

A Grace Gathering
23 January 2022

As We Approach 2022: Thoughts

“Life is Like a Box of Chocolates”

-Forrest Grump

What crept upon us quite unawares in March of 2019 unnerved us in 2021. If Covid-19 was not enough, the variants came, the Delta virus and, now the Omicron. Deeply unsettling were the social ramifications that greatly limited social interaction with levels of isolation that was both resisted as well destructive. This emerged at an unprecedented time of political descension in the country that followed a tumultuous national election, disputation over the accuracy of the outcomes, a tragic confrontation of anger and violence on the steps of the symbol of our national unity, the national’s legislative branch. While I believe that we have lived through uncertain times in our past, we have not experienced the decline of our two major political entities into an internecine struggle of total triumph of one over the other. It seems that party politics has taken precedence over the good of the whole. Tribalism has replaced the possibility of cooperation and the political art of effective compromise between contenting parties grasping the virtues of the opinions of both parties, the detriments inherent in both with a willingness to honesty debate the issues with a view to the greater good of either party.

While it is simplistic to suggest a singular cause for such a state of circumstances, though I believe that a swirl of secondary causes is evident, I believe there is a common root that brings us to the observable chaos, the crisis of uncertainties that our nation is experiencing. We have lost our way!

What do I mean by this? My thesis is that we have lost the glue of common grace that places the wellbeing of others over the progress of the individual. We have lost a sense of corporateness of goal and purpose that once interconnected the citizenry. Individualism has redefined the nature and meaning of freedom. Considering such, the deepest crisis we will ever face is the lost of ability to determine the appropriate course of action! Ethics deals with the matter of the criteria of choice-making and values. When the criteria have been lost, integrity disappears, decisions lack an objective grounding, and society is endangered.

While I do not have a clue as to how we will view 2022 in retrospect (we all have our hopes), I thought to begin the new year by re-focusing on some timeless realities that should be the bedrock, the foundational lens through which we will pass the days of this year as a Grace Gathering of God's people.

To do so I would like to gather my comments around Isaiah 40: 1-31.

I. Introduction:

Twelve years ago, we studied the Book of Isaiah together, a book divided by our commentators into three parts: A description of foreboding judgment for the nation and inevitable exile (1-35), a historical interlude (36-39), and messages of hope that looks beyond the immediate, unavoidable circumstances (40-66).

II. Comfort in Uncomforting Circumstances, 40:1-31

A. The announcement of coming comfort, vv. 1-2

The prophet projects into the future offering comfort for them in their immediate, incontrovertible circumstances. Tragedy does not suggest that what is impending should terrorize us. What is true, will be true, but it is not yet, though we should live in the assurance that it will be true someday.

B. The consequence of coming comfort, vv. 3-5

We should live our lives considering the future to prepare our hearts for it, the eternal not the mere temporal.

C. The surety of coming comfort, vv. 6-26

1. The announcement of a Coming One, vv. 6-11

a. The fact of human frailty, vv. 6-8

In mankind there is no hope of deliverance. Humanity is like the grass and flower. They look elegant, but they are frail when the summer heat ("the breath of God") falls upon them. This is repeated for emphasis. Man is weak; there is no hope in him in any earthly resources for aide.

b. The fact of divine ability, v. 8b

There is, however, surety in the promises and warnings of God. In this context the divine "word" specifically refers to his decreed promise of regathering. Hope is only as sure as the integrity and power of the object of hope.

2. The character of the Coming One, vv. 12-26

a. His lordship, vv. 12-14

1) His incomparable power, v. 12

The prophet poses five questions and the answer is “only God.”

2) His incomparable wisdom, vv. 13-14

b. His grandeur and might, vv. 15-20

1) Over the nations, vv. 15-17

The might of the greatest nations (i.e., Syria, Assyria, Babylon) cannot be compared to the Lord in any way. They are as a droplet of water, dust on a scale.

2) Over the false gods, vv. 18-20

There is simply no comparison! He created the material that they are made of by man.

c. His greatness and strength, vv. 21-26

1) Four rebuking inquiries, v. 21

The rhetorical questions have a single answer.

2) His absolute sovereignty, v. 22

“It is He who sits above the circle of the earth”

3) His control, vv. 23-24

“He reduces rulers to nothing” (v. 23)

4) The conclusion, vv. 25-26

“‘To whom shall you liken me that I should be his equal,’ say the Holy One” (v. 25).

