

Dear church, behold your God!

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[0 : 00] Father, I just pray once again that you will speak for the final Sunday of 2019 and that you will speak powerfully so that people can lift up their eyes and you will lift up our eyes to behold you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now this past Thursday, for the first time this year, I finally stepped into a cinema to watch the latest Star Wars movie. In fact, Alicia was in the same cinema as me. It was fun and when all is said and done, I doubt though that anyone will be calling those set of movies the best trilogy of all time.

Avid fans might suggest that honour belongs to the original Star Wars trilogy. Others might suggest The Lord of the Rings, which is indeed excellent. And perhaps others still will suggest The Godfather.

But I think one of the most underrated movie trilogies of all time has to be Toy Story. I was simply astonished. By the consistently high quality of storytelling found in Toy Stories 1, 2 and 3.

[1 : 02] And so I was a little bit worried when they released Toy Story 4 this year that it would suffer badly in comparison. And that's one reason why I haven't actually gone to see it myself. But that didn't stop me from reading a little bit about it online.

And as I was going through some quotes from the movie, two of them jumped out at me. Now remember, I haven't watched the movie, so I don't know the exact context of these quotes. But these were certainly words that resonated.

The quotes are on your outline. The first quote is this. I'll give anything to be loved the way you have. And that's a universal sentiment, isn't it?

From what I understand, a lonely, jealous Toy says this. And she's voicing a desire for connection, for affection, for attachment.

This Toy is in a lonely place. And she's expressing a longing for comfort. The second quote is this. Being there for a child is the most noble thing a toy can do.

[2 : 09] And it's kind of true, isn't it? Because when you think about it, what is one of the most basic functions of a toy? It's actually the giving of comfort.

If your kid is upset, give him or her his favorite teddy bear or her favorite doll, and all will be right with the world again. And so if toys were living creatures, this giving of themselves, to give comfort to the ones that they belong, is a noble thing indeed.

And as adults, I wonder if we sometimes wish that things could be so simple that we could just turn to a toy and receive comfort. Well, this morning, Isaiah 40 speaks to all of those who at some point have longed for comfort.

And that's all of us. And now let me just set the context of this passage for you. God's nation has been divided for some time. There's the northern kingdom called Israel, and the southern kingdom called Judah.

And Isaiah is speaking to the southern kingdom, Judah, in light of what's happened to the north. You see, there's a new superpower in town.

[3 : 27] They're called Assyria. And many years before, Israel, the northern kingdom, God worried about this new kid on the block throwing about their wake.

And so God said to them, Trust me, don't worry about them. But Israel did worry. And so they flirted with military alliances with other nations, even though God said no.

They thought about offering worship to other gods, even though God said no. They didn't stand firm and trust God.

And as a result, Assyria did come for Israel. And their military alliances and their other gods didn't protect them.

They disobeyed. And so what happens is that the northern kingdom falls and disappears. But ominously, in chapter 39, just before our chapter today, Isaiah says, Judah, the same faith awaits you.

[4 : 35] You haven't been faithful to God. And so the day will come when another superpower, Babylon, will carry you into exile. Your sin has condemned you.

And that's exactly what happened around 597 BC. And so what happens is that as we come to Isaiah chapter 40, what Isaiah is doing is he's actually looking into the future.

He's looking into the time when Babylon has already come, when God's people have already been conquered and banished from their homeland. So that's the setting he's speaking into.

People in exile. People longing for comfort. And he's giving comfort.

He doesn't bring a toy to them, but he brings the word of God. And the word of God brings comfort.

Notice how it begins, verse 1. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

[5 : 42] Now what's so comforting about comfort? Well, let's just think a little bit about what comfort is. It's that feeling when you've just heard some bad news.

Perhaps you failed an exam or suffered a breakup. Or you just heard that your mum is desperately sick. And you're sitting on the steps. Your head is in your hands.

And then your friend comes alongside you, sits with you, and just puts his hand on your shoulder.

And suddenly, you feel a little more ready to face the world again.

That's comfort. You see, all too often we assign the wrong meaning to the word comfort. We think comfort equals comfortable.

That to be comforted means to have life become easy and anxiety-free all over again. But no, that's not what comfort means. Or we think comfort is simply to say, ah, don't worry, be happy, things will get better.

[6 : 48] But that's what we call cold comfort. Counterfeit comfort. Cheap comfort. Not true comfort. No, comfort doesn't necessarily mean making life easier or better.

