

# Israel's Strength and Consolation

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On this third Sunday of Advent, I'd like to begin with a caveat. It has to do with the title I've chosen for my sermon this morning: "Israel's Strength and Consolation."

This title is obviously taken from a line in a song that we sang earlier in the service, "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus," which is probably my favourite song of the season.

I am aware that the word "Israel" is a loaded word these days given the horrors of October 7 and the brutal war that is now into its third month. I am aware that the word "Israel" is the source of strong opinions these days.

Given these realities, I want to make clear at the outset that in using the word "Israel" for my title, I am not making any kind of commentary on the modern nation of Israel or staking out any kind of political territory when it comes to the war going on right now.

The church has always borrowed the language of "Israel" because our Scriptures are saturated with it, and because we can't make sense of the story of Jesus or the church without it.

The church of Jesus has always audaciously claimed promises made to Israel as our own. We do this each time we read the prophets during Advent, or any part of the Old Testament at any point during the Christian year.

So, I want to be clear. The word "Israel" in my sermon title (and in the song we sang) is a theological statement, not a political one.

My heart breaks for the suffering in Gaza right now. My heart also breaks for the suffering that many Israelis experienced on October 7. Two hard and difficult to reconcile things can be true at the same time. Our hearts can be pulled in more than one direction.

I long for peace and pray for peace in every part of this planet where there is violence and hatred and brutality and the dehumanizing of God's children.

The hymn also contains this line: "Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart."

Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, is indeed the God of every nation, the unwitting desire, hope, and joy even of those who may not even know it. This includes the modern nation of Israel. It includes the long-suffering Palestinian people. It includes Ukraine and Russia and Sudan and Somalia and Canada and every other political entity on the planet.

So, "Israel's strength and consolation" is a statement of faith, not politics, an expression of hope, not ideology. I just wanted to make this clear at the outset.

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One of the things I have discovered in around a decade and a half of being a pastor is that this is a vocation that somewhat regularly puts me in *in extremis*.

*In extremis*. This is a Latin term which can be translated "in an extreme situation."

(Another thing I've learned in a decade-and-a-half of being a pastor is that dropping a Latin phrase into a sermon is a great way to sound really smart and spiritual.)

Pastors are expected to bring strength and consolation into extreme situations: contexts of depression, addiction, suicidal ideation, poverty, relational breakdown, violence, despair, doubt, illness, and of course, ultimately death.

But what happens to the possibility of consolation in a culture where many don't believe in this One anymore? This is the subject that Canadian professor, writer, and former Liberal politician Michael Ignatieff addressed in a 2022 article called "The Art of Consolation."<sup>1</sup>

Ignatieff acknowledges that in our increasingly post-Christian secular culture, we find ourselves in a bit of a bind when it comes to the possibility of consolation.

Once upon a time we consoled ourselves with illusions of an afterlife to heal the wounds of this world but now we know better.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.persuasion.community/p/the-art-of-consolation>

And yet we still stubbornly seem to need a more expansive hope than the options secularism makes available to us. Ignatieff acknowledges that consolation was easier in the past and that some of what we use to replace what we have lost doesn't really work:

Consolation has... lost its institutional setting. The churches, synagogues, and mosques, where we once consoled each other in collective rituals of grief and mourning, have been emptying out. If we seek help in times of misery, we seek it alone, from each other, and from therapeutic professionals. They treat our suffering as an illness from which we need to recover.

Yet when suffering becomes understood as an illness with a cure, something is lost.

Well, yes. This is one of the many domains in modern life where transferring some of the weightier existential burdens of human existence into the realm of "health" and "wellness" is woefully inadequate.

We are more than machines that require a bit of fiddling with the inputs. Much, *much* more.

Ignatieff attempts to recover this "more" by laying a kind of secular claim to religious texts of consolation:

We might suppose that religious texts—Job, the Psalms, Paul's Epistles, Dante's "Paradiso"—are closed to us if we don't happen to share the faith that inspired them. But why should we be required to pass a test of belief before we can derive consolation from religious texts? The promise of salvation and redemption might be closed to us, but not the consolation that comes from the understanding that religious texts can offer for our moments of despair. The Psalms are among the most eloquent documents in any language of what it is to feel bereft, alone and lost. They contain unforgettable descriptions of despair as well as exalted visions of hope. We can still respond to their promise of hope because the Psalms recognize what we need hope for.

Well, that's an interesting claim, isn't it? But is it true? Do these texts offer real consolation without the God to whom they point?

Is the eloquent language of lament and longing in the Psalms meaningful without the God to whom they are directed? Does Job's rage against his suffering retain its poignancy and pathos without the chastening final few chapters where God speaks out of the whirlwind?

And what of Paul's epistles? Well, it's hard to say it better than Paul says it himself: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19).

But Ignatieff can't (or won't) get here. He will not give up on the possibility of consolation in a secular age:

This is how the language of consolation endures—human beings in extremity drawing inspiration from each other across a millennium. Consolation is... keeping company with the bereaved, helping a friend through a difficult moment... reaching back to the dead and drawing meaning from the words they left behind.

Give voice to your pain. Live your life to the full. Remember you're not alone. Draw inspiration from your fellow sufferers. For Ignatieff, this seems to be the consolation we're left with.

I spent a good chunk of Wednesday at the jail for Christmas services. The jail is full of stories *in extremis*. In the jail, things are pretty stark. People are hanging on, often just by a thread. Hope and deliverance and consolation are not intellectual abstractions, but lifelines clung to in pure desperation.

My job at Christmas is to go around to sing Christmas carols and pass out treat bags to all the inmates who aren't allowed to come down to the gym for services.

