



Sermon Growth Guide

December 18, 2022

The Great Rescue - The Coming

Isaiah 40:1-11

Key Verse: Isaiah 40:5 “And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. ”

Big Idea: God is a rescue God. We want to be a church like that because we worship a God like that.

Foundations

We are four weeks into our Advent series, ***The Great Rescue***.

Isaiah, speaking seven centuries before the advent of Christ, had a mission from God. He was sent to Israel to convict and encourage her, to help her understand what God was going to do with her (captivity), what God was not going to do with her (abandon her), and what God eventually would do for her (rescue her). Years before Judah would be released from Babylonian captivity, Isaiah was proclaiming a word of rescue, a word that would expand and climax in the advent of Christ, the great rescue.

It is indeed great, not only because it had been anticipated from the beginning, long before Isaiah (Genesis 3:15). It is a great rescue because of the identity of the rescuer. It is not the voice of a frail human saying, “I’ll do my best!” No, it is the voice of the Creator God who says, “For the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah 40:5) and “the word of our God endures forever” (40:8).

And the medium of this word is not merely another prophet bearing the message of God (Jn. 1:23), but the Son of God himself coming as prophet, king, priest and savior.

Since the Fall, creation has been in advent, not because we have always expected rescue, but because God has always been preparing it in his Son (Eph. 1:4). He has made a way for us, even when we could see no way.

Understanding God’s Word

Together, read Isaiah 40:1-11. Identify some of the words, phrases and images being used. Which are familiar to you, and what comes across as foreign? Is this a message of hope, judgment, condemnation, or restoration? And finally, what is the content of the message? What is God planning for His people?

Applying God’s Word

Where in your life do you find yourself in exile? Maybe your family is in captivity to destructive patterns. Maybe your heart is wrestling between the lordship of the Spirit and the temptations of the flesh.

Through the power of His word and Spirit, God has made a way, a path for us to walk: repentance. How does repentance set the Christian on the path to restoration? (See 40:11). Once on that path, how does God provide us the grace to align our behavior, desires and thoughts with our repentance, our new mind? What resources do Christians have to lean on as they grow in Christ?

Witnessing God’s Word

What if the Church modeled God’s gracious rescue toward our neighbors, family members and friends through acts of hospitality, love and sharing about God’s Kingdom? What is our tone? What language, images and phrases do we use to bring comfort to all people that a rescue has come?

Are we a museum for saints or a hospital for sinners? That's the question St. Augustine put before his congregation a long time ago. A museum for saints is a place to come polished and prim, ready to display your success and self-righteousness. A hospital for sinners. Well, that's something different. That's a place to crash in, wounded, wearied, in need, ready for help. Which are we? In **The Great Rescue**, today, a way is being made. A road. And someone is appearing over the horizon. You can just see the silhouette, the form of a man. It is help. A comforter to bring hope, a great physician to bring healing, a Savior to bring rescue—for any who would have it. Prepare the way for **The Coming** of the Lord.

I once heard a pastor tell about going out on a member's fishing boat. On the way back in, they saw a boat drifting hard away from the marina and a man swimming after it, struggling. They drove over and picked him up. "I fell out," he said, "and the boat just drifted away—faster than I could swim." On the way into the marina, the pastor said, "I saw all those boats, millions of dollars of boats and none of them were out there to rescue. This man almost drowned within sight." Churches can be like that. Which one are we? Sitting in the harbor, or out to save? "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3). Can we connect with that road? Can we help others to find it?

In our exploration of **The Great Rescue** Isaiah maps out for us, we have seen the Peril, the darkness of our wandering from God. We have seen the Plant, how our desperate situation has been infiltrated. Last week, we heard the Promise. It's like a spy crept into our prison cell and whispered, "We're getting out of here, and there's going to be a party." But the help we need has got to get to us. We need to get connected with this Great Rescue. When we are so lost, and so in the dark, that there seems no way home, the good news is this: God makes a way where there was no way.

The Rescuer. **The Coming**. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Isaiah is remarkable future prediction. I want you to see what's happening here. Isaiah's prophecy, written around 740-700 BC, precedes a huge event in Israel's history called the Babylonian Captivity. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar is going to conquer Jerusalem in 587 BC, blind the king, destroy the Temple, and carry everyone off into slavery for 70 years. Isaiah, as he writes, is warning King Hezekiah about what's coming more than 100 years before it happens. Then in this passage, Isaiah jumps all the way ahead of the Babylonian Captivity and shares a picture of what it will be like when God rescues His people from that slavery, which for Isaiah is 200 years in the future. It will be like when Moses led them out of Egypt. The road back to Jerusalem is going to be a celebration.

"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" (Isaiah 40:1-2). The struggle is over and now the road is open and wide. Let's go home. Somebody lifts up their voice. As they leave the city of captivity, somebody calls out, or sings, "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain" (Isaiah 40:3-4). God is going to get you home. You may not even know the way home from here, but God's going to get us home. This is the road home. The road from Babylon to Jerusalem is prepared.