But rather, it means literally to offer strength. To give support. You might feel like you're at the end of your rope.

But when someone comes and offers true comfort, he gives you new strength. And that's how Isaiah 40 begins.

God will come and strengthen you. He'll renew you. Empower you. Refresh you. Sustain you.

Comfort you. Comfort, comfort my people.

And this morning, as we come to the end of 2019, perhaps we're in a place where we need comfort.

For some of you, it's been a tough year. There's been some trials in your life.

[7 : 56] Caring for aged parents and so on. There have been tragedies. There's even been some terror welling out from within you as you look back.

And you dread what 2020 has in store. Perhaps for some of you, you've lost your way, spiritually speaking. You say to God, Do you care?

Do you remember? Do you even see me? How could you do all these things to me? And your relationship with the Lord has grown cold. And for some of you, that is not where you are right now. 2019 has mainly been a chill year, a year with plenty of joy and happiness. But what you don't know is that it's coming.

You're looking forward to 2020, but actually, unknown to you now, it's going to be a testing year. You're going to feel quite uncomfortable, actually.

[8 : 57] Perhaps in the workplace, or at home, or with life generally. I have to confess, in some ways, I wonder if that's what my 2020 is going to be like.

And that's how life is meant to be like in this world as Christians. After all, we're not meant to be comfortable here. This is not where we belong.

But still, we long for comfort, don't we? While we are far away from our true home, we need His strength to face the world.

And so the question is, what is God doing to comfort us? What is God doing to comfort us? And the very first thing we'll discover this morning is that He's doing plenty.

That's what we'll see in the first 11 verses of Isaiah 40. Comfort, comfort my people, God says. And we're going to hear how that happens.

[9 : 54] And here's the first thing to notice. The occasion of God's renewing comfort is our failure. God's people had failed Him.

They didn't trust Him. That's why they're in exile. But God didn't choose to withdraw Himself from them forever. Instead, He says, be comforted.

You are still my people. I haven't given you up. In verse 2, He says, you're pardoned. You're forgiven. One day, your time of discipline will be over.

You're free. Everything has been paid for. You've received double. And that doesn't mean double retribution here. Rather, it means that their punishment has been proportionately met.

You know, think of an A4 paper that has been doubled or neatly folded in half. The two halves match each other perfectly. So that's the idea here, that their punishment is proportionately met.

[11:02] One that finds its basis in Old Testament texts, like Exodus 22 verse 9 and Deuteronomy 21 verse 17. All has been paid for.

You have a future. And perhaps that's what some of us need to hear today. Maybe you know that you've been pretty rubbish in 2019 in the way that you've treated and ignored God.

But if you're ready to make your way back to the foot of the cross, well, there's pardon there.

Forgiveness is there. God's renewing comfort is there.

If we are ready to say to Him, Yes, Lord, I failed. No excuses. And we allow our failure to drive ourselves back to Him.

And when we return to God, what comfort does He offer us? Well, to see this, we need to listen to the other voices in verses 3 to 11. I wonder if you notice that three voices speak.

[12:12] Look at verse 3. A voice of one calling. And then down in verse 6. A voice says. And then finally verse 9. Lift up your voice.

And when we take these together, these three voices combine to bring us one united message.

This is God's comfort. He's going to bring you home.

He's going to bring you home. No more exile. Well, let's listen to each voice in turn. So here's voice 1 in verses 3 to 5.

And here is the basic message of this voice. God intervenes. God intervenes. The people, verse 3, are in Babylon.

That's equivalent to being in the wilderness. And you might remember from our numbers series this year what the wilderness represents. It represents rebellion, despair, hopelessness.

[13:17] And there's no way we could escape on our own. But it's a different story when God intervenes. Verse 3 again. A voice of one calling.

In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. You see, Israel can't get out.

But God can get in. And so they better be prepared for his arrival. And so this voice commissions the biggest engineering project ever undertaken.

Just imagine the Pan-Boneo Highway. But a hundred times grander. Verse 4. Every valley shall be raised up. Every mountain and hill made low.

The rough ground shall become level. The rugged places a plain. You see, mountains will be flattened. Potholes will be filled. God is intervening to rescue his people.

[14:17] And no valley, no highland, no rough terrain is going to stop him. And given the scale of this project, everyone is going to sit up and take notice.

Verse 5. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed. And all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. You see, in verses 3 to 5, God is saying, I'm personally going to come to bring you comfort.

