The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 40:2: “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I remember being in some scuffle on the playground as a kid, and saying to my opponent: “Let’s quit now—we’re even.” He said, “We’re not even until I’m one up.” I didn’t understand, so I said, “What do you mean?” He showed me. I didn’t ask again.

That’s how the world works: if you want to put a stop to something, you do so with more force than necessary. I’m reminded of the line from The Untouchables, where Sean Connery’s character tells how to defeat Al Capone: he says, “He brings a knife to a fight, you bring a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue.” Or, to paraphrase Rodney Dangerfield: after you’ve sacked the quarterback, you go after his wife and kids. The key to defeating an opponent is a decisive victory, not some wrist-slap that makes him think that the crime is worth the punishment.

So this is how, for a long time, I heard verse 2 of our Old Testament lesson: “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” In other words, “Tell Jerusalem that I’ve punished her enough, and her citizens ought to know better. Time to move on.” I should have known better—this isn’t about double-punishment, for that isn’t how God works. It would contradict the Gospel. He doesn’t say, “I forgive you after you’ve paid your pound of flesh.” He says, “I forgive you because Christ became flesh to suffer and die in your place.”

No, this verse isn’t about double punishment, but double the grace. It’s not just about comfort, but double comfort, comfort-comfort, as in “Comfort, comfort My people, says your God.” In fact, this text is so full of Gospel that some preachers are afraid that your sinful flesh will use the News to let you get away with murder. But this text isn’t an excuse for sin: it’s balm for the wounded, life for the dying.

Your warfare is ended and your iniquity is pardoned, declares the Lord. Your sin made you an enemy of God, but you’re not at war with Him anymore. It’s not that you came up with enough of a ransom that He promised to leave you alone. He paid the ransom. He pardoned your iniquity, blotted out your sin. He doesn’t see you as subdued sinners afraid to cross Him, but as friends and beloved children.

How serious is the Lord about forgiving you? Listen: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” Valleys and mountains are obstacles to travel: in Isaiah’s time, caravans would go around them and add days and weeks to trips. What does the Lord do to bring grace to you? He simply fills in the valleys and flattens the mountains into a highway. In other words, nothing is going to get in His way. This train is coming through. Nothing can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Who is it for? The text declares, “The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” This is for all people, all flesh; and this is vitally important, because “all flesh is grass…the grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever.”
This is Good News—the Good News that the heralds of God and all of His people are to proclaim. There’s even more joy: this redemption is not just from the Lord. It is the Lord: “Say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’ Behold the Lord GOD comes with might, and His arm rules for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him.” The Lord comes, with only reward and recompense—no vengeance to be found. And while He comes with power intact, He comes gently: “He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”

The Lord comes to His people with healing, with grace. Not with just enough comfort, but comfort-comfort, double the grace.

The prophet Isaiah declares this to the faithful remnant of Israel as they watch their nation falling apart. Disaster and destruction will come soon at the hands of the Assyrians, and it is coming because the nation has rejected the Lord and His Word. Because they want nothing to do with God, God grants them their desire; and without His protection, they’re sitting ducks. But to the remnant that still trusts in the Lord, Isaiah declares that the Lord Himself is coming. He is coming with all the grace they need (and more!), and nothing will prevent Him from saving His people.

Much of this prophecy is fulfilled in our Gospel lesson for this week: John the Baptist is the voice crying in the wilderness. He is preparing the way of the Lord. He is preaching the Law that all flesh is withering, dying grass. He is bidding all to prepare for the Lord’s coming by repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Soon, he will proclaim, “Behold your God!” His precise words will be “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” In order to tend to His flock like a shepherd, God comes in the flesh to be led to the cross like a lamb to the slaughter, the perfect sacrifice for your sins.

Because Christ has died in your place and is risen again, I tell you this: the Lord comes to you. He comes to you with grace and pardon. He comes to you with comfort-comfort, with double for all your sins. He has died for more sins than you could possibly ever commit.

If you seize upon this news to say, “I can go ahead and keep on sinning all I want!,” then see Romans 6. To continue in sin is to refuse forgiveness for it. The one set free from sin does not remain a slave to sin, and the one who continues in willful sin is enslaved to it. To take advantage of your Savior so is to mock the death and hell He suffered for you. Repent. Otherwise, you remain fading, dying grass; and your condemnation is richly deserved.

If you find yourself unmoved by the lavish shower of Gospel in this text, take heed and examine yourself. This is welcome news to the one who knows his sinfulness and repents. If this text is a ho-hum proclamation, you’re well-advised to consider yourself. Do you have sins you want to hold onto, and so you don’t really want to be freed from them? Do you consider yourself to be not-that-sinful, and thus in need of little grace? Then sin has pulled the wool over your eyes. Repent. Believe what the Word says about the depth of your sinfulness. Rejoice and believe all the more in what the Word says about Christ’s lavish grace for you.

If you are troubled by your sin and know your unworthiness before God, then rejoice in this generous Gospel. Your sin can no longer separate you from the Lord, because He brings you grace upon grace. To you this night, I proclaim, “Behold your God!” Not just the One who came in flesh and blood to die for your sins, but the One who comes this night to give you His flesh and blood for the forgiveness of your sins—the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Be comforted, friends. Your warfare is ended. Your iniquity is pardoned. For Jesus’ sake, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen