

Isaiah 40:1-11 ; John 10:11-18

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- [0 : 0 0] We're into November, and well, you know what that means. Next month is December. Well, next month is Christmas. Soon it will be time to dust off the Christmas lights and the old carols. And when it comes to carols, I'm rather partial to the classic carols, some of them with the oldie English lyrics.
- How about one of these old classics, God rest ye merry gentlemen. There is a comma there, God rest ye merry, gentlemen, but that's not how we sing it.
- I love the chorus of that carol, O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy.
- The chapter in Isaiah that we've been exploring these past few weeks is all about tidings of comfort and joy. We see how the chapter begins, the very first verse of chapter 40, comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
- [1 : 1 0] And then in verse 9, the first verse of the small section we're going to be thinking about this morning. You who bring good tidings to Zion. Go up on a high mountain, you who bring good tidings to Jerusalem.
- And I want to spend a little time considering these good tidings. These good tidings of comfort and joy or this good news.
- The Hebrew word translated there in verse 9, good tidings, has as its Greek equivalent the word evangelio or evangel or good news.
- That is good news that the messenger is to proclaim. Good news, good tidings of comfort and joy. And we want to think about that good news.
- Good news that God would have shouted at from the summit of a high mountain. There's two questions that we're going to pose and try and answer.
- [2 : 1 1] They're simple questions, but I think they allow us to draw out some of the truths that we find in verses 9 to 11 of this chapter. The first question is simply this, what is the good news?
- What are these glad tidings of comfort and joy? What is the good news? The second question is also answered in quite a rich way, I would say, in these verses.
- And it is this, what are we to do with the good news? So we'll begin by simply asking and trying to answer the question, what is the good news as we find it in these verses?
- And then secondly, that practical matter of what are we to do with the good news? First of all then, what is the good news?
- What are these glad tidings of comfort and joy? I think we can divide our answer in two parts. The good news is in the first place an invitation to see God, but then also it is a description of God.
- [3 : 1 6] So I think that's one way of dividing the answer. It's really one answer, but for the purposes of drawing out what we have in the text, we can divide it in that way.
- An invitation from God, an invitation to see God, and a description of God. First of all, let's think of the invitation to see God.

And I would invite you to, if you do have a Bible open in front of you, I'd invite you to find what the very first words of the good tidings that to be announced are.

Notice there in verse 9, the messenger is commissioned to bring good tidings to Zion. He's then given instructions as to how he is to do that.

But the actual message is found or begins at the end of the verse. And notice the very first words of the actual message. There at the end of verse 9, here is your God.

[4 : 15] Or as some versions, I think perhaps slightly more helpfully translated, behold your God, or see your God. You see, more than a statement of fact, or simply a statement of fact, as here is your God could perhaps be understood.

This is an invitation. Behold your God. It is an invitation to look and to see God. And in these verses, God is presented, certainly in verse 9, He is presented as a victorious king approaching Jerusalem, a very similar picture to the one that we were considering in verses 4 and 5 of the highway that was prepared for this victorious king to approach his city.

The same picture here of God as this victorious king approaching Jerusalem, and all are invited to look and to see Him in all His glorious splendor.

An invitation to see God, to know God. And this really is the invitation that is extended as we gather for worship week by week here in Bon Accord.

Come, I would have you see God. An invitation extended to see King Jesus, victorious and enthroned.

[5 : 39] And the constant challenge that is placed before us is how do we respond to that invitation? Behold your God. Behold your God. See your God. See Jesus for who He is and all that He has done on behalf of sinners.

An invitation. The good news has at the very beginning of its message this invitation, behold your God.

But the second element or the second aspect that we can find here is that the good news involves a description of God. And what follows to the invitation, here is your God, you have a description of the divine King, of the sovereign Lord.

See, the sovereign Lord comes with power. The sovereign Lord at the head of the festive throng. And this description of God is in turn what you might call a two-fold description.

And it focuses on something maybe that wouldn't immediately come to our mind. It focuses on God's arm. Now, we've already touched on the significance of God's arm as we were sharing something with the children.

[6 : 56] We find it here, this focus on God's arm, God's arm being described. There in 10a, see the sovereign Lord comes with power and His arm rules for Him.

