This is the second message in a Christmas series I’ve called “The Fifth Gospel.” Of course strictly speaking, there is no “fifth gospel.” But if a book of the Bible could be nominated for “the fifth gospel,” the Old Testament book of Isaiah would get my vote. It would get my vote because Isaiah clearly presented the “good news” of salvation which the Messiah would bring seven centuries before “the Word became flesh” in the little town of Bethlehem.

Last week we looked at Isaiah 7:14 and saw how Isaiah predicted the virgin birth of Christ. And we saw how the doctrine of the virgin birth is indispensable for our faith on two counts.

First, because if the virgin birth – clearly taught in Scripture - isn’t true, then how do we know that anything else in the Bible is true?

Second, the Savior had to be God to be worthy enough to die for the sins of the world. So he couldn’t be conceived in the usual way because he would have inherited Adam’s sin nature like the rest of us. But the Savior also had to be a man because he was destined to die as humanity’s substitute. He had to be one of us and that’s why he was born of a woman.

Today we move from the birth of Christ to the work of Christ. The late author Joe Bayly said that the first Christmas was when “God the Father came down the stairs from heaven with a baby in his arms.” But why was the birth of a baby so important that we’re still celebrating it and talking about it 2,000 years later? Isaiah answered that question in today’s text.

Let’s read together from Isaiah 40:1-2, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” (NIV)

A Personal and Caring God

In his book The Knowledge of the Holy, A.W. Tozer made a profound observation: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” Whether we realize it or not, what we think about God conditions the way we look at life. When Isaiah thought about God, what came into his mind was a concerned, caring, compassionate and comforting God. Do you think what he thought about God conditioned the way he looked at life?
Isaiah lived in difficult and dangerous times. The year was 700 B.C. and the Assyrian army under King Sennacherib was on the rampage. They had already swept over the northern kingdom of Israel, carrying thousands of her citizens into brutal captivity and servitude. Now they were poised on border of Judah ready to move in, vanquish Jerusalem and inflict unspeakable hardship and suffering on the people. If ever the people of Judah needed the assurance of God’s presence and comfort, it was now. At times like that, only the comfort that God can give is sufficient. The comfort of family, friends and financial security falls woefully short. Even those outside of faith in God sense their need for divine comfort during life’s darkest days.

Katie Couric, NBC's former Today show host, lost her husband (Picture), attorney Jay Monahan, to colon cancer in 1998. She also experienced the death of her sister almost four years later. Katie shared with an interviewer about an inner yearning: "I'm very interested in exploring a more spiritual side of me, and I'm in the process of doing that, both formally and informally. I really envy those who have a steadfast, unwavering faith because I think it's probably so comforting and helpful during difficult times."

I don’t know where Katie’s search for spiritual comfort led her. I can only hope it led her to Isaiah 40 where God said: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned....”

This was George Frederic Handel’s opening text of his famous oratorio – Messiah.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dDjva1ecYo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dDjva1ecYo)

(Start and end at 2:00 – second time he sings “and her iniquity is pardoned.”)

It’s no coincidence that Handel began the “Christmas” section of Messiah with these words from Isaiah.

The four weeks between thanksgiving and Christmas is the time more than any other when hurting people need God’s comfort provided only through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

In his book Deserted by God? Sinclair Ferguson recounted the story of the first physician to die of the AIDS virus in the United Kingdom. He was a young Christian who had contracted the disease while doing medical research in Africa. In the last days of his life, his power of communication failed. He struggled with increasing difficulty to express his thoughts to his wife. On one occasion she simply could not understand his message. He wrote on a note pad the letter J. She ran through her medical dictionary, saying various words beginning with J. None was right. Then she said, "Jesus?" That was the right word. [Jesus] was with them. That was all either of them needed to
know. No other source could bring comfort to the dying man and his heartbroken wife.

Some of you are in the midst of an intensified degree of pain and a heightened sense of loss simply because it’s Christmas.

11 days ago we visited with two dear friends in Silver Spring, MD. They are faithful members of the church we served for 11 years. They entered the Christmas season with the knowledge that it may be their last Christmas together this side of heaven. The husband is losing a heroic battle with cancer and his prognosis isn’t good. Mingled with the joy of the season is the reality that the sorrow of separation may be just around the corner.

Sooner or later all of our lives will be forever altered by the grim realities of sickness, separation, and death. And every Christmas season will bring back vivid memories of what once was and shall never be again.

That’s why Isaiah 40:1-2 is such a relevant Christmas text.

