

This Is Your God

Isaiah 40: 1 - 11

Many years ago, a doting groom wrote a love letter to his bride. James Bracy was stationed at a California military base thousands of miles away from his wife, so his only link to the lovely woman waiting for him to come home were their love letters.

But this particular letter didn't get delivered. Somehow it was lost, it became up lodged between two walls in Fort Ord's mailroom in San Francisco...

A half century later, James and Sallie Bracy had just finished celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary and were relaxing in the living room. "Once in a While," their song, began to play on the radio. Sallie remembered affectionately the 1950s song and how she used to get calls and letters from this man who owned her heart. They joked together knowing there would be no letter or phone call this time because James was right there, at her side.

Meanwhile, a construction crew was dismantling the old post office at Fort Ord, and they discovered a long-forgotten letter from a young army corporal. The crew turned the letter over to Bob Spadoni, the postmaster in nearby Monterey. Spadoni began the process of delivering that letter, tracking down the Bracys through post office records and phone books.

So, as it happened, just a few days after hearing their song, the letter, dated January 28, 1955, was delivered to Sallie Bracy, and she again became a love-struck 22-year-old. "It meant a lot to me then," said Sallie. "It means even more now."¹

Many years ago God wrote a love letter to us. Some have already received it, for others, it's waiting to be delivered, to be opened at just the right time. It's a letter that is not only *good* news, it is a letter containing the *best* news ever shared.

Let's stay with that letter image here for a minute or two more...

¹ "After 46 years lost in post office, love letter finally arrives," *Jefferson City News Tribune* (4-25-01)

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I remember once, years ago, when I received a letter that looked pretty important. Looked official. I opened it and discovered to my joy and sheer amazement, that *I* was one of the finalists in the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes. According to this letter, which had *my* name all over it, the chances were very good that I may have *already* won. And considering my immanent riches, why not go ahead and order a magazine subscription or two? I could afford it!

Well, needless to say, I didn't win. And you know, I'm sure that I received more – probably many more – of those same letters since then. But the rest of them remained unopened, and they were simply thrown away. You might say, “I considered the source” having seen the return address, and I decided that there really wasn't any good news in there for *me* at all.

I heard a statement recently from someone that I've quoted here before, Brennan Manning. He was talking about his favorite subject, and God has given this man an incredible ministry which is almost entirely based on one thing: fixing/ healing our image of God. He said in a recent message to a local church that ‘our images of God *make us* what we are’. How we see God, in a sense, sets the parameters, the broad outline of our entire being. It filters practically everything we think, and do. Certainly everything of significance.

And I've seen many, many people – within and without the church – whose love letter from God has been left *unopened* because, like I do with the Publisher's Clearing House letters, so many assume that there is really no good news in there for *me*. They have a picture of God that leads them to pre-judge the message, and reject it before it is even heard.

The Bible teaches us that the clearest ‘picture’ of God that we have is seen in Jesus. And we talk about that a lot here. But I would like to look with you this evening/ morning at a glimpse of God from a much earlier source. From the book of Isaiah, chapter 40. Some 700 years before Jesus was born – but looking ahead to that very coming. This is a familiar passage to anyone who has sung or heard Handel's Messiah – a lot of you could probably sing it. (You basses anyway!)

It starts out with a very comforting word. “Comfort!” (That's a little preacher humor. Very little!)

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¹ *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² 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.*

Just a quick word of explanation here: to say that Israel has received 'double' for all her sins, doesn't mean that she was punished *twice as much* as she 'deserved'. In fact, in reading this the passage, we see that it doesn't mean that she was punished at all; in fact, the good news that the messenger is being called to share with Israel is that her sins were paid *for*.

But the word 'double' can be confusing. What it is referring to is not *twice as much*, as we would use the word, but '*the double of her sins*' i.e., *the exact counterpart* for all her sins. The point being that the scales of divine justice have been balanced – the payment was *exactly what was needed*. So, she – Israel – is free!

"Comfort my people" with this word, says God. Speak *tenderly* and tell her – 'it's all forgiven', it's over. Your time of struggle is finished. It's over.

The passage continues, and Handle picked this up with a musical visualization of that message going out into all the earth. "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain." I.e., every barrier, every obstacle will be removed, set aside, cleared away, so no one will miss this incredible message! The glory of the Lord *will be revealed and all people will see it together*.

Look at the next section:

⁶ *A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all human faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. ⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."*

You know what the point of that is? In this context? It is telling us that this good news of God's glory that is to be revealed, this good news of sins forgiven, of a new standing in the presence of our holy God, this news is *not* based, **not** based on *our* faithfulness. **Surely** *the people are grass*.