Now put yourselves in the shoes of the people hearing this. They're in Babylon. They're in exile. They're feeling abandoned. But now imagine them hearing God telling them, I'm coming.

Not just my servants, me. I'm bringing you home. And we too can take comfort in these words because they have been fulfilled for us.

For centuries later, John the Baptist becomes this voice calling in the wilderness. And he says, Prepare the way for the Lord. Guys, God has come.

[15:34] He's appeared in the flesh. And you know what? We've seen his glory. He's called Jesus. What Isaiah says has now been fulfilled.

And that's what we've just been celebrating during Christmas. God has intervened. He didn't wait for us to climb up to him, but he came down to us.

Or as a pastor friend of mine so beautifully put it, God intervened. We weren't expecting. We weren't involved. We didn't ask. We didn't deserve.

We didn't even imagine. And yet, to us a child is born. To us, a son is given. God intervened. God personally came. Even when we didn't deserve it. Oughting to ask. Well, here is God's comfort. Jesus has rescued us.

[16:38] But he didn't just intervene. He promises. And his promises endure. That's what voice number two says. In verses six to eight.

You see, the prophet imagines what happens when you look to other people for your strengthening. You discover, verse six, that they are like grass.

We are like grass. What happens when you cut the grass? They soon become brown. What happens when you cut some flowers and you put them in a vase? They soon become layu. They are beautiful to look at, but they're dead. And that's the truth that Isaiah wants to impress on us in verse seven. The grass withers and the flowers fall.

So look to other people and you'll soon discover that they're as frail as you are. They're as limited as you are. They will let you down just as you sometimes let other people down.

[17:42] But the word of God is not like that. Verse eight. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God and Dios forever.

Do you remember once again from the book of Numbers how God promised his people that they would enter the promised land? It took them longer than they expected, but even their sin could not stop God from eventually fulfilling his promises.

And so Isaiah says, hey, you guys are once again outside the promised land. You're in Babylon. But you know what? God says he's going to rescue you out of there.

And you can be sure it will happen. God's word has no expiry date. There's no statutory limitation. And so what does that mean for us?

Well, it means that we can take him at his word. Let's just look at one example. Let's look at what he says in 2 Timothy 2, verse 11 to 13, a passage that we've already heard this year.

[18:50] It should be on the screen. 2 Timothy 2, verse 11 to 13. If we died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him.

If we disown him, he will also disown us. If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for we cannot disown himself.

And notice that Paul says that this is a trustworthy saying. We can trust what God says because this promise endures.

The word of God endures forever. And so his words comfort us. And it spurs us on as to the other promises that we find in the Bible.

And what that also means is that if we are looking for comfort, well, we should turn to God's word. That's often the last place we turn to for comfort, isn't it?

[19:49] If we are being honest, we turn to our friends, we turn to the internet, we turn to comfort food, but we don't turn to the word of God. We're so doubtful.

And so we need to hear verse 8 again. The grass withers, and the flowers fall, and the chocolate runs out, but the word of God endures forever.

And then voice 3 reminds us God doesn't just intervene. He doesn't just promise, but he shepherds. He shepherds.

You see, this voice in verse 9 now summons the people to announce the coming of their God.

They're meant to go up on the high mountain and speak loudly without fear so that everyone else would hear the good news.

And the essence of their message is this. Look, it's God. Behold. And so with a message like this, you want to turn and behold this God, wouldn't you?

[20:54] And so what do we see? Look at verses 10 and 11. See, the sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him, and his recompense to accompany him. And you know what? If we were just to read verse 10 on its own, what are we expecting to see immediately after?

After all, we just heard about God coming with power and with a mighty arm. And so we expect perhaps to see a soldier or a warrior with awesome weapons and magnificent armour.

We expect to see something glorious like fire and thunder and something as brilliant as the sun. And instead, verse 11, he tends his flock like a shepherd.

He gathers the lambs in his arm and carries them close to his heart. He gently leads those that have young. We find a shepherd with lambs held near his bosom.

[21 : 54] But that is comforting, is it not? For a shepherd is exactly what we need because we are sheep.

Years ago, I used to live near sheep, so I've seen firsthand what they're like. Sheep get lost easily. They're a little stupid. They get confused. Sometimes they eat the wrong thing.

And we all like to think that we are German shepherds, big and strong and dependable. But the Bible gently robs us of such a lofty notion.