“Comfort”

The word “comfort” means to “sympathize” and to “console.” One way he does this is seen in verse 2. God “speaks tenderly” to us. As we read and ponder the timeless truths of Holy Scripture, we are reminded of his love and care, his plan and purpose. The age-old Christmas story tells us about a God of such comfort and compassion that he sent his one and only son into the world to build a bridge between heaven and earth.

The great scientist and professor J. Robert Oppenheimer said: “The best way to send an idea is to wrap it in a person.”

God wrapped up the idea of “comfort” in his son – the Lord Jesus Christ – and sent him to earth to communicate the Father’s caring and compassionate heart. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” John 1:14 (NIV)

Christmas is when the world’s collective pain met the incarnation of comfort in Jesus Christ.

The “Comfort” We Need the Most

The comfort we need the most is the comfort that comes when we know that our sins have been forgiven and that the warfare between us and God has ended. That’s the message of Isaiah 40:2, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for....” (NIV)
What is “the hard service” to which the prophet referred? It is trying to earn our way into heaven through our own efforts of personal goodness and religious performance. The great reformer Martin Luther (Picture) knew just how “hard” this “service” could be!

Roland Bainton in his excellent biography of Luther related Luther’s struggle: “Whatever good works a man might do to save himself, these Luther was resolved to perform...All such drastic methods gave no sense of inner tranquility. The purpose of his striving was to compensate for his sins, but he could never feel that the ledger was balanced.... He could not satisfy God at any point.” God was not a loving father but a demanding tyrant for Martin Luther. He could never do enough to win his favor.

It reminds me of the scene in Schindler’s List when the reality of how many Jews had been killed in the Holocaust sets in on Liam Neeson (Picture). He looks at his watch and says, “This watch . . . I didn’t need this watch. Why couldn’t I have sold this? This watch could have freed two Jews . . .” For Oskar Schindler, there was always one more thing he could have done to clear his conscience of guilt.

We can draw tremendous comfort from the good news of Isaiah 40:2 that our “hard service has been completed....”

Jesus Christ came to earth not only to die for our sins but to live the perfect life none of us could live so that he would be qualified to die for our sins as our substitute. He pleased God perfectly. And when we believe that Jesus did what we could never do – live a perfect life and die a substitutionary death – there descends on us a supernatural peace and comfort that can only come from the forgiveness of our sins by a holy God in heaven.

Christmas isn’t just about a helpless baby lying in a manger. That’s the beginning of the story but it’s not the main point of the story. The main point of the story is why he came. He came to live the life we could never live and die the death we could never die.

Philip Yancey in his book The Jesus I Never Knew picked up on this theme: “As I thumb...through my stack of Christmas cards, I realize that we...observe a mellow, domesticated holiday purged of any hint of scandal. Above all, we purge from it any reminder of how the story that began in Bethlehem turned out at Calvary.”

Isaiah foresaw the meaning of the story seven centuries before the first chapter: “Her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for....” This is the liberating, comforting truth of Christmas.

The founder of the 18th-century Methodist movement, John Wesley (Picture), described what happened when he experienced the comfort of forgiveness on May 24, 1738 at a Bible study on Aldersgate Street in London: “About a quarter before
nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins....’

Has your heart been “strangely warmed” by the comforting assurance of God’s forgiveness? Quit working to earn God’s favor. Jesus already did everything necessary. Just trust in his finished work on Calvary.

**Conclusion**

From where I stand, the words “I forgive you” are even more precious than the words “I love you.”

When we hear the words “I love you” it’s almost always because of who we are. It’s the response of one person to another person’s kindness, generosity, commitment and faithfulness.

When we hear the words “I forgive you” it’s almost always in spite of who we are. We’ve been selfish, unkind, insensitive, and thoughtless. “I forgive you” is the response of a person who is willing to look past our faults and flaws to preserve the relationship because we are too precious for the forgiver to lose. That’s the comfort of forgiveness and it’s the forgiveness that Jesus came to provide for everyone who wants it.

In his autobiography *Timebends*, playwright Arthur Miller (Picture) told of his marriage to Marilyn Monroe. During the filming of *The Misfits* Miller watched Marilyn descend into the depths of depression and despair. He feared for her life as he watched her growing paranoia, and dependence on barbiturates.

One evening, after a doctor had been persuaded to give Marilyn yet another shot and she was sleeping, Miller stood watching her. "I found myself straining to imagine miracles," he writes. "What if she were to wake and I were able to say, 'God loves you, darling,' and she were able to believe it! How I wished I still had my religion and she hers."

“Christmas comfort” is the truth that “God loves you, darling.” The only response God desires is for us to believe it and live in grateful thanks for his grace.

No wonder the Apostle Paul sang with full-throated conviction and joy: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort....” 2 Corinthians 1:3 (NKJV)