⁸ *... grass withers and flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."*

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This message of freedom and forgiveness is based on God's promises, on God's character, on God's faithfulness... and not ours. And so is not *ever* going to be revoked. We did nothing to deserve it, we can't earn it. It is a gift. It's a love letter from God to us that is as valid today as the day it was first written.

This passage ends in verse 11, talking about God relating to us: *He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart...* what a picture of love, friends. Tender love. It is a picture of a God who – for reasons that we'll never grasp this side of eternity – a God who really, truly, loves us. Who cares for *us*, who wants to gather us – all of us – in his arms, hold us close to his heart, and comfort ... us.

So, Verse nine:

⁹ *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!"*

Here is your God! *This* is what God is like! Friends, how often I pray for the ability to share from this 'mountain' that wonderful news. To say to people who are running as hard as they can in the opposite direction from God, running because they have an image of God in their mind that is incomplete, or just wrong. Images of a vengeful God, an angry God... a God who delights in judgment and is full of wrath.

How I pray for the ability to somehow bring these folks to the presence of our Shepherd, to Jesus, to be held close. It's the only reason I'm in ministry. To be able to share God's comfort... so that all could hear this word from the Lord: "the scales have been balanced. You don't owe me *anything*. Come, let me hold you."

In that same message that I mentioned earlier, Brennan Manning spoke these words:

...I can stand here tonight and with theological certainty in the power of the Word proclaim, "God loves you as you are, and not as you should be, because there is nobody in this building who is as they should be. Do you believe this?"

*Think of someone... a Christian for 20 years, "Do you believe God loves **you**?"*

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“Oh yeah, been there quite awhile.” Then watch the way they live – lives of fear, anxiety, shame, remorse, guilt, low self-esteem, self-hatred, self condemnation. Oh, they believe God loves them in some vague, distant, abstract way, but they’d be hard pressed to believe that right now the essence of their Christian life is a love affair; and not just a simple love affair, but what G. K. Chesterton called a “furious love affair” going on between Christ [and] themselves at this very moment.

Do you really believe that with all the wrong turns you’ve made in your past, the mistakes, the detours, the moments of sin, selfishness, dishonesty, and degraded love - that God has used them all to bring you to where you are tonight and the Word says you are standing on holy ground?

This moment, do you truly believe that God loves you beyond worthiness, and unworthiness, beyond fidelity, and infidelity; that he loves you in the morning sun and the evening rain, without caution, regret, boundaries, limits or breaking point, no matter what’s gone down – he can’t stop loving you.

If you don’t trust that, you are... projecting on Jesus your negative feelings about yourself, assuming that he feels about you the way you feel about you and that you are worshipping a God of human manufacturing - a God who does not exist.

Isaiah writes: Israel, **THIS IS YOUR God**. A God of love, compassion, forgiveness...a Shepherd who holds his sheep close to his heart, and gently cares for them. A God of love who pays for their sin.

There’s a parable that Jesus told that we often use during stewardship messages – the Parable of the Talents. (In fact, we looked at it ourselves just a few weeks ago) so you hopefully, remember it:

A wealthy master is going away and he gives his servants each a certain amount of money. To one he gives 5 talents of silver, to another, 3, and to a third, he gives one talent. And after a time – a long time - he returns and calls those servants to give an accounting of what they did with the Master’s possessions. It’s a powerful lesson on Stewardship. But there is something else in there, too.

The third servant, who had just been given one talent comes before the Master and he says: “*Sir, I knew that you were a hard man, harvesting where you did not sow, and gathering where you*

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did not scatter seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.'

The whole time that the Master was away, this servant lived in fear of him, based on his perception of the Master's character. He hid his meager talent in the dirt awaiting that day of accounting.

Now that is just a parable, and parables are designed to make one point. But we do know that the Master in this parable was most certainly, representative of God.

And we also know that there are a lot of people who think about God *exactly* as this servant did. A hard man, who harvests where he doesn't sow, and gathering where he doesn't scatter seed... There are a lot of people who live in *fear* of God, who feel that God is unjust, and uncaring, capricious. Because of that fear, they run. And God's love letter is left unopened.

Friends if that describes any of you... I say, simply, please: "Trust him. Open the letter! It is Good News! You are loved beyond your comprehension. It will never be otherwise. The scales have already been balanced. Your freedom awaits."

Come to this table in simple faith, and allow your heavenly Father to hold you, and share his love with you.