

Counterfeit: Tolerance

Isaiah 40:1-11

Prayer...

We are in our Advent series: ***Counterfeit***

where, as we wait and anticipate the birth of Jesus,
— as we anticipate the birth of hope, peace, joy and love —
we do so, recognizing that we'll be tempted
to pursue counterfeits of what Jesus
actually welcomes us into.

So rather than blindly entering into this season,
we want to be intentional about what it is that makes Jesus distinct
and why it matters that He was born into the world at all.

Last week we unpacked the Advent (“arrival”) of ***HOPE***
and how the counterfeit of hope is escapism.

Today we explore the Advent (“arrival”) of ***PEACE***.

And though we might think war is the opposite of peace
I propose the opposite is actually division.

War is a byproduct of division,
but it is that separation, the fracture between people;

it's the breakdown of intimacy and lack of trust
between people that is the opposite of peace.

So if division is the opposite of peace

what is the counterfeit that leads us away from the PEACE of Jesus?

The counterfeit of PEACE is ***tolerance***.

Tolerance is a loaded term in our society.

Depending on the circle of people you surround yourself with,
tolerance is either the pinnacle and ideal
that humanity needs to strive toward,
or it is the very problem that has caused
more division and discontentment.

The reason for this is because tolerance is very much a counterfeit.

It's attempting to accomplish the work of Jesus without Jesus.

In theory it might sound wonderful
but in practice is often falls short.

Tolerance seeks to establish peace

between people who disagree on various topics,

but does so without intimacy.

Say two people disagree about something

(like abortion or sex or politics, insert whatever hot topic you'd like),

tolerance is practiced by either not talking about it

(ignoring it and sweep it under the rug

and pretending like it doesn't matter)

OR we don't move forward together

because we can't agree.

Like our own personal baggage

(wounds or presuppositions that we've picked up over our lifetimes),

if we don't deal with them

the tension they cause will grow

and impact other areas of our lives.

Tolerance gives the illusion of peace

because it's taking people who disagree

and convincing them to be civil and "play nicely" together.

But if the tension from the disagreement isn't addressed

it will grow and leak into other aspects of life together.

And this tension does not necessarily look

like conflict with another person.

It could take the form of a subtle sense of superiority
over the other person:

“Yes, there they go again with their point of view.

I’m glad they have the right to believe that...but really,
everyone knows they’re wrong about it.”

This then implies, that we are the one
who knows better; who’s right.

This isn’t PEACE,

because we are still divided;

believing that we are better or superior or more right
than the other person.

Now, perhaps you don’t have that sense of superiority.

Maybe you’re thinking,

“Curtis, I get along just fine with people I disagree with
(and they get along well with me).

We’re perfectly able to get along *and* disagree
rather well, and that’s great.”

This is probably the best case scenario

this side of the Kingdom coming in its fullness.

But the reality is there will always be this tension

anytime the topic of disagreement comes up

because we know we disagree.

This means there is a limit on our intimacy.

True **PEACE** allows for deeper intimacy

and as long as we feel that sense of tension

we will not taste that deeper intimacy

that we were designed for;

we won't know true **PEACE**.

So what, then,

is the PEACE that is found in Jesus,

and what makes it so complete

that it is able to unite people who disagree

and have room for intimate relationship?

Only Jesus is able to bring PEACE

because instead of asserting influence and power

(which He alone has)

He chose to live humility, and serve lovingly.

And that is what our passage reveals to us:

a God who reaches into His People's darkest moment

and reveals His **humility and serves lovingly**

as He leads them out.

This is a God of PEACE

who promises PEACE for His People.

As we move forward

we're going to look at the three main sections of our passage

under the headings: **comfort, concrete** and **covenant**.

COMFORT (vv.1-5)

Isaiah chapter 40 starts off with God declaring,

the hopeful and encouraging imperative:

Comfort, comfort my people

Now this declaration is significant

because God's People find themselves in exile in Babylon.

In Jeremiah 28 we encounter a man by the name of Hananiah

who declares to the people

that God is going to break the yoke of the king of Babylon,

return His People to Jerusalem,

and bring all the plundered temple articles back.

Jeremiah confronts Hananiah as a false prophet

and God confirms that

and Hananiah experiences judgment for working against God.

Hananiah's message was not unlike what we read in Isaiah 40

so what's the real difference?

Why can Isaiah declare God saying **Comfort**

in the face of exile, while Hananiah declared it

and it was fighting God's Plan?

The key is in the state of the audience.

The word Isaiah uses for **comfort** carries with it

a consoling as a result of repentance.

God declares in verse 2

...cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

The People had resolved to believe

that the exile was a result of their waywardness to God,
and here God is declaring that their time of judgment
for this sin was over.

“In the case of Hananiah

we find a prophet offering assurances
to an unrepentant, unchastened, and arrogant people
that they would not suffer divine judgment.

...in contrast, [Isaiah] is addressing a people that *has* suffered grievously
and through repentance has become receptive
to God's word that ‘she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins’ (Isa. 40:2).”¹

To put it in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

Hananiah was offering “cheap grace” to the People,

¹ Hanson, Paul D. *Interpretation: Isaiah 40-66*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 19-20.

expecting nothing from them except receiving God's blessing.

