**THOSE WHO HOPE IN THE LORD**

 December 29, 2019

Isaiah 40:1-31 Key Verse 40:31, “but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

Today we have the last Sunday Worship Service in 2019 and the new year 2020 is approaching to us. Personally, whenever I put the past one year behind me and face a new year, in my heart there has always been some sorrow due to unachieved things as well as thanks to God due to his unchanging grace and love. Some may have been full of joy because of God’s amazing grace despite all difficulties and challenges. However, I believe that during this past one year we all have had our own struggles. Some of them may have been pretty intense. Whether our struggles have been big or small, we know that we all need real comfort that can solve all our agonies or sorrow or anxiety. Then where can we find such comfort? Today’s passage, Isaiah 40 is about God’s comfort. As you know human comfort has limit. It helps us in some degree but not completely. But God’s comfort is perfect. It really gives us real freedom from all darkness that bother us. Most of all, God’s comfort is in his word of promise. God promises that those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint. What a life we wish to have! Let’s hold on God’s word of promise as we face a new year 2020 so that in this coming new year, we may have victorious and fruitful life. Amen.

Look at verse 1. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” In chapter 39 the prophet Isaiah had prophesied Gods judgment upon the people of Judah that they would be taken into Babylonian captivity due to their sins (39:6,7). As the prophet Isaiah had prophesied, the people of Judah suffered unbearable pain under the Babylonian captivity for 70 years. But now God tells to comfort these people. Here we see that the purpose of the Babylonian captivity is not just to punish them but to discipline them. The time of Babylonian captivity was very costly and painful but it was necessary because it was the time for them to be purified for their repentance and restoration. So when the necessary period was fully completed, God tells to comfort his people. Then how does God comfort his people?

**First, real comfort comes from the forgiveness of sins**. Look at verse 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.” We cannot properly describe the suffering and pain of the Israelites under the Babylonian captivity for 70 years. It was worse than Korean people’s suffering under Japanese occupation for 36 years, or Burmese people’ suffering under military government for around 50 years. God made them suffer under the Babylonian captivity not because he hated them but to cleanse them from their sins. Now they don’t have to suffer any more since they received double for all their sins. Their sins were forgiven now and God would bring them back home; Jerusalem. This was the greatest comfort that they could receive. Those who are tired and weary need comfort. How can we comfort them? All human and materialistic comfort have limit. The message of forgiveness of sins is the best comfort we can give them and this is actually what God really wants to give us all. That’s why after verses 1 and 2, all the messages from God is about coming of the Messiah who would bring the fundamental forgiveness of our sins.

**Second, we should accept God’s rule**. Real comfort comes when we accept God’s rule after the forgiveness of sins. Look at verses 3, 4. “A voice of one calling: ‘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.’” These verses are specifically the message John the Baptist, the forerunner of Messiah Jesus quoted for his mission in Mark 1:3 and Luke 3:4-5. Here, the wilderness picture is a metaphor for personal repentance and restoration that would happen when the Messiah comes into us. Wilderness represents sinful mankind’s (including current Israelites) lifeless, weary, and dry inner state, Every valley low self-esteem; inferiority; depression; or inner wound, Every mountain and hills pride, The rough ground and the rugged places crookedness and rebellion in our hearts. When the Israelites served the idols leaving God out, they only received pain and sufferings due to their sins and they became ignorant and numb about their broken inner reality, namely, how much ruined their life was. But now when the LORD comes to them, they are to encounter their broken reality in their hearts and repent them; their wilderness-like heart; mountain-like pride, valley-like low self-esteem and inferiority, and rough and rugged ground-like rebellious heart. These are also the hope of restoration which will happen when we accept God’s rule in our heart throughout our life time. God’s comfort is not just lip service but real restoration in our inner personality and furthermore he enables us to see the glory of the LORD through such inner transformation in those who accept his rule (5).

**Third, we have to stand on God’s word**. In verse 6a, God says to Isaiah to cry out and when he said, “What shall I cry?” God answered him. Let’s look at verses 6b-8. “All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” The Israelites, after coming back from the captivity, must have felt miserable when they looked at Babylon’s glory. It looked so glamorous. On the other hand, even though they were chosen people by God, nothing went well, and furthermore they suffered under the strong godless people. But God says that all men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The Babylon’s glory and power looked as if they would endure forever, but when she became proud, she was defeated by the Persians. Like Israelites, sometimes when we compare with prosperous ungodly people, we feel like losers and we can doubt the life of faith and the word of God and we are tempted to seek worldly glory and honor just like all prosperous ungodly people. But God says clearly that all their glory will perish but only the word of God endures forever. All who put their hope in worldly glory will be put to shame when it perishes like the flowers of the field. On the other hands those who put their hope in word of God seeking God’s glory will endure forever with God. God wants us to choose such life eternally comforted by eternal God.

**Fourth, powerful Sovereign God is our shepherd**. Isaiah who has been delivering the message of comfort, now declares who God is. Look at verse 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!’” The Israelites only looked at their pathetic situation or their prosperous godless neighbors, and then despaired. At this time, they should look up at God. As we conclude 2019 and start new year, we should look up at God instead of looking at things of the world. We should help others to look up at God. Then who is God?

