

Isaiah 40:1-4; 9-11 Common English Bible (CEB)

Comfort for God's people

40 Comfort, comfort my people!

says your God.

2 Speak compassionately to Jerusalem,

and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended,

that her penalty has been paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins!

3 A voice is crying out:

“Clear the Lord's way in the desert!

Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!

4 Every valley will be raised up,

and every mountain and hill will be flattened.

Uneven ground will become level,

and rough terrain a valley plain.

9 Go up on a high mountain,

messenger Zion!

Raise your voice and shout,

messenger Jerusalem!

Raise it; don't be afraid;

say to the cities of Judah,

“Here is your God!”

10 Here is the Lord God,

coming with strength,

with a triumphant arm,

bringing his reward with him

and his payment before him.

11 Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock;

he will gather lambs in his arms

and lift them onto his lap.

He will gently guide the nursing ewes.

Soul Reset - How is it with your soul?

So, how is it with your soul?

I mean, how is it really?

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion [and everything else]?”

Jesus says: “Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.” Matthew 11:28-30

Over the next few weeks of Lent leading up to Easter, we invite you to slow down. And to examine yourself -- to think about your life. To think about what is bringing you joy and what is stressing you out. We will ask you to be brutally honest with yourself and with God about how it is with your soul. We will invite you to lay down your burdens and to learn the unforced rhythms of God's grace. We will invite you to take comfort from God as the prophet Isaiah promised. My prayer during this series is that we will learn to rest in Christ and to live freely and lightly as we walk with Jesus. Each week, we will send you out with a challenge -- a specific spiritual discipline to try out as a means of getting into this rhythm of life as a follower of Jesus. It is going to be a great adventure, and I can't wait to get started

The logo for our sermon series is this power button. And I find myself pushing this button a lot with the devices in my life. When it comes to technology, sometimes our phones or our computers get overwhelmed -- either we are trying to do ten things at once with them or they aren't connected well to the internet or who knows what, but sometimes they just lock up! Am I the only one who has this problem? Our devices freeze up, and we just have to power off, let the device rest and then restart -- to reset their operating systems. When we push our bodies and our souls to the limits, we can experience frightening results that are quite the opposite of the abundant life that Jesus promises.

So, I hope to raise two areas of thought for you this day. One: "How do we know when we need to reset?" and two, "How **do** we reset?"

So first, I have to say, I think most all of us need a reset. The pace of our American lives can be kind of insane. One writer in Forbes Magazine said that Americans live in an age of freneticism -- we take pride in our busyness and it is destroying our health and well-being and it is actually hurting our productivity instead of increasing it.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/danpontefract/2018/07/09/you-are-way-too-busy-its-hampering-your-ability-to-think-and-be-productive/#2f39264fa4cc>.

I came across a podcast this week called the overwhelmed brain; and I think that describes many of us pretty well.

I think most of us need a reset, and I have found that our bodies give us red flags. For me -- I get migraines when I overdo it. When I am stressed my heart rate gets really fast -- I can feel my heart beating in my chest. I get irritated and short with people who certainly don't deserve that, and I get grouchy. I've experienced anxiety and depression, feelings of hopelessness and crying for no apparent reason. You may have some red flags, too. Usually, our bodies give us signals!

One of the most exhausting things, though, is to be feeling stressed and overwhelmed and yet wearing a mask -- pretending that everything is perfect when in fact we are about to go face down. We often feel that we have to put up a facade instead of being honest with ourselves, and honest with our God, and honest with the people who love us -- including fellow-Christians. But friends, authenticity leads us to freedom. When we can admit our heavy burdens before God and before those trusted people in our lives, then we are able to really lay our burdens down and to move toward wholeness. Then we are able to live a life of joyful abundance in Christ Jesus our Lord. The message of Lent and the message of this sermon series is that this is a time to examine our souls and then to turn toward Jesus, who is loving and merciful and who provides comfort---comfort for God's people! It is by walking in the ways of Jesus that we will learn to live freely and lightly. Christ will be our strength in carrying those burdens that weigh us down.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, used the question "How is it with your soul?" as an opening question for the small groups that were so vital to the growth of the movement. The

early methodists would gather to share their hearts and souls with one another - to support and encourage one another in their growth as disciples. They met regularly, and they were intentional about staying connected to God and to one another -- they met to hold each other accountable to growth in Christ. Our journey to wholeness comes through establishing some rhythms of God's grace. There are some practices that will lead us to experience the love of Christ, and they are called means of grace -- they are channels that will allow us to receive the love of God in our lives. It's like the flood gates of a dam holding back the water. God's love is like the flowing water, and the means of grace help open the flood gates so that the cleansing water will flow into our lives. The means of grace are the means, the way, that we make ourselves open to receiving God's love in our lives.