We are sheep. But the good news is that that has been shouted out is that the God who is coming, the God who has come, is a shepherd. And as we've heard already this morning, he's a shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

That's his intervention. That's his promise. I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep. And my sheep know me. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

[23 : 00] And then this shepherd leads them home. So here is the comfort that God gives us. He intervenes. He promises.

And he shepherds, bringing us home. But once again, I want you to put yourself in the shoes of these exiles in Babylon.

Now they knew that this was going to happen, that Babylon would come and take them away. And now they hear that God is coming to take them home. But as the years pass by and Babylon still remains in charge, how would they begin to feel?

You see, this exile is actually going to last 70 years in total. That's an entire lifetime. And God's word must feel to them like an illusion.

And there's going to be times where you're going to feel the same way. You look back at 2019. You look back at the time of the year. You look back at 2019. And Isaiah 40 verse 1 to 11 doesn't feel real to you.

[24 : 12] Or when we get into 2020, and you're hit with something that you didn't see coming, well, you're going to wonder if Isaiah 40 verse 1 to 11 is just a dream.

And the question arises. God says, He will do all this, but can He do it? Can He do it?

And Isaiah answers that question like a flood. He piles on verse after verse after verse, from verses 12 all the way down to verse 27, to help us to see that, yes, God can do it.

In verse 12, Isaiah asks us to hold out our hands. Now, can we do that? Just take a look at one of your hands, and I want you to hold it out now, just like this.

Right? And I want you to think, what can fit in your hand? A tennis ball, maybe? An orange? Two oranges? Okay, let's cheat a little bit.

[25 : 17] How about two hands? A handbag? Maybe a balloon? How big is a balloon? I measured my son's balloon. It's roughly about 11 inches.

And do you know how many inches there are in a kilometer? I looked it up. It's roughly 39,370 inches. Now, let me tell you the size of the South China Sea.

How big is it? It's 3.5 million square kilometers. And do you know what Isaiah says in verse 12? God measures all of that water in the hollow of his hand.

And by the way, he can easily do that even if you combine the South China Sea with the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Pacific Ocean, all of which are many times bigger than the South China Sea.

verse 12. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hands? We can barely measure a balloon.

[26 : 23] And then Isaiah asks us to look up into the sky. According to the October 2016 issue of the journal Science Magazine, based on images from the Hubble telescope, there could be up to 2 trillion galaxies in the observable universe.

There's 12 zeros in a trillion, if you've forgotten. Now look at your hands again. Can they reach for the stars? And I mean that literally, not figuratively.

And yet God looks at his hands and they can easily handle 2 trillion galaxies, which means they can handle tens of trillions of stars.

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand or with the breath of his hand mark of the heavens? And then Isaiah gets us to look at the ground.

Can you see the dust? Not really, until they've accumulated into dust balls. That's what happened to my ceiling fan recently, so I had to clean them. And if the dust ball falls to the ground and I pick them up, they are so light that they won't register on my weighing scale.

[27 : 41] They'll easily disintegrate. But the mountains of the earth are like dust balls to God, who has held the dust of the earth in a basket or weigh the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance.

For God is the incomparably great creator. And did anyone counsel him in the process of creating and weighing this universe?

You know, as the pastor of this church, and some of you might not know this, but I've just become the national chairman of the KVBC Next Gen Movement, I often have to make decisions.

And I often find that difficult. I crave good advice. Because like it or not, both our church and the Next Gen Conference are at a size where the organization has become complex.

And if a church of about 300 people is already complex, how much more complex is crafting and organizing the entire universe?

[28 : 50] But verse 13, who can fathom the spirit of the Lord or instruct the Lord as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him?

And who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? The answer, no one. The Lord didn't need them.

He didn't need management consultants, technical expertise, or anything of the sort to carry out his purposes. His wisdom is matchless. Nothing is too complex for him.

And so for verse after verse after verse, Isaiah keeps asking, who can you compare God to? With whom, he says in verse 18, will you compare God?

Perhaps the nations, verse 15, that would certainly have been tempting for God's people because the Babylonian empire looked so overwhelming. But Isaiah says, whether it's Babylon or Rome or China or whatever future empire would rise up, they're like a drop in the bucket to God.

[30 : 09] They're dust. That's right. China, which has two million active personnel in their army, the largest army in the world, is considered so insubstantial that they're not enough for a burned offering.