Let’s look at verses 10, 11. “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.” The Israelites knew God as God who condemns sinners without mercy, God who is so holy that no one may approach him. But in fact, God is our shepherd. He is gentle and caring and patient. The image of shepherd who carries a lamb in his arms, close to his heart is the most beautiful picture that we can imagine, which shows us that he is approachable and makes us feel most accepted and secure in his care. As we learned in our United GTA Christmas worship service, 2000 years ago, Jesus God incarnate was born in a stable and laid in a manger in order to demonstrate that he is approachable to anyone and later he demonstrated his shepherd heart again by being glad to be mocked as the friend of sinners. This gentle shepherd Jesus is the Sovereign LORD who also rewards and recompense all our efforts without fail. When we look at such God, our sense of loss and fear disappear and we can have peace even in the midst of sufferings or hardship.

In verses 12-17, Isaiah continues to speak about God’s power and his Sovereign rule. God has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and marked off the heavens with the breadth of his hand. Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counselor? Surely to God the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust…Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. When Israelites suffered under the powerful Babylonians, the Babylonians looked like they were ruling the whole world. But here God clearly says through the prophet Isaiah that God regarded them as dust or nothing or even less than nothing. When Isaiah saw himself, his people, and all the nations from God’s point of view, he was not afraid of the Babylon and any powerful ungodly men and he could proclaim God’s message boldly without fear. Likewise, the Psalmist in Psalm 118:6&7 also had such conviction and shouted, “The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies.” When we have God’s perspective like Isaiah and the Psalmist, we also can boldly carry out our mission without fear.

**Fifth, he is the Creator God**. Isaiah continues to testify who God is by comparing him to idols. Look at verses 18 19. “With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him? As for an idol, a metalworker casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it.” How foolish it is to trust lifeless idols which were made by men! On the other hand, God was in the beginning and stretched out the heavens like a canopy. Look at verse 26. “Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.” The Creator God made the heavens and the earth and all universe and every single thing big and small, visible and invisible in them and he alone sustains all of them. When we look at this awesome Creator God, we don’t trust in worthless idols.

In verse 27, Isaiah point out the real problem of the Israelites. They complain that God does not regard their difficult situation: Even though God is the Creator God and rules the world, he is indifferent to their sufferings and sorrow, and so they considered him irrelevant. They did not believe in God’s love and providence due to their hardship. Even though God is the Almighty God, if we do not believe in him, we have no part with him. Isaiah cries out with a shepherd heart in verse 28-29, “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. *He gives strength to the weary and increase the power of the weak*.” Even though they seemed to know God well, they were blind spiritually and did not know who God is. When we only struggle with worldly problems, we forget who God is. Here Isaiah rebukes them of their unbelief and ignorance, saying “Do you not know? Have you not heard?” God gives strength to the weary and he is the source of power and wisdom. Therefore, if anyone depends on God, he or she will not get tired or weary and be filled with wisdom. On the other hand, those who do not depend on God grow tired and weary and fall even though they are young. Here we can see that the problem is not in God, but in their unbelief and ignorance.

Let’s look at verse 31. “but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.” “Hope in the Lord” means to put all our hope in God and depend on him. Because we put hope in God, we also seek God and follow God and live God-centered life. God’s promise is that when we do live such life, he or she will always receive a new strength from God. Why am I powerless and easily become weary and tired? It is because I depend on myself, on material things or on my experience. But those who hope in the Lord will soar on wings like eagles and will have great vision and strength. Eagles have big and strong wings and they can soar high. In particular, when there is storm, other birds go into their nest, but eagles ride the storm and fly higher. Likewise, those who hope in the Lord will have more strength and faith thorough hardships. Those who hope in the Creator God do not live only looking at the problems like sparrow. They live with high hope and vision like eagles as God’s chosen people. They devote their lives to the eternal life instead of small benefits in this world. They live lives of mission instead of enjoying petty pleasure. Even though they may grow old outwardly, their inner men will be renewed every day and live like young men.

This year in the fall semester we studied the book of Joshua. Especially we learned about the life of Caleb who followed the Lord wholeheartedly throughout his entire life. When he was about to conquer the promised land, his age was already 85. But he was full of pioneering spirit just the same as when he was 40 years old. He said, “I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I am just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then (Joshua 14:11).” In Caleb’s life, I really see the very good example; how can I live like an eagle in spite of getting old? The secret is hoping in the Lord wholeheartedly. The Lord Jesus made a new foundation of a new life through his grace of forgiveness of sins. When I accept his rule by depending on him and obeying his word, my whole restoration as God’s healthy and holy child is already done in faith and in God’s promise. With such conviction I should walk with my shepherd Jesus through deep prayer daily, entrusting all life challenges and problems in his hands who is Sovereign and who controls and sustains all things.

As a conclusion, let’s make our focus on looking up to our Lord Jesus and put all our hope in him and his word of promise and seek and follow him wholeheartedly as we conclude this year 2019 and face a new year 2020. Amen.