But if we never take the time to open the flood gates, if we are not intentional about spiritual practices, if we don't open those gates every day, we will continue to live without the full power of God in our lives. If we don't put time for God on our calendars or set our alarms to remind us, we are going to let the million other things in our life take over and consume our attention. And in turn we might never experience the full measure of the love of God and the full measure of the fruit of God's Spirit in our lives

So, how **do** we reset? Well, I have a very practical answer for you -- the process is not really mystical or mysterious. These means of grace are things that you may already be doing -- or maybe not. Maybe you do some of these things sporadically. But for our long-term spiritual, emotional and even physical health, we have got to be disciplined and intentional -- it takes hard work to do something every day. It takes practice to turn away from the idol of busyness and to turn toward God through things like prayer and silence and rest. And so, I for one, am glad for this challenge to practice every single day making my faith and my walk with Jesus a priority. Every week we will challenge you to try a different spiritual practice.

Seeking the presence of Christ every day through these spiritual practices is important not only for the ordinary, everyday stresses of life, but they are vitally important to help us be ready for those earthquake experiences in our lives that are bound to happen -- having the grace of God already flowing through our lives helps us prepare for and survive those times when our whole world seems to be shattered.

Have you ever heard the story of Horatio Spafford? It goes like this: Horatio lived in the 1800s. He was a devout Christian who'd immersed himself in Scripture, many years of his life were joyous. He was a prominent Chicago lawyer, whose business was thriving. He owned several properties throughout the city. He and his beloved wife had four beautiful daughters and one son. Life was more than good — it was blessed. But faith, no matter how great, does not spare us from the worst of times.

Just as Horatio hit the pinnacle of his profession and financial success, things began to change. It began with the tragic death of their son. Not long thereafter, the Great Chicago Fire destroyed nearly every real estate investment Horatio owned. Just a few years later in 1873, Horatio decided to treat his wife and daughters to a much-needed escape from the turmoil. He sent them on a boat trip to Europe, with plans to join them shortly after wrapping up some business in Chicago. Just a few days later, he received a dreadful telegram from his wife, "Saved alone..." It bore the excruciating news that the family's ship had wrecked and all four of his daughters had perished.

Horatio was on his way to meet his heartbroken wife, passing over the same sea that had just claimed the lives of his remaining children. It was then that he put his pen to paper and wrote the words to “It Is Well With My Soul.”

It seems to me that Horatio’s years of grounding himself in the practice of his faith had given him the gift of God’s grace flowing through him. Because those flood gates were already opened in his life, he could cling to the power of God to give him comfort through unimaginable tragedy. He was able to write that when sorrow like sea billows rolled through his life, even on that day of overwhelming grief, he could say, “God you have taught me to say: it is well with my soul.” <https://www.godtube.com/popular-hymns/it-is-well-with-my-soul/>

Now, please hear this. This is so so so important. The idea here is not to ignore the pain and trouble that we may be experiencing and to just pretend that it is well with our souls. We must not put on a mask and pretend that our lives are perfect. The idea is to be honest before God -- to seek out the presence of God so consistently that we might come to recognize that God is with us in the pain and God is with us through the pain, and that, therefore, we can say that God is with me and God is in the process of healing my soul -- therefore, it is well with my soul.

Friends, the question today is not just a surface-level, “How are you?”

The question is: “How is it with your soul?”

The God who loves you unendingly, urges you to lay down your burdens and to take comfort in Christ.

Would you close your eyes for a minute. Would you take a deep breath. Would you put your palms face up in your lap as an invitation of God’s presence. And reflect on these questions.

What is bringing you joy in these days?

What is bringing you a sense of burden in these days?

What is God saying to you about making a soul reset?

Closing prayer

Gracious and loving God, we thank you for hearing our silent prayers. We thank you for drawing us closer to you and for your desire to make us whole. Free us from our burdens and free us for light and free living, walking each and every day with you. We are praying for a soul reset, a restart with you. We commit to this journey of seeking wholeness and abundant life that can be found only in you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.