

“Confession and Comfort”

Mark 1:1-8, Isaiah 40:1-11

What is your comfort food or activity? Did it bring lasting comfort or just let you forget about your stress for awhile? Did it make the source of discomfort go away? Avoiding or delaying can be an attempt at finding comfort, but problems don't disappear. Some false comfort is sought in pleasures that are sinful. They only add the extra discomfort of guilt and regret.

We all feel discomfort, but it wasn't that way in the beginning. Adam and Eve were perfectly comfortable in the presence of God. Genesis says they were naked and were not ashamed. Then sin changed everything. Satan seduced them with lies into eating what was forbidden by God.

Genesis tells us, *“Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.”* They sought comfort by hiding behind a fig leaf. But their nakedness was the outward manifestation of the shame they felt before God. Just like children that have done what they don't want discovered, they hid. ⁹*But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”* ¹⁰*And Adam said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”* They were in desperate need of comfort. In fear of punishment, like anyone who is too ashamed they tried to become invisible. But they were dying inside of discomfort.

When God tells Isaiah to speak comfort to Judah, he prophesies they future discomfort and shame they will know when Babylon destroys their city walls and temple and then takes their property and people into exile. The shame will be more intense because they will have deserved it for their idolatry and loveless regard for each other. Rather than repent when God's prophets called for it, they will rebel even more. God will discipline them as a father corrects his children. He desires that they confess their sins so that he may comfort them with his love.

God is promising a time when their struggle with sin will be over, when they will be set free from it by the forgiveness of God. He will take them up in his arms like a shepherd and gently lead them and feed them on his loving grace. Their iniquity will be pardoned.

As in many prophecies, this one was fulfilled at different times in the future. The first fulfillment was when Cyrus of Persia, who had conquered Babylon, released them 70 years later. Having confessed their sins, they enjoy God's comfort as they return to rebuild Jerusalem.

The second fulfillment comes in today's Gospel. John the Baptist calls sinners to confess their sins and offers the comfort of God's forgiveness. Jews expecting the Messiah for hundreds of years were to prepare themselves for His advent. Through repentance and baptism, God would replace the discomfort of their guilt with the comfort of His grace.

While John is baptizing, Jesus himself arrives to bring the ultimate comfort, once, and for all. He is the fulfillment of the promise given to Adam and Eve that their descendant would crush the power of Satan who had brought them so much discomfort and sin.

His coming was foreshadowed also by what God did next: *“And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.”* Only God could cover their sin, but not with the leaf they fashioned for themselves. God used the skin of an animal He sacrificed to cover their shame. Animals continued to be sacrificed by God's command until one day John would see Jesus and said, *“Behold, The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”*. John had baptized Jesus as if he were a sinner to take our place on the cross. Jesus fulfilled John's words by adding to all future baptisms his Holy Spirit, who enables us to repent and believe.

Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy still today. Having filled us with His Spirit in baptism, he keeps nourishing our faith with the ultimate comfort food: his body and blood in bread and wine.

Finding comfort now, we look forward to the last fulfillment when we will enjoy a new heaven and new earth, where there is found no discomfort of sin and shame.

We prepare for that day first by confessing our sins, agreeing with God that we need to repent and turn away from them. Secondly, we confess our faith, declaring that in Christ's words, sacrifice and sacrament we have what God promised through Isaiah. Comfort. Comfort in Christ. Amen.