

## **“Comfort, comfort my people!” Luke 3:1-6**

**“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

“Comfort, comfort my people!” Do these words sound familiar to you? Does anyone recognize and remember where they come from? This is the Holy Spirit speaking through Isaiah the prophet more than two and half millennia ago.

Very famous message! But why would it be important for our meditations today? Because what follows after the “comfort, comfort my people!” are the words that we heard for our today’s Gospel reading. **“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.**

**Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”**

In today’s Gospel reading these words refer to John the Baptist. Remember, we reflected on this a couple month ago, how our God has written the story of this world from the end. He knows how everything will end.

He knows how He wants everything to end, and He is shaping the flow of history for this world and for each one of us according to His eternal plan. Look at this example with John the Baptist.

He foretells that He will send His chosen messenger more than seven centuries before it happens. Then, remember, how the angel of the Lord appeared to Zachariah, John’s dad, when he was serving in the Temple?

How it was foretold what John’s mission will be – to prepare the way for the Lord. Now good thirty years later, the Word of God came to John in the wilderness. Exactly as it was foretold by the prophets and announced to his dad.

Our Triune God knows where He is leading His people. As we can see that it was in no way an accident that John appeared on the scene. And that is in no way an accident that we are here as Grace, and that is no accident that you are here.

As He chose and called the prophets of old and the apostles to deliver His message, so now He has chosen and called you to be part of the same ongoing grand rescue plan for the entire creation. This is why you are here.

Now, let's focus on what comfort today's Gospel message brings to us. **"The word of God came to John... and he went... proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written:**

**"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"**

What was John sent to proclaim? Repentance and forgiveness. What did Jesus proclaim? Repentance and forgiveness. What were the apostles sent to proclaim? Repentance and forgiveness. And what are we here to proclaim?

Yes, exactly! Repentance and forgiveness. This is why we are here. To hear the message of repentance and forgiveness ourselves and then to deliver it to the world. To prepare the way for the Lord by proclaiming repentance and forgiveness.

Let's briefly reflect on four heart-warming and joyous aspects of this quote from Isaiah. **First**, on the voice. **Second**, on who is on the move. **Third**, what preparation needs to be done. And **fourth**, on the magnitude of God's message.

**First, on the voice.** Isn't this interesting? It was John who was preaching in the wilderness. But his ministry is described as "the voice". The person of John recedes in the background, because what really matters is the message.

John didn't try to attract people, as we will discover it next week. It wasn't about his personal charisma. It wasn't about appealing to the felt needs of those people. It was simply about delivering God's message. The voice crying out...

Think about this, how liberating this is for us. We are partakers in the same ministry, sent to proclaim God's message. We too can be described as "the voice crying in the wilderness". But it is not about us; it is about the message.

The One who spoke entire creation into existence, the One who spoke through the prophets, the One who could speak though the wild guy, who wore a garment of camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey – and then magnify his message so that the whole world is confronted with it even today – the same One, the Holy One today speaks through us. Through you. When you proclaim the same message, it is our God speaking through you. You are the voice. His voice. Today in this place.

What a privilege to be so used by God, and what a liberating thought, that the results of our preaching are not up to us. Most of you would have experienced situations when you try to bring the message, but it just doesn't work.

People may not like the message, or perhaps they don't like you. Thus, as far as we can see, nothing good comes out of that, and that may be disheartening. But now remember, we are just the voice crying out... preparing the way.

You can not create a new heart for someone who rejects God's grace. Nor is this your responsibility. Our God doesn't expect that from us. He only sends us to speak His message, calling to repentance and proclaiming forgiveness. That's it. And what a joyful and fulfilling task it is!

Now, what was **the second aspect? Who is on the move?** So often people think about their relationships with God as them searching for God, approaching God, looking for Him. It's like we are on the move to find God.

The Holy Spirit paints a totally different picture. Who is on the move? Who is coming looking for you? Who is searching for you? Yes, the Lord. The Triune God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. He is on the move to find you.

Again, "comfort, comfort my people!" We don't need to find God. As if we could. He is the Creator, He is the Almighty, He is the General of Heavenly Hosts, He dwells in unapproachable light, no one has ever seen Him nor can see Him.

But now He is on the move. All-knowing, all-powerful, determined, committed, He is coming to you, to surround you, to embrace you, to give you a new heart, to make you a new creation, to adopt you as His child, to bring you in His family.