D. The hindrances to comfort: Unbelief, vv. 27-31

The prophet turns from announcement to promise, applying the previous comments to the comfort of God’s people who are facing severe traumatic through exile in the future. He does so by employing the rhetorical of posing and answering His own question. Though the prophet speaks, what he says are the words of God! The paragraph begins with “Why” and ends with the repetition four of “I will.”

1. The complaint of God’s people, v. 27

The prophet voices two arguments of the people, blaming God for their plight. This is common to all of us though we seldom, if ever, voice it publicly. “If you had been here, this would have never happened to me.” Gideon, facing the oppression of the Midianites, registered the same complaint to the Lord, simply suggesting that his problems were God’s fault. “Oh my Lord, if the Lord had been with us, why then has all this happened to us?” (Judges 6:13). The silence of God at times causes all of us to think God is unaware and insensitive to our needs.

a. The charge of ignorance, 27a

This is the accusation that God is unaware of our plight. Here the charge is that of an uncaring callousness born of ignorance of our need.

b. The charge of insensitivity, v. 27b

While interconnected to the first charge, it is the ground of the second.

Because God is distant, He is insensitive to our concerns and needs. Together these reflect the common reaction to the feeling of abandonment for all of us.

2. A needed realization of God's people, vv. 28-29

a. The questions, v. 28 a

The Lord through the prophet challenges the people with the very charge they have levelled against God in their disappointment and confusion. The answer to the divine inquiries is "No."

b. The incorrect assumptions corrected, v. 28b

Here are four wonder realities of the character of our God; very helpful as we enter times of disappointment, loss, and distress.

-Our God is not limited by time and circumstances ("The everlasting God").

-Our God is the master over the events of time; He is absolutely sovereign ("The Lord").

-Our God never succumbs to weakness; nothing is outside His power to effect or prevent ("does not become weary or tired").

-Our God possesses infinite wisdom and knowledge and we do not ("His understanding is inscrutable").

c. The correct assumption stated, v. 29

God provides for those who are His children. However, instead of doubt and becoming despondent, there is a manner of handling such things from our perspective.

3. A Comforting promise to God's people, vv. 30-31

a. A general truth, v. 30

Humans become weary even those of robust health and stamina. Finitude is simply characterized by finitude. We are all weak, but we have a resource that is not.

b. A general fact, v. 31

1) Promised, v. 31a

"Yet" is the great contrast.

"Wait" suggests focus; it suggests confidence in someone outside that shadows that creep over our lives; it means to trust that God is in control.

2) Illustrated, v. 31b

Three metaphors make the Lord's point.

-Like the eagle God's people will soar.

-Like the athlete they will endure.

-Like the walker he/she will not faint.

- "I will" occurs four times.

III. A Summary

Since the focus of our meditation is upon Isaiah 40:27-31 (vv. 1-26 setting a broader context), I want to gather some thoughts from the progression of our passage.

v. 27: A question -----v. 31: A Promise

v. 27: A complaint *of God*

vv. 28-29 A realization *about God*

vv. 30-31: A promise *from God*

v. 27: Bewilderment-----vv.28-29: A new focus-----vv. 30-31: Hope

v. 27: Why? -----vv. 28-29: Who? -----vv. 30-31:

Wow!

IV: Final Thoughts

We are approach this new year I find myself something of a happy optimist, whose personality is generally sanguine. I do not know what is before us; I can only speculate based experience of years gone into the books. However, here are my deepest feelings.

1. We must keep our focus upward, not merely outward, and certainly not consumed by the inward. We must not think negatively of God or His ways when ignorance and tears fill our hearts, and darkness obscures our path.
2. Helpful is the realization that the thoughts we entertain are the thoughts that control us. This is why the reading of Holy Scripture is vastly important. It is not about learning more about the content of the Bible, though that is the means; it is about filling our minds with good thoughts.

“... whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right,

whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute; if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, let your

mind dwell of these things” (Phil. 4:8).

3. We need each other and that is, in part, why AGG exists. We come together as a community because each of us need community. We were never meant to be alone; isolation is not our protection. It is our adversary. We all need fellowship!! You and I have a duty to serve up friendship!