But the greatest blessing,

as Israel would come to realize,

is being in relationship with the Creator God,

which is impossible for humans without repentance.

Israel had suffered great loss —

loss of family and friends as they were divided in exile;

loss of identity as they were taken from God's promised Land;

loss of hope as the dwelling place of God,

where heaven and earth intersected,

was destroyed.

There's no sense that this declaration **comfort**

is coming by luck or chance.

But it does come with significant theological meaning.

Commentator Paul Hanson states,

*"Peace has returned as a result of the restoration of a proper relation between Israel and her God, that is, 'her iniquity is pardoned' (v. 2, RSV)."*²

This is what the Land, the Temple

² (Hanson, 19).

were all pointing God's People toward:

it's not about the geography or the building

that makes you God's People.

It's being in relationship with a God

who made a covenant with you.

So when Israel truly repented

the floodgate of covenantal imagery comes rushing out.

...make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

God's People are called to **prepare the way for the LORD;**

to make this **highway** from the desert place they are in (exile)

leading to the Promised Land (a flourishing relationship

with God).

Every valley shall be lifted up...

every mountain and hill be made low...

The danger of valleys and mountains

(places of vulnerability, where robber and thief wait to strike;

places that are difficult to travel with first century technology;

symbolic places for the highs and lows of life)

are **made even**.

Being in covenant relationship with God

means walking through life with Him

and the PEACE that brings feels like the road is smoother

(not perfect, but smoother).

⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed.

Now the word for **glory** is the word *kābôd*

and it's the same word connected with the tabernacle and Temple.

So when we hear Isaiah declaring it

we are hearing him declare that God's presence

is revealed **and all flesh shall see it together.**

CONCRETE (vv.6-8)

God gives us an even more comforting image in verses 6-8.

God recognizes that humans are vulnerable;

that we're prone to forget

and turn away again.

**⁷...surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.**

God knows that His People, though repentant now,
will likely turn away and forget Him again.

But God's Word (His covenant promise to deliver His People
from all that enslaves them) will stand forever.

This is the concrete confidence we have:

that when God makes a covenant, it is kept.

This is why it's so significant that when the original covenant
was made with Abraham (Genesis 15)

God fulfilled both sides of the covenant.

COVENANT (vv.9-11)

And what is left for God's People to do

if God alone is fulfilling His covenant to them?

Be heralds of good news.

Now this phrase **good news**

carries with it the good tidings of the ancient world:

like declaring the birth of a son

(ensuring the family line to continue);

or the announcement of a victory of battle

(sent throughout the land to reassure the people they are safe).

God's People are to be heralds of this good news:

that God has come with power and might

and the glory of the LORD

[the real and near presence of God] **shall be revealed,**

and all flesh shall see it together (v.4);

that God comes to gather his lambs,

to carry them close to his heart, to lead them (v. 11).

PEACETODAY

The God who declares **comfort,**

whose promises are **concrete,**

and who welcomes us into a **covenant** relationship

and longs for all peoples to receive that same invitation,

is the God who comes to us

wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger.

We started with exploring

how tolerance seeks to establish Jesus' peace without Jesus,

and then asked what makes Jesus so special

that He is able to offer a lasting and deep PEACE?

The answer is that **only Jesus is able to bring PEACE**

because He chose to live humility, and serve lovingly.

Instead of asserting influence and power (which He alone has);

instead of proving everyone wrong and himself right,

He chose to live humility, and serve lovingly.

The One person who is the TRUTH,

humbly subjected himself to the various “truths” in the world

without fighting back, even when they led him to the cross.

The One person,

who is strong enough to be on top and remain there

CHOSE to stoop down and **serve,**

leaving His throne behind

and willing to wear a crown of thorns.

The One person who could wipe out anyone who disagreed with Him

chose to repair the fracture that prevented

an intimate, **loving,** relationship between Him and them.

Only this kind of person

was capable of uniting Jews and Gentiles

(two opposite ends of the theological spectrum)

and break down the dividing wall of hostility

thus making peace (Ephesians 2:14).

The PEACE that Jesus offers

is the fullest form of shalom,

which is not just peace of mind or peace between people.

It is PEACE radiating in and through and around everything; all of creation.

Shalom is what we saw in the Garden of Eden before the Fall.

Shalom is what Revelation 21-22 picture for us.

Shalom is found in the presence of a Covenantal God

who longs to be with His People

and will hold nothing back

in order to be at PEACE with them.

This is the God who is born

and laid in a manger.

Tolerance might get us acting civil or “being nice”

to those who disagree with us

but it can't reach that intimate place where

we first see ourselves as fatally flawed people

in need of a Saviour,

and then see the other person in the same light.

Only a God who reaches into our lives

and repairs the fracture of sin

can take us to that place

where we are united together in our need for help

and then grow closer together

with the God who draws us close to Himself.

The Advent (“arrival”) of PEACE

is found in JESUS because He alone

can bring us into such a relationship with God. **Let's Pray.**