



*1 Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins. 3 The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: 5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. 6 The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: 7 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. 8 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. (Isaiah 40:1-8)*

Here we have another great old Lutheran hymn whose exquisite beauty and truth is derived directly from God's Holy Word. It tells both the Advent story as well as that of the Christmas Season. I am so happy we observe the liturgical calendar year in the Anglican tradition since Christmas is far too joyous to be observed in one night only, instead of the accustomed twelve days of Christmas ending at Epiphany (January 6<sup>th</sup>). Though intended for use on John the Baptist Day (June 24<sup>th</sup>), its lyrics clearly herald the great hunger, need, and realization of the Coming Savior. It is a paraphrase itself of Scripture that was included in the Genevan Psalter of 1551 Anno Domini. Lyrical content was modified for better meter by Johannes G. Olearius of Leipzig, Germany in 1671. Musical score is *Werde Munter* by Johann Schop, 1642.

This hymn celebrates the coming of the Light of Christ, but it also begs the question: "Who will we be comforted by it, and how?"

*Comfort, Comfort ye My People*

Comfort, comfort ye My people,  
Speak ye peace, thus saith our God;  
Comfort those who sit in darkness,  
Mourning 'neath their sorrow's load;  
Speak ye to Jerusalem  
Of the peace that waits for them;  
Tell her that her sins I cover,  
And her warfare now is over.

For the herald's voice is crying  
In the desert far and near,  
Bidding all men to repentance,  
Since the kingdom now is here.  
O that warning cry obey!  
Now prepare for God a way!  
Let the valleys rise to meet Him,  
And the hills bow down to greet Him.

Yea, her sins our God will pardon,  
Blotting out each dark misdeed;  
All that well deserved His anger  
He will no more see nor heed.  
She has suffered many a day,  
Now her griefs have passed away,  
God will change her pining sadness  
Into ever springing gladness.

Make ye straight what long was crooked,  
Make the rougher places plain:  
Let your hearts be true and humble,  
As befits His holy reign,  
For the glory of the Lord  
Now o'er the earth is shed abroad,  
And all flesh shall see the token  
That His Word is never broken.

*Comfort, comfort ye My people, Speak ye peace, thus saith our God; Comfort those who sit in darkness, Mourning 'neath their sorrow's load; Speak ye to Jerusalem Of the peace that waits for them; Tell her that her sins I cover, And her warfare now is over.*

As we have noted several times over, the purpose of the great classical hymns of the church is to convey biblical truth and doctrine in such a way as to aid memorization and love of God's Word in the heart. It is notable that the first words uttered by the Angel of the Lord to the frightened shepherds on the heights overlooking Bethlehem were, "Fear not!" At the sight of such an amazing sight, why would we not fear? We fear not because such a blessed sight is from the Lord. Once we understand that all things that come into the life of the Christian is of God, we can then take comfort in that knowledge. It was God's Voice that spoke through the medium of the Angel of the Lord to the shepherds. Why should they fear when the Angel brought them "good tidings of great joy which shall be to ALL people?" Were the shepherds not included in that happy term, "all people?" The pervasive spiritual darkness of the centuries fled before that coming Light of Christ. He is the Light of the World, and if a candle can dispel the darkness in a pitch dark room, the Light of the World can disperse the darkness from

every quarter of Creation! *The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.* (Isaiah 9:2) This darkness had grown so prevalent from Adam's Fall that the eyes of the people were now blinded to that spiritual Light that came down at Christmas - that is, all but the poor shepherds and those of the Wise Men from afar - and wise men and women everywhere today.

*For the herald's voice is crying In the desert far and near, Bidding all men to repentance, Since the kingdom now is here. O that warning cry obey! Now prepare for God a way! Let the valleys rise to meet Him, And the hills bow down to greet Him.* There would be no point for men to repent if forgiveness was not made available in Christ. Repentance and forgiveness does not mean that man is now free to sin wholesale and reject the Law of God. We must never willingly sin, but we sin a thousand times without even being aware of that sin at the moment of its commission. We repent of all, but cannot even remember all. It is for this reason that we have the General Confession Prayer that all can utter without reservation. It covers the two categories of sin - those of COMMISSION, and those of OMISSION! John came preaching in the Wilderness as a forerunner and emissary of the great King of Glory to come. Many had forgotten even of their need to repent! But "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Our Lord will not walk in the ways of a sinner, for He is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. So the sinner must be converted and follow Christ in the RIGHT way. With the Coming of Christ, the Kingdom also came down to be among men; but some are so blinded by the smothering darkness of centuries and millennia that they comprehend not the Light.

*Yea, her sins our God will pardon, Blotting out each dark misdeed; All that well deserved His anger He will no more see nor heed. She has suffered many a day, Now her griefs have passed away, God will change her pining sadness Into ever springing gladness.* The New Jerusalem of the God is the Bride of Christ, and includes all of Israel - not those who are of the fleshly seed only (for many are NOT), but are Children of Abraham by the Promise and inner workings of God - both Jew and Gentile. All who are without Christ are still dead in trespasses and sin. (see Ephesians 2) But Christ paid the sin-debt on the cross for His Elect. Paul Lee Tan offers a great illustration of that glorious blessing of freedom from the old dead corpse that we were: "The Romans sometimes compelled a captive to be joined face-to-face with a dead body, and to bear it about until the horrible effluvia destroyed the life and health of the living victim. Virgil describes the cruel punishment:

The living and the dead at his command  
were coupled face to face, and hand to hand;  
Till choked with stench, in loathed embraces tied,  
The lingering wretches pined away and died.

Without Christ, we are shackled to a dead corpse - our sinfulness. Only Spirit- evoked repentance frees us from certain death, for life and death cannot coexist indefinitely.

*Make ye straight what long was crooked, Make the rougher places plain: Let your hearts be true and humble, As befits His holy reign, For the glory of the Lord Now o'er the earth is shed abroad, And all flesh shall see the token That His Word is never broken.* The first two phrases are not our labors, but rather those of the Lord. Since He is the WAY, He is the one who makes the WAY straight. *Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.* (Matt 7:13-14) But it is the drawing power of the Holy Ghost that drags us, sometimes kicking and screaming, to that Way which the Lord wants us to follow.

Heartbreak Ridge is a rugged part of Bear Mountain overlooking the US Military Academy at West Point. The forced march in full field packs up that ridge is heartbreaking, for the trail inclines steeply upward and appears to end at a crest; but when the presumed crest is approached, the cadets are disappointed to find that it only turns up a steeper incline. I am one of those who knew the disappointment of Heartbreak Ridge in my younger days at the Academy.

The Straight Way is uphill for it leads up to God. Not many people wish to travel uphill, so there are few on that Narrow Way. But many lazy and shiftless sinners are on that Broad and highly trafficked way that leads down to destruction. They love to be in the company of abject sinners. They love the apparent ease of sin and the world's recognition and approbation of sinners. They know not their destiny until the gaping jaws of Hell appear before them at the abyss when it is too late to turn back. Truly, the Word of God is immutable and never broken, for Christ is the Word Incarnate - He changeth not. *Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.* (Heb 13:8)