Okay, so do you get that? This prophecy is folding over 200 years into the future to when this whole episode in history, the Babylonian Captivity, is over and the people of God get to go home again. But the Spirit

isn't done. These same words emerge again. John the Baptist said, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'" (John 1:23). These same sacred words fold over again, only this time 600 more years into the future to when Jesus shows up at the River Jordan. And this time, it's not about God accompanying us on the long road home from where we are. It's about God coming to us! It's about a way being made for Jesus to walk right into our lives. What was first a word about us making our way, now is a word about God making a way to us. A way through the wilderness. A way across the great division. A way to find us and save us in our captivity. Once it was us trying to find the road, but now it's God making a road to us. From the household of God all the way to where our souls are lost in Babylon, all the way down to a manger in Bethlehem the road runs. The way is made. There is no Great Rescue without connecting with God and getting our feet on the way. How can we get on that road?

Both times this word folds forward into the future, there are three things that don't change. This same word folds over twice with hundreds of years between, and the road, once from our captivity to home, then from God's home to our captivity, from God to us, for all that, there are three things that stay the same. First, the power to build the road does not come from us but from God and the power of His word: "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field...The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever" (Isaiah 40:6,8). Second, in both cases, God is relentless in accomplishing the task—the way will be made, and nothing will stop it. "And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 40:5). Third, this way is a way of repentance. You have to turn around to get on this road. Isaiah says the iniquity can be pardoned. There can be peace with God again. John the Baptist, preached, "Repent!" and baptized. God

makes the way and we turn our hearts to get on it. It's going to take some change to get on this road instead of the one you are on. Part of the Great Rescue is a change in our own hearts. Jesus is coming. Make the way clear.

Repentance and change are necessary. They are part of the rescue. Why? Because without repentance, without an acknowledgement and confession of our sin and our need, we will not believe we need rescue at all. Our hearts get used to this dark world. Our minds get accustomed to these confused places. It's so easy to get all turned around to where good things seem bad, and bad things seem good. And it can't stay that way if we are going to be rescued. You can't get on God's road and stay on yours. A. W. Tozer said, "The idea that God will pardon a rebel who has not yet given up his rebellion is contrary both to the Scriptures and to common sense." Give up the rebellion. Repent and turn to your Rescuer. The Westminster Catechism says, "What is repentance unto life? Repentance unto life is a saving grace, by which a sinner, out of a true recognition of sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of this sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience." Can we repair ourselves from our sins, heal ourselves, set our hearts straight, jump up on that highway to heaven and march ourselves right in? No. But we can allow God to set our minds right, convict us of our sins, and energize us to turn, to be rescued, and in the power of the Holy Spirit to try virtue again.

That's repentance. That's what happens in the heart when the road is built, and the way is made. The mountains of error are shaved down, the valleys of regret are filled in, the uneven ground of confusion is set right by Word and Spirit, and the rough places—all the ways we rub against our neighbors and cause them pain—they start to get filed down and smoothed. Not because we figured out a road to God, but

because God is relentless in getting to us. Will you allow the coming of the Rescuer? Will you help another toward it? I'm trying to cook in two pots here. In this one, I want you to know and receive the grace of Jesus Christ, to be rescued and pulled up into the boat with Him, to have your feet placed on that great way of salvation to eternal life in Jesus. I want that. I do. But over here, I also want to ask, can you help someone else to find their way? Can you help another to find life in Jesus?

Which are we, church? Museum or hospital. Marina or rescue boat? In North Carolina, there's a Shipwreck Museum full of memorabilia from something called the U.S. Life Saver Society. Ships crashed so regularly out there that they had boathouses lining the beaches with rowboats up on ramps pointed toward the sea. The boats were connected to long ropes on giant spools. When a shipwreck happened, volunteers would take off in these boats with 8-10 guys rowing out over the waves, dragging the rope. They'd toss these drowning people in the boat and, whizz! get cranked back onto shore, then out again. They were ready, you see. They knew that people would drown, right there in front of them, unless they were ready to rescue. So they were ready! "Everybody crashes here, you know! That's why we're here!" That's us. That's the church we want to be for those who are sinking, drowning spiritually, life drifting away from them faster than they can swim. We don't want to be a museum, or a marina filled with yachts. We want to be a rescue society, a life saver society.

Within eyeshot of your front door, there's someone swimming for their life. Will you help them? "You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" (Isaiah 40:9). Here! Here's the rope. Here's the rescue! Here is your God. Invite them to worship with you. Share a

word of Jesus with them. Offer to pray. Invite them to Alpha, or to Christmas Eve. Be part of the rescue and help people get in touch with Jesus—the only one who is able to save them from their drowning sorrows and darkened failures and broken, leaking lives. We want to be a church like that because we worship a God like that. God is a rescue God.

Or maybe it is you who feels yourself sinking. This world is not as good as it gets. This is a world of captivity, war, injustice, broken relationships, hatred—but all of that pales in comparison to the anguish in your own soul when life drifts away faster than you can swim, out of reach and out of control. There are places in life where just about every one of us runs aground. At some point every one of us is in need of rescue. But we're not rescuing each other; we are being rescued together by Jesus. Jesus, the Great Rescue plan of God. "See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (Isaiah 40:10-11).

The infant Jesus is the victorious launch over the waves, the infiltration from heaven to earth, from God to us. Jesus broke in; then He grew up, and He healed, He taught, and ultimately He died to pay for all of our sins. Then He rose from the dead, and He still lives. Imagine a life on the road with Jesus your Great Rescue. It looks like this, as the carol says, "Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in." Talk to Jesus. He is here. He is present in your life. Open your Bible and ask to hear from Him. He will surprise you. Ask for His light in your life. You will be amazed at what it is like to stop stumbling in darkness and begin to walk in light on the way of the Lord. Christ has come.