So, God is being described and particularly His arm, His ruling arm. But then also we find that same picture being utilized in verse 11.

He tends His flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in His arms. The prophet is employing picture language.

God is a spirit. He doesn't have arms or legs, but the description, though pictorial, is accurate and true. And God's arm is presented or described in these two ways, an arm that rules and an arm that carries.

And I want us to think about these two descriptions of God's arm as we consider this good news that is an invitation as we've seen, but also this description of God.

[7 : 59] First of all, His ruling arm. Now, what does this picture tell us about God? The fact that His arm is described as an arm that rules. Well, let me say three things, and the three things really are not three different things, but each of them builds on the previous one.

So, it's almost like a cumulative picture that we'll be building up. The first thing we can say about a God who is described as having an arm that rules is that He is the God who acts.

When the Bible speaks of God's arm, it invariably is looking to describe God as acting on behalf of His people. One repeated metaphor in the Old Testament is of God revealing His arm, or as we were sharing with the children, rolling up His sleeves.

We read from Isaiah 53, just a few moments ago, we'll just do it again, to remind ourselves who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed.

And that's the idea of this metaphor of God's arm being revealed, of Him rolling up His sleeves to make visible what He is doing.

[9 : 10] He is a God who acts. He is a God who acts on behalf of His people. But the picture here of an arm that rules goes beyond simply indicating to us that our God is a God who acts, but rather it goes on to make clear that He is the God who acts with power.

I guess we all act in one way or another. We can all roll up our sleeves on a given occasion or in particular circumstances, but what happens next, having rolled up our sleeves?

The acts that we engage in are often ill-conceived or futile or lacking in power, lacking in effectiveness. Not so with God.

He acts with power. He is the sovereign Lord. He is Adonai Yahweh. He comes and enters into the arena of human history with power.

His arm rules for Him. And when we have this idea of His arm ruling with power, the picture is of power but also of authority.

[10 : 25] And I know these two things are very related, but they are distinct. Power and authority. His arm is an arm of power and an arm of authority. This came to my mind yesterday morning.

I was watching just for maybe 20 minutes or so the England versus Lebanon Rugby League World Cup game.

I don't know very much about Rugby League, but it was on and I watched it for a while. I confess in the forlorn hope that there might be this huge upset, but there wasn't.

But nonetheless, that was my less than worthy motivation for watching. But I think this sermon must have been in my mind because one of the things that struck me as I was watching was how one particular action of the referee clearly had great authority.

And it would be when the referee would lift up his arm. And the reason was for a penalty that had been committed. And everything stopped when the referee lifted up his arm. Now, his arm wasn't particularly powerful in one sense, but it was this arm of authority that was recognized as such and respected as such, an arm of authority.

[11 : 42] And here, what we have in these verses that we're considering, as we have God described and His arm that rules. His arm that rules for Him, to use the language there in verse 10.

It speaks of a God who acts with power and who acts with authority. And then the third thing I want to say, and as I say, these things are kind of building on one another.

He is the God who acts with power, with authority to save. In the second half of verse 10, we read of the Lord's reward or recompense.

Notice there, in that very same verse where it speaks of His arm ruling for Him, see the sovereign Lord comes with power and His arm rules for Him, see His reward is with Him and His recompense accompanies Him.

And the question is, well, what is this reward? What is this recompense that is accompanying the divine King? What or who is His reward?

[12 : 48] And it is clear that His reward is His own people. The very ones He has come to save, the very ones He has come to liberate from slavery and bring home from exile, they are His reward.

He exercises His arm of power, of authority to save His people. And here we have the picture, His people accompanying Him, with Him, joining in this festive throng around their redeeming, saving God.

He is a God who acts with power to save. King Jesus came into this world to save a people for Himself.

We are the reward or recompense of His saving work. In Isaiah 53, we've made mention of that chapter already with reference to the metaphor of God's arm being revealed at the very beginning of the chapter.

As that chapter continues, we have this vivid picture of all that Jesus suffered to save us. And then we are told that Jesus, having suffered in this way, we are told that after the affliction of His soul, He will see and be satisfied.

[14 : 12] What is it that He sees? Well, He sees us. He sees His reward. He sees His recompense. He sees this people that He has saved from slavery.