Comfort, comfort my people! You are His mission, that is your company that He desires, this is you whom He wants to see in His Kingdom, He wants you to rule with Him forever over all His creation. He is on the move, and who can stop Him!

No one and nothing! As the Spirit assures us – neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything in all creation. He is coming for you. Your God, your Father and your Saviour.

There is only one person who can deprive God the Father of what He longs for. And that person is – you. Yes, you! That is a scary thought, and that is a scary power that is given to us. As rebellious children we can reject our Father's love.

We can turn away from Him or pretend that He doesn't exist. Or we can play the Christian game, perform Christian rituals, use Christian language, be involved in Christian activities, but our hearts may belong to someone, or something else.

We may not want our God to be the Lord over our lives. “That’s okay to give Him an hour or two on Sunday morning, but we need to be done by lunch! The rest of life is mine; I live it the way I want, and I am in charge of my decisions.”

We may reject Him when we are not willing to listen to Him, when we are not willing to forgive and ask for forgiveness when we have sinned against others. When we despise His most precious gifts. When we desire something from this world so much that we are willing to ignore our Father’s will and wise instructions.

And, by the way, the harsh truth is, that we all do reject our Father, and that we all do reject and despise our brother and saviour Jesus Christ. We do it daily. We do it with ease. We do it regularly and we are so good with justifying ourselves, with assuring ourselves that we are such good people, we know where we are going...

This is where we get to **the third aspect – what preparation needs to be done** as we wait for the Lord to arrive? Listen to this! “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.” Can you spot what is wrong with this?

Just reflect on this! Surely, we have achieved quite a bit in our road engineering, but to fill every valley and to make every mountain and every hill low... this is so, so far beyond what we are capable of. That requires some divine intervention.

Most likely that these words refer to our spiritual preparation. It is about changing our spiritual terrain, filling the valleys of our apathy to God’s commands and indifference to God’s mission, and making low the mountains of our grand egos, and hills of our self-righteousness.

But the Holy Spirit is right. We are not capable of this grand preparation, and this is why our Lord comes to our help. He takes this preparation in His hands, and we usually don’t like it. I am talking about the whole calling to repentance thing.

We don’t like when the Word of God preached by other imperfect sinful human being exposes our lukewarmness, our self-centredness, our interest in this-worldly matters and our indifference to the Kingdom of God and His will for our lives.

We don’t like when our God demands to prioritize Him above everything else, and when we are reminded that we don’t do that, that we actually fear and love and trust in other things more than in our gracious and patient God the Father.

It makes us feel guilty. It upsets us. “I do so much for this church, I am a reasonably good person, and now I need to listen to all these accusations and demands! I want to feel good when I come to church, I don’t want to hear any critique that makes me feel guilty!”

Thanks be to God if you experience this! It means that your incredibly patient God has not given up on you. He continues to speak to you and He continues to call you

to repentance. He Himself gets into your heart and soul and keeps working to change the terrain. To fill the valleys of our sin and sloth, and to lower the mountains of our selfishness and self-righteousness.

That's Him, your God, your loving Father, the Holy Spirit working with you and in you, preparing the way for the Lord to come, so that you are ready and willing to receive His gifts, it is God Himself at work with you. Praise the Lord!

When we as rebellious children have turned away from Him, He kneels next to us, gently embraces us and turns our faces again towards Him. He looks in your eyes and says with affection of loving Father: "You are my child. With you I am well pleased. Stop fooling around! Come home, return to me and let me bless you!"

Finally, **the fourth. The magnitude of this message.** "**And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.**" We are not here to teach good morals. You are here to proclaim the complete makeover of this wonderful, but sin ridden creation.

You are here to announce the coming of New Heavens and New Earth, of full restoration of the goodness of creation, and the gathering of all those who want to be with this God from all languages, and tribes and nations. That is the mission!

You are here to announce that the Lord is coming, and to prepare the way for Him. Beginning with your own hearts, and then proclaiming the repentance and forgiveness to all people in your life whenever there are opportunities.

Is there anything greater than this? Is there anything more majestic and joyful? Some better, more life-changing news and responsibilities? Of course, not! So, yes, dear Brothers and Sisters, rejoice in God's favour, marvel at the great privileges entrusted to us and keep our great mission in focus, both today as we consider our future path as Grace and every day that the Lord has graciously given to you.

"Comfort, comfort my people!" Your God is coming! He is coming soon!

Amen.