

“Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her; that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance.” For thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip, and bounced upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bones shall flourish like the grass; and the hand of the LORD shall be known to his servants, and he shall show his indignation against his enemies.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Today we begin our summer sermon series, looking at the requests that you have made for sermons on various topics or Scriptural teaching. As we go through these coming weeks, God’s Word will do what it always has done and as it always will do—it speaks to our hearts to call us from our sins and to give us the assurance of the Lord’s love and grace in the midst of the struggles and fears of our lives. As the psalmist says: ***“Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints; but let them not turn back to folly.”*** (Psalm 85:8, ESV) God calls us to hear His Word, to live in it, and to find the treasures of forgiveness, life and salvation He sets before us that we may have hope, guidance and comfort for all our days.

In part, that is why I chose to start with the request about knowing His love and patience in times of our grief. God wants us to have hope and comfort in all the changing scenes of life and let’s face it—life can change in an instant. I will conduct a funeral this coming week, because life changes in an instant. I spent time with someone at the hospital this week because life changes in an instant. Many people had their travel plans disrupted when a bomb scare shut down six airports here in Canada. Life changes in an instant. The Winnipeg Blue Bombers couldn’t seem to recover after two intercepted passes were returned by theStampeders for touchdowns. Life changes in an instant.

There is a hymn that says: *Through all the changing scenes of life, In trouble and in joy, The praises of my God shall still My heart and tongue employ.* (TLH 29, st. 1) That is a wonderful summary of the words of our text today. Even though life may change in an instant, our great and glorious, all-powerful and all-knowing God does not change. Although there may be those times of grief and pain, God will comfort His people. He will bring us to the paradise he regained for us in Jesus Christ. He will be with us in all that we face, as we walk with our hand in His.

As I was driving this week, I was listening to The Seekers, an Australian folk and pop group from the 60s. You may recognize them by the songs that were hits, like “Georgy Girl”, or their shepherd’s song, “I Know I’ll Never Find Another You (Ewe - sorry, bad pastors’ joke). They have a song entitled, “When Will the Good Apples Fall”. It is a song about a rich girl whose father seems to be controlling her life and who wants her to marry a rich man he chooses. While she may wear diamonds, she envies those she sees around her in the world, especially the young lovers, walking hand in hand. The lyrics that caught my attention said: *“Oh, when will the good apples fall on my side of the fence? When will I taste the sweet fruits of life? When will the sun smile for me through great cloudy skies above?”* (When Will the Good Apples Fall) Isn’t that the way we often feel? We tend to feel that the only thing we have is not the good apple, but the bruised and rotting apples. We find ourselves grieving for someone or something we have lost and all we see are cloudy skies. We wonder why the sun never shines for us.

Now, this may be a bit of an overstatement. I don’t think most of us see only problems and cares day after day. Even for those who grieve there are those moments of joy and celebration. There are days of sunshine and days when everything seems to be going our way. Yet the rains do come. The clouds block out the sun and we again find ourselves having to face grief as we deal with the losses of our lives. This is the reality of life in this sin-stained world. It is the consequence of our sins, which show our rebellion and separation from God. All the glory, beauty and joy of life that God had created for His people is lost in our disobedience and sinful pride. In our Gospel lesson, we hear how Jesus sent out the disciples to call people to repentance and to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Yet the message is not received with joy by many people. Our sinful hearts get in the way. That is why Jesus told them: ***“Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.”*** (Luke 10:3, ESV) He also said: ***“But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come***

near.” (Luke 10:10–11, ESV)

We go our own way. We turn from God’s truth. We flee from the One who wants to hold us close to Himself. Thankfully, God didn’t give up on us. Jeremiah reminds us: ***“For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.”*** (Lamentations 3:31–33, ESV) That is the wonderful truth Isaiah is declaring in our text today. The last chapters of Isaiah look to the future glory that God has prepared for His people and which He will give to His people. We’re not quite there yet. We still live in this fallen world and we experience the grief of this world. We have those moments when everything seems to be falling apart. But God has not, and will not, forget His people. He reaches out in love to comfort His people. He describes this comfort like the comfort a loving mother gives her infant child. He speaks of His peace that flows to us like a river. Go down to Memorial Drive and walk along the river. Watch the water flowing by constantly. That is what God’s peace is like. It is never stagnant or stale. It is flowing, fresh and powerful. Jeremiah tells us God’s mercy is new every morning. Isaiah tells us that is true for His peace, too.

But the image of God’s comfort that caught my attention in the text this week is in the promise that ***the hand of the LORD shall be known to his servants***. God holds our hand in His powerful, loving hand. We don’t hold on to Him; rather, He holds on to us. He has a firm grip on us. Jesus assured His disciples: ***“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”*** (John 10:27–29, ESV)

And look at the hand that holds our hand! It is scarred, marked by the nail that was used to pierce that hand as it was nailed to a cross. It shows the love of the One who took upon Himself our humanity. By the life He lived with us and among us He brought real and lasting peace to His people. He experienced all the grief of our life so that He can comfort us. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: ***“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”*** (Hebrews 4:15, ESV) Your Saviour knows your grief, your fear, your pain. He knows how lost and hurting you are. And He reaches out to you. He reaches out to help you. He holds your hand tightly in His nail-pierced hand, so that even though we go through those dark times and struggling days, we never—never—do it alone. That is why treasure those wonderful words of David in his beloved psalm: ***“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”*** (Psalm 23:4, ESV)

Life can change in an instant, but the steadfast love of the Lord never fails. To return to the words of that song by The Seekers: ***“Oh, when will the good apples fall on my side of the fence? When will I taste the sweet fruits of life? When will the sun smile for me through great cloudy skies above?”*** My dear people, loved by God, the good apple has already fallen into your hands and into your hearts. In the wonderful book of Proverbs we are told: ***“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.”*** (Proverbs 25:11, ESV) The word of God is that fitting word, that apple of gold. It is the word that declares God’s love for us. It is the Word that speaks of the forgiveness greater than our sins. That Word, so filled with promise and hope, is the Word through which the Holy Spirit brings us to know and believe in the True God. That Word, through the power of the Spirit, brings us to know and believe in the Saviour, who died on the cross for us and who rose again to bring us His everlasting comfort. The word and its promise of peace flows over us like a river in our Baptism, as God marks us as His own and takes our hand, never to let it go again. That life-giving Word declares a great and glorious miracle, as the crucified and risen Lord says to us: ***“Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”*** (Matthew 26:26–28, ESV) When we come to His table, the Lord places Himself in our hands and in our mouths. He gives Himself to us to comfort us with His forgiveness and to bless us with His presence. He comes to us to drive away all the doubts, fears and griefs of our life. He is holding your hand in His loving hand. He holds you in His loving embrace. That is, and always will be true, no matter what life may bring. All the sorrows of this world will give way to glory. As Isaiah says: ***You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bones shall flourish like the grass; and the hand of the LORD shall be known to his servants.*** With our hand in His hand, we are at peace, knowing the everlasting comfort of our Saviour and our God. Amen.