He sees this people that He has redeemed from sin and guilt and death. So, His arm, His arm that rules, is an arm that rules, is an arm that acts with power to save.

But the picture of His arm is also presented in a second way. Not only does His arm rule, but His arm also carries. Notice in verse 11, It is worth noting that the word arm, then in verse 11, He gathers the lambs in His arms, is in the Hebrew in singular form, not plural form.

Now, I perfectly understand why the plural form has been used in translation. And it's to do with securing idiomatic language that sounds right in English.

And in translation, you have to do that. You have to respect the idioms of the language into which you are translating. And in English, it just sounds right to speak of Him gathering the lambs in His arms, plural.

[15 : 41] But it is important, and it's, I think, helpful to note that the original speaks of arm in the singular. And it does so because it's the intention of what is being said to make it very clear that it is the same arm that rules as the one that carries.

The same arm, the arm of God, an arm of power, an arm of authority, an arm that rules. But also that very same arm is the arm that carries the lambs close to His heart.

So, you have this striking picture being presented by the prophet, God's arm of power and authority.

The same arm that consoles and comforts. Your God is a God of might and mercy.

He is great and gracious. He is powerful and pastoral. And so, with the prophet, I would say, behold your God. And what can we say about God's arm that carries?

[16 : 53] We've said something already about the arm that rules, some characteristics of it. Well, what about God's arm that carries? Let me say again three things about it.

The first is a very obvious one, but let me say it all the same. It is the arm of a shepherd. The God who is pictured as a king in verse 10 is now pictured as a shepherd.

And the contrast, though maybe seemingly quite a striking one, quite a different picture being painted, in some ways it's not or ought not to be an unfamiliar one.

Israel had already known the blessing of being governed by a shepherd king, King David. King David, who in his very person served as a type of the promised and coming Messiah, shepherd king.

And so, as David was shepherd and king, so here God is presented in this same manner. The king, the all-conquering king, and yet that very same God, the shepherd of his flock.

[18 : 00] It is the arm of a shepherd. And secondly, it's the arm of a shepherd who cares for his flock. In this one short verse, in verse 11, we're given a rich description of the nature of this shepherd-like care that God exercises on behalf of his people.

Let's just notice some aspects of it. We notice that it is a care that extends to all of his flock. The very beginning of the verse, he tends his flock like a shepherd.

All of his flock are cared for by the shepherd. It is careful also that this care that is provided is careful to provide special care for the weak and vulnerable.

He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms. So, those who are young, those who are weak, those who are more vulnerable are particularly looked after for by our shepherd king.

And this care is also mindful of the particular needs that some within the flock may have, distinct from others.

[19 : 18] There at the end of the verse, it speaks of how he gently leads those that have young, and the particular needs that those members of the flock will have that others who don't have, young won't have.

So, the care extends to all. All of the flock are cared for, but the weak and the vulnerable are particularly the focus of his attention and his care and of his tenderness, and those with particular needs.

They're known and identified and responded to by the shepherd. And so, you have this rich picture of the shepherd's care for his flock.

And so, this arm that carries is the arm of a shepherd. It's the arm of a shepherd who cares for his flock. And thirdly, it's the arm of a shepherd who loves his flock. Now, that's, I think, implicit in what we've said already.

But the picture that we have painted here is very clearly one of tender and gentle love. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.

[20 : 20] If you are a disciple of Jesus, if you are part of God's flock or family, having put your trust in Jesus as your Savior, then this verse is describing God's care and love for you.

The Almighty Lord, Adonai Yahweh, the good shepherd, carries you close to his heart. And so, I would encourage you to behold your God.

Come, see what he is like. See his shepherd heart and his love for you. Again, in the light of the coming of Jesus, we know that the shepherd heart of God is most beautifully seen in the person and work of Jesus.

But Jesus, the good shepherd, takes shepherding to a whole new level. He feeds the flock. He tends for the flock. He gathers and guides and protects.

But as we've read in John's Gospel from his own mouth, he also is the shepherd who dies for his sheep, who lays down his life for his sheep.

[21 : 36] Again, let's just remind ourselves of what Jesus says there in John chapter 10. I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep.

That's what Jesus did when he laid down his life on the cross. He died for and in the place of his sheep, of his flock, of his people, sinners like you and me.

