains the promises of God, and they are true and dependable. What God says, He always accomplishes and fulfills. For ages He promised a Messiah and in a few weeks the Christian world will be celebrating God’s fulfillment of the promise in the Babe of Bethlehem. God’s values in the Word – the moral standards – will never, NEVER change. We say this in spite of changing moral values in our day and the new morality [that is being demanded of us]. God’s commands are for every generation as long as time lasts. Woe to that person who disregards and disobeys them! [They] will fall on a rock and be crushed.”²

But to have this confidence in God’s unchanging Word and Ways, we have to have His Word in

² (John R. Brokhoff, *Wrinkled Wrappings*, [Lima, OH: C.S.S. Publishing Co., 1975] pg. 26)

us. If we do not believe in God's Word, if we do not accept God's Word as truth that never changes, we can never come to rely upon these words as the truth. It is vital that we hold God's Word as truth, believing in it, receiving it, trust in it, and then live by it so that we establish convictions in our lives that never waver or shake, even when surrounded by a society that calls them into question. We are to let God's Word establish deep convictions within us that not only dominate our minds, but rule everything that we do and say. It is to take Psalm 119:105 as a life verse, "*Your Word, Oh God, is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*"

It is in God's Word that we find safety and security. Nowhere else can we find the assurance and certainty that is missing everywhere else. Anyone who puts their trust in God's Word will find stability for their life, for they will be putting their trust in that which never changes.

And finally, there is Good News for bad times because of the **Message of Hope**. Isaiah tells us to "Behold Your God!" He will come with strength and power, using people who were once despised and rejected to bring freedom and restoration back to us. In great love for us, God will bring us back to Him so that He can be our Shepherd. Isaiah 53:6 says it well, "*All of us like sheep have gone astray, each one of us has gone [their] own way, but He has caused the iniquity of us all to fall upon Him.*" When we turn to the Lord our God and cry out to Him, and repent of our ways, He will come to gather us together to be with Him again. That is the hope we have!

It is so easy for us to lose hope when life around us turns bad. It is so easy to think that nothing will turn our right. There is such great pessimism and cynicism among the American people today, even so much that almost all we hear around us is negative. Watch the news just one night and you will see the hopelessness that is presented, the viciousness extended toward others who differ from the politically correct view, the outright rage against anyone who holds on to traditional values. The trend is to degrade and beat up on everyone and everything. There is such gloom and doom forecast each day from the media that there is little wonder that people are just giving up. There seems to be this pervasive attitude among the masses, "Heck with it all!"

There is a general dissatisfaction, apathy, and malice toward one another, even as early as middle school age children. They have grown desperate amid cyber bullying, loneliness because of isolation, anxiety due to all of the changes with Covid19 and frustration with all the violence around our nation, and that leads many to consider and accomplish suicide. It seems to be a generation that is without hope.

Is there any hope for the people in 2020? Yes! And it is found in only one man, Jesus Christ. Again, Isaiah calls us to “Behold Your God!” He is so much greater than any person AND any problem! He is the One who made this world, and He is the One who holds it in the palm of His hands. There is no one greater than He is, so He has the ultimate authority, AND the ultimate victory.

When we have Jesus in our lives, there is always hope in the midst of the conflict and confusion and chaos of the world. When we give ourselves over to being followers of Jesus, there is always hope. There is never a hopeless situation when Jesus is within us. He is the answer to all of our problems, and He has the solution to every trial, every hardship, every struggle, and every disappointment. “There is no problem that cannot be solved when the problem is approached in the spirit of Christ – a spirit of justice, love and goodwill.”³

God loved us enough to send His only Son, Jesus, to give us the hope we need throughout the year when life is bad. When we turn to Him individually, Jesus transforms our life so that we are no longer fearful, or anxious, or angry, or bitter with life. When we let Jesus be at the center of our lives, alive in our hearts and dominant in our minds, He is able to make all things new, so that we can rejoice in Him, no matter what is going on around us. But we have to give ourselves over to Him, believe in Him, trust in Him, and receive Him into our lives as our Savior and Lord.

This is the Good News for us in the midst of our Bad Times – a message of pardon, promise, security and hope, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Service of Communion...

³ (John R. Brokhoff, *Wrinkled Wrappings*, pg. 28)