Or perhaps the images of God that the Babylonians had, verse 18, perhaps they have power. After all, they guided the Babylonians to victory. Well, excuse me, says the prophet, where did these gods come from?

Verse 19, as for an idol, a metal worker cast it and the goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashioned silver chains for it.

They're man-made and you know what? They're so powerless that what they're made of depends on the financial condition of the devotee.

Just look at verse 20. A person too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. They look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple.

[31 : 17] So in other words, if you're rich, your idol will be golden. But if you're not, your idol will just be wooden. Well, what comparison is there with our God who made the same gold and wood?

And indeed, God says in verses 25 to 26, to whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal, says the Holy One? Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens.

Who created all this? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

You see, the Babylonians, like many in their day, worship the stars and the moon. But God says, who called forth the stars? Who's in charge?

Well, the answer is obvious, isn't it? And so God says, Isaiah says, you need not worry. With a God like this, no spiritual being can so much lift a finger if God says no.

[32 : 31] Well, what about the rulers of the earth? Well, Isaiah says, verse 21, do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits and thrown above the circle of the earth and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

He brings princes to naught and he reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground that he blows on them and they wither and a whirlwind sweeps them away like shaft.

You see, whoever we consider powerful now, the Donald Trumps, the Boris Johnsons, the Xi Jinpings, the Joko Widodos, whoever they are, they are grasshoppers. That's how small they are.

They look so big and imposing now but history tells us that one day many people wouldn't even remember their name. I wonder if anyone under the age of 30 today can tell me anything about President Suharto or Jiang Zemin.

[33 : 45] You see, again and again, Isaiah is asking rhetorical question after rhetorical question to make the simple point. Can God do it?

Yes, he can. So, behold your God, Isaiah says. See how big he is. There is no one like him. Don't look at your God substitutes and let those things narrow your scope of vision. Don't let your situation limit your imagination. See that God is the reality.

See his glory. Don't settle for anything less. And don't take God so lightly. Isn't it true that all too often we take God for granted?

Why do we do so? Is it because we are too busy beholding ourselves and our selfish desires and not him? Well, if we are not doing so, if we are not beholding our God, we are denying ourselves his comfort.

[34 : 58] And indeed that's the question Isaiah poses in verse 27. Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, my way is hidden from the Lord?

My cause is disregarded by my God? See, we are wondering this morning, is my situation hidden from God's sight? Maybe he will overlook it or he will neglect it or he has no idea what to do about it because there are a billion other things on his plate.

And Isaiah says, no way. God is way too big to miss anything like this. Verse 28, do you not know? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary at his understanding no one can fathom.

This is who he is. He is, to use a big word that the theologians like to use, transcendent. And if you knew the transcendent God to be your God, well, that would strengthen you and comfort you to face the present like no other.

[36 : 14] But, Baba Huss, we have one final lingering question on our minds. Yes, we say, okay, can God do it? Yes, he can. But will he do it? Will he do it?

And the answer is also, yes. Hear the promises of God in verses 29 to 31. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall. But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles.

They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint. For sure enough, after the 70 years were up, the people indeed did return home.

They've been pardoned. They've been forgiven. And then in an even greater way, God did it again when Jesus came. For to use another big word that the theologians like to use, God is also imminent.

[37 : 20] That means he's with us. He's close to us. For the good shepherd has come to rescue and pardon and forgive and to lead his people home.

God can do it because God has already done it. So as we leave 2019 and we enter 2020, this is what we need to do.

Behold our God. If you've been down and out this year, you need to know the God we worship is able to see you through whatever you're facing.

Go to him. If you've wandered far from him, you need to know God sees everything. He sits and throned. So fear him and come back to him.

And if you've had a good year, well, here's what you need to keep doing. Keep beholding him. Don't lose your grip on him. Make him your solid ground.

[38 : 25] So that if and when the winds of hardship come, your strength will be renewed. For to whom would you compare him?

And who is his equal? Whose hand would you put your life in apart from the hands of the one who holds two trillion galaxies?

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you.

We ask for your forgiveness if we have too small a view of you this morning. But thank you for enlarging our vision. help us to see again that you are this big, big God.

And indeed, who was it that taught you knowledge? Who showed you the path of understanding? No one. And so Father, we come to you, we come to your wisdom. And we thank you, Lord, that

you are like a shepherd who gathers the lambs in your arms and carries them close to his heart.
[39 : 37] And so Father, we just want to rest in your arms this morning as we look forward to the new year. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.