He died for us to bring us back into the arms and embrace of God. So, that's the answer to the first question.

What is this good news? What are these glad tidings of which the prophet speaks so that the prophet is commissioned to announce to Jerusalem or from Jerusalem?

Well, the good news is an invitation. Behold your God. And the good news then goes on to describe that which we are to behold. The God whose arm rules.

[22 : 40] The God who acts with power to save. And the God whose arm carries. The arm of a shepherd who cares for his flock. Who loves his people.

Of a shepherd who, yes, even lays down his life for his sheep. But that leads us to the second question that we'll deal with more briefly.

What is to be done with the good news? What is to be done with the glad tidings of comfort and joy? Well, certainly we can sing about them at Christmas and generate a fleeting feel-good factor that soon dissipates in the face of the harsh realities of the new year and the real world.

Well, God through Isaiah tells us what we are to do with the good news. Let me suggest four things that we are to do and just run through them very quickly.

One or two are very obvious and yet worth mentioning. The first thing is that the good news is to be heard. Now, that may seem very obvious and indeed it is very obvious, but it's important.

[23 : 50] And this good news is proclaimed. It's verbal. It involves words that are pronounced. And we need to listen. We need to hear the good news. And often we're not very good at listening.

I know that's true in our house. I know sometimes at home, you know, the question will be asked about some matter where it's assumed that I know the information.

And I'll say, well, I don't know that. And my wife will say to me, but I told you. And I said, no, you didn't. Yes, I did. Now, nine times out of 10, she probably did. But I wasn't listening. See, I wasn't listening. And so even though that the message has been communicated, I didn't hear it because I wasn't listening. I'm being very humble here and taking the brunt of the blame. It's not always the case, but often it is the case. You need to listen.

This good news needs to be heard. But there's a second thing that's important that I think is very explicit in verse 9. And that is that the good news that we hear is to be tested. I think this is the implication of the thrice repeated see or behold. There in verse 9, the verse ends, here is your God.

Or as I mentioned, the idea there is, or the language used is, of behold your God or see your God. And notice in verse 10, you have the verb see repeated on a second and a third occasion.

[25 : 15] And it's actually the same verb in Hebrew. See, see, see. And what is the messenger doing? The messenger is saying, test this for yourself. Don't just take my word for it. This good news needs to be tested. See, discover, investigate. Come to a conclusion as to whether this is true.

I'm telling you it's true, but you see for yourself. Test it out for yourself. That's the idea. That is what the people are being encouraged to do. When we lived in Peru when I was a child, one of my grannies used to send the three of us, me and my brother and sister, comics that would come by boat. So they would take weeks to get to Lima. And they would come several at a time because she would post them at different times. But of course, the boat would be filling up over a few weeks, I guess. So by the time the boat left, several of the copies of a given comic would have all come together. So when they eventually did arrive in our house, you know, you'd spend the whole day reading through all these comics. Now, the comic that I used to get was the Hotspur. Now that dates me and some of you have never heard of the Hotspur, but that's the comic that I used to get. But my sister used to get one. She was older than me and she was cleverer than me. And she got one called Look and Learn.

And some of you are showing some evidence of having heard of Look and Learn. And the title tells it all. It was more things you could discover. It wasn't stories and cartoons like my one. But that was the idea. Look and Learn. Discover for yourself. And this is what the messenger is saying. Behold your God. See. See. Discover. Investigate. Test. Determine if this is true. That's what we need to do with the good news. By all means, listen, but then test the good news. But there's a third thing. I said there's four. This is the third. The good news has to be embraced. Verse 10, we've already seen, paints a picture of carnival joy. God saved people are with him and accompany him in this street party of salvation.

And the question is, are you there? Are you among those festive celebrants around the King? Don't remain at arm's length as a silent witness of what is going on. Join the party. Embrace the good news. Embrace Jesus. Trust in Jesus as your Savior and follow him as your Lord. The good news has to be listened to. It has to be tested. By all means, test it. But having done so, embrace it. Believe the good news. For it is indeed true and it is indeed good. But there's a final element, and I think it's the one that is most prominent in verse 9. And that is that the good news is to be proclaimed. I think verse 9 is really all about this aspect. And I think there's two things to particularly note about this proclamation.