One of our stops is "the hole." It's the place where inmates are sent for disciplinary reasons. There were two guys who stood with their eyes looking out of a little slit in the door listening to us belt out Christmas carols as loud as we could.

One, I had met two days earlier. A twenty-one-year-old young man who had asked to speak with a chaplain because he had just learned that his nineteen-year-old sister had been found dead in a field. The other was a guy wearing a protective blanket in lieu of coveralls due to suicide risk.

Both had tears in their eyes as we sang. One sobbed almost uncontrollably when I put my hand up against the glass when we were leaving.

*In extremis*. These were two young men in need of consolation.

I tried to imagine how they would hear things like, “consolation is human beings in extremity drawing inspiration from each other.” Or, “to be consoled, simply, is to hold on to one’s love of life as it is, here and now.”

I can imagine them saying, “Well, thank you very much sir, but I don’t love my life here and now very much and I don’t want to hold on to it.” Or, “Sounds nice. But I don’t draw a whole lot of inspiration from my companions in extremity.”

What I *have* heard inmates in the jail say are things like, “Jesus rescued me in a dark, dark place.” Or, “I’m a screwup, but I know God loves me and forgives me.” Or, “I know that Jesus is looking out for my kids and my girlfriend and this gives me peace.” Or, “I can’t wait for a world that is better than this one because this one is just too hard.”

Are these just pleasant illusions? Pre-enlightened fantasies seized upon by dull and credulous minds? Perhaps.

Or maybe, just maybe, these human beings *in extremis* see our need for divine consolation more clearly and truly than anyone.

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The book of Isaiah was written to people *in extremis*. A people in exile, far from home. A people suffering under the weight of their sin. A people for whom hope may have seemed in short supply.

Isaiah, like all the prophets, offers both stern warnings of judgment as well as words of consolation.

What consolation is Israel offered? Isaiah speaks of:

- Good news for the oppressed
- Binding up the broken-hearted
- Proclaiming liberty to captives
- Release to the prisoners
- A day of vengeance and justice (from the One who can truly be trusted with such things!)
- Comfort (consolation) for all who mourn.

The year of God's favour, mourning being turned into gladness and praise.

At our Young Adults group this year, I've been doing what we do as a church at the beginning of each calendar year. I've been letting them choose the topics or questions we discuss when we meet.

(Reminder: submit your Faith Questions! I need to have them by this Wednesday so I can begin to make a plan for 2024!)

One of our questions this fall had to do with the "Upside Down Kingdom" Jesus proclaimed. Isaiah's vision describes it in part. A world turned upside down, where the ones on the bottom are honoured and those on the top are brought down.

Well, speaking of the upside-down kingdom, it's impossible for us to hear Isaiah 61 and not think of Jesus. In Luke 4, Jesus comes to his hometown Nazareth, marches off to church, and appoints himself the morning's Scripture reader. He takes the scroll of Isaiah and reads the very words you heard in church this morning:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he sat down and said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

(He leaves out the "and the day of vengeance of our God" part, which is interesting. It's also interesting that his hearers were initially quite pleased with his little scripture reading exercise until they discovered that the day of the Lord's favour included their enemies, at which point they tried to kill him... But that's another sermon.)

Release. Recovery. Freedom. Favor. Salvation. A world where wrongs are righted. A world where all that is wrong within us is forgiven and where our hearts beat in tune with our Maker's.

*Israel's strength and consolation.*

This is the kind of news that *actually* offers strength and consolation.

Strength: There is no road we can travel that God does not walk with us. There is no situation so severe or extreme that can take us where God is not. Even “the point of death.” God sees those on the bottom and God’s future includes a great reversal.

Consolation: God has suffered, too. All suffering is temporary. Ultimately, it will be swallowed up by love and life. Wounds will be healed. Sins will be forgiven. Guilt and shame will no longer haunt our steps. Tears will be wiped away. Sighing and sorrow will flee away.

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Are you in need of strength or consolation today? I’d be surprised if you weren’t.

To be human is to struggle. It is to go through hard things. We know this, of course. We hear about it every week during our sharing and prayer time (yes, we hear of joys and celebrations, but the hard things tend to overshadow the hopeful things).

Hard things are the things that weigh us down.

Hard things do not define all of reality, thank God! There is much that is good, true, and beautiful in our world, and we must never forget this, nor cease to give thanks for this.

But there is a sense in which all our lives are lived *in extremis*, if only in the sense that life is an extreme situation. We don’t always feel it to the same degree, but it is true.

We need strength. And we need consolation.

Jesus offers both.

Jesus does not tell us to draw inspiration from our fellow companions who also suffer on life’s journey (although this can surely help, in a limited way).

Jesus does not say, “Well, why don’t you rummage around in some old misguided religious texts and see if you can find any consolation there?”

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Mat. 11:28).

Jesus says, “Blessed are you who mourn for you shall be comforted” (Mat. 5:4).

And ultimately, Jesus says, “Behold, I come to make all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

Jesus tells us that no matter how extreme the situation, all is not lost. All can indeed be healed. There is no stain of human sin that cannot be washed white as snow. There is no sorrow that cannot be turned to gladness.

This is not a pleasant fiction. This is the truth of who God is and of how God works in the world.

Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise. Jesus is Israel’s strength and consolation. And he is ours today.

I want to end my sermon with the words that Come Thou Long Expected Jesus ends with. These words are my prayer for all of us, for our church, for our world.

These words are my hope for myself and for our world as Christmas 2023 approaches:

By thine own eternal Spirit,  
rule in all our hearts alone.  
By thine all sufficient merit,  
raise us to thy glorious throne.

Amen.