First of all, the pattern of this proclamation, and I'll explain what I mean by that in a moment. But then also the manner of proclamation or transmission. First of all, the pattern of transmission.

[28 : 33] At the beginning of the chapter, in verses 1 and 2, the messengers were to deliver the good news of comfort and joy to Jerusalem. Notice there in verse 2, Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Proclaim to her.

And then we have the good news described. So, the direction in which the message is going is from the messengers to Jerusalem. But now in verse 9, there's a development. The good news is to be delivered not only to Jerusalem, but it is to be delivered, it is to be transmitted, it's to be proclaimed from Jerusalem.

I think the ESV, the English Standard Version translation captures this development more clearly. Let me just read verse 9 in that alternative translation of verse 9. And we read as follows, Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God.

So, I think you see the picture. Jerusalem, having received the good news, is now commissioned to proclaim the good news to others, to the towns of Judah, to those towns that are distant from the city, who don't know about the king who's coming and approaching the city. He hasn't passed by their way.

They haven't heard about it. And so, Jerusalem is to get up on a high mountain and proclaim the good news to others. They've received the good news, now they are to proclaim it to others.

[30 : 18] And so, there's this pattern that's established that holds and applies today for us. Those of us gathered here today, I think most of us would be those who have heard and embraced the good news.

Good news. Well, what are we to do now? Well, we are now to go out and proclaim it to others. This is the order, this is the manner in which the good news is to be transmitted, or rather the pattern of transmission.

The second thing I want to notice here is the manner of transmission. I think two words capture something of what is being said in verse 9 on this matter of the manner of transmission. And that is that our transmission, our proclamation, our sharing of this good news is to be broad and it is to be bold.

We are to proclaim the good news broadly or to a wide audience, all that may hear. That's the whole purpose of the messenger being told, to go up on a high mountain, to have the best location, to be able to sound out the good news that all may hear. Go up on a high mountain and to declare it with a shout.

We see that language there in verse 9. Lift up your voice with a shout. Why are we to shout the message? Well, simply so that more may hear. The louder we shout, the more we'll hear. That's the idea that is being put across. And again, I think it's probably not necessary or ought not to be necessary to dwell on the application of this. It's, I think, very obvious what is being presented to us as a challenge. We who have heard the good news, we now have to proclaim it to others and we are to do so in a broad way to as many people as we possibly can. So broadly, but also we are to proclaim the good news boldly. What is it that God says there in verse 9? Lift up your voice with a shout. Lift it up. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. And it seems that the call here is to both courage and certainty. Courage in the face of opposition. Yes, there will be those who mock. There will be those who reject. There will be those who oppose those who proclaim this good news concerning Jesus. And we need courage. We're often afraid.

[32 : 58] We're timorous. We're hesitant. And the call here is don't be afraid. The encouragement is don't be afraid in the face of opposition. But I think it's not just talking about courage. It's also talking about about certainty and authority. In the face of unbelief, the message that you are to proclaim is to be a clear one, a certain one. Don't be afraid. Don't doubt the reality, the truth of the news that you have been given to proclaim. And again, I think all of us can, whatever we are, in whatever our circumstances, we can look to apply this challenge to ourselves. Well, as Christmas approaches a few weeks down the road, let's focus our attentions and our affections on the good tidings of comfort and joy that the season reminds us of and celebrates. Lift up your eyes and behold your God, the God whose arm is strong to save, and tender to carry. And let's not just celebrate the good news, but proclaim and share the good news with all those God places in our lives and paths. Well, let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the invitation that is extended to us to behold our God, to behold you. We thank you for the beautiful description that we are given of you, of your arm that is powerful to rule and of your arm that is strong and tender to carry and to comfort and to tend. We thank you that you are the almighty God, and we thank you that you are the Good Shepherd. We thank you for your Son, Jesus, who self-identified as the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd who gave his own life, laid it down on behalf of the sheep.

And we thank you for that great love that found expression in this wonderful and sacrificial way. We thank you for the good news, and we pray that you would help us by your Spirit to respond to the good news in the manner that you yourself lay out for us, that we would listen carefully, that we would test what we hear, that we would believe and embrace the good news, and that having done so, we would count it our privilege and delight to share it with others. And we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.