

**SERMON TITLE-** "All Men Are Like Grass"

**TEXT-** Isaiah 40:6-12

**PREACHED AT-** Neighbourhood Church

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Let me begin with a story that happened last fall-

It was one of those situations that slows traffic as we strain to sort out the details. The police, the tow trucks, the ambulance and vehicle wreckage are all part of a picture that is all too familiar. Except this time it was me.

I had been taking one of the last motorcycle rides of the season, Wes and I were on the way home and life was very good. The last thing I remember was passing a lake cradled in forest covered mountains and looking down one of the few straight stretches. With a deep sense that all was well in the world I was also mentally going over some of the connecting pieces for the next day's sermon.

The next thing I remember is trying to answer a policeman's questions about what had just happened. I didn't know, I told him. That's normal, was his reply, as we stared at the crushed side of the bike.

The woman I hit thought I was dead and couldn't come back even when she was assured that I was OK. I never did meet her.

And I was OK. I walked away and on the 2 hour ride home did some serious thinking. The line between a pleasant fall ride and eternity and everything in between was suddenly razor thin. It was even more disconcerting because the concussion had wiped the entire incident from my memory. There was nothing there- I may as well have been struck by lightning from a clear blue sky.

Isaiah's words were rolling around in my muddled brain- and they have stayed there. In fact they are part of why we have been looking at Isaiah this summer.

**A voice says, "Cry out."**

**And I said, "What shall I cry?"**

**"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass." Isaiah 40:6-7**

How true! But it can have a terrifying ring to it when you are sitting in the wreckage of a perfect fall bike ride. Is life really that fragile? One minute you are going along with hopes, dreams and plans- the next minute you are no more. It is deeply unsettling.

So where is the comfort in that?

We all know life is fragile but there are moments when the reality of "all men are like grass" drives its impact deep into our souls. Sometimes, calamity strikes from out of the blue. The world of the modern highway keeps reminding us of how, in an instant, our detailed plans can be wiped away without warning.

But it is not only about motor vehicle accidents.

Recessions change lives. Incomes are lost when, in the mysterious world of

international finance, something goes wrong and castles of sand sink into a rising tide.

Sickness changes lives. Relationships take heart-wrenching turns. And what was supposed to be a pleasant ride becomes wreckage.

Sometimes like an advancing tsunami we see it coming and scramble to get out of the way. Sometimes we do- sometimes not. Tsunamis have many forms.

Being reminded that I am like grass did not feel comforting as I rode home.

But it is supposed to be a comfort- after all the voice that cried out began with-  
**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Isaiah 40:1**

So this is supposed to be Good News and Isaiah tells us why-

**The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."**  
**Isaiah 40:8**

We are not going through this text in order- but in the verses that follow Isaiah sets up a series of juxtapositions or contrasts that build towards God's comfort.

**We are fleeting but-**

### **#1. God's Word Is Not Limited To This Moment**

There are good moments that we treasure and there are bad moments we would like to erase from our memory banks.

Each of those moments brings a "reality" with them. In the short moment of my fall ride I went from a beautiful sense of everything being right to utter mental confusion.

It might not have felt like comfort in that moment when everything already felt out of sorts and temporary- but these words were actually written to people who understood that life is fragile.

In many ways our culture works very hard to shield us from this fact. We have medicine that no body in the course of history could ever dream of. Life expectancy is rising to the place where too many old people is now the next big problem.

The commercials on TV are filled with picture of young fit people that we are supposed to identify with.

In other times and cultures the temporary nature of life was part of the daily consciousness of people. People died around you on a regular basis. People died young. What we consider to be minor illnesses killed your family members. Accidents and wars happened to everyone.

That was the world of Isaiah's audience. That is the world of most cultures.

So do people who live with that need to be reminded that life is short and fragile? Is that what I needed when I was already shaken by life's fragile nature?

At the time I didn't think so but, in fact, I think we will discover from Isaiah 40, that this is exactly what I needed, maybe in the same way that a person who breaks a bone needed to suffer the pain of having that bone reset.

The pain of the reset might seem unbearable at the time- but unless it is set right- the full healing cannot take place.

Part of that resetting is the statement that in contrast to our fleeting nature, God's word stands firm.

There is a sense of comfort in knowing this. While I remember not liking the idea

of how temporary I felt I did find some level of comfort in having the verses going through my mind after all they are God's word.

There is a comfort in being reminded that God's word stands forever- but as I already mentioned- in the moment it didn't feel that good.

And to some degree the message gets harder before it gets easier.

Isaiah goes on- not only are we fleeting- like the grass- we are tiny, like dust and in contrast it is God-

**Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Isaiah 40:12**

## **#2. Our God Is Vastly Above Creation**

As I read this I thought about the Book of Job. Job had seen his beautiful world collapse around him. In his case, that collapse literally did come from no where. Job would never find out why all the terrible things happened to him. They really were arbitrary and not just in the natural sense of the word.

In our physical world there are times when lightening does strike people- but that is natural. In Job's case calamity came to because of a conversation in heaven.

Of all the people on earth- Job was not being treated fairly and the life he had worked carefully to build, and which he deserved in a moral sense- was torn from him without any cause or any warning. Job was wronged.

But when the time came for God to speak to Job, what was the message?

**Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.**

**Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone- while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Job 38:1-7**

It hardly seems like a comforting word from God who loves Job. In fact for a person who has been critiqued for days by his best friends my first reaction is- why does God now speak so harshly to Job. If I was Job, at that point, I might have been inclined to put my fingers in my ears and break down crying.

Maybe he did- but God had something to say- and He said it.

The message was that God is that He is above all of creation and in similar language this Isaiah it is language that highlights that contrast between ourselves and God in every imaginable way.

How is that a comfort when everything has gone wrong?

Because there is another side to this verse-

**Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or**

**weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Isaiah 40:12**

In the middle of this contrast Isaiah start to show us where the comfort is. It begins be observing that-

### **#3. Our God Is Very Tactile With His Creation**

The Bible is clear that God is vastly beyond creation but there is a stunning juxtaposition to this. The language of that contrast is the God who stands apart from creation- as its Creator- and language of touch. For those who are familiar with the Bible the stunning contrast between these 2 has become merely the language of God. But I think it is supposed to startle us.

On the one hand God is completely “other” from creation. The Jewish people understood that and because of it, like people do, decided to take it one step farther and make even saying the name “God” out of bounds. They did this by not putting vowels into YHWH. There, now we can’t say His name.

Of course that misses the point of everything else in the Bible but it came from the understanding of God’s ultimate “otherness.”

But it does miss the point because along side of God’s otherness is God’s tactile relationship with His creation.

God’s relationship with creation is a relationship of touch. God did not create us in a factory that stamps out one identical product after another.

Through the magic of computers you can now buy amazing paintings produced by machines. Only a trained eye can tell the copy from the original.

That is great if all you want is a pretty picture on our wall- but it seems to me that for all their beauty- they are not real pictures. The picture in our home that I value the most is one of an African woman carving something. Not only is she carving something- the painting is an original, painted by a friend. I know that every bit of paint was applied by a brush stroke.

He was in Africa and as part of that experience he sat down and created a picture with his hands. The picture is of a woman’s hands and I think of his hands actually painting it. That makes the painting very special to me.

That the God created the entire universe by “touch” is a comfort when your world has been rocked.

When you have lost your orientation you need something to touch to get your bearings. God is a God of touch.

The God of Touch is revealed from the very beginning- in fact I think it is a primary characteristic of God.

The creation of man is described this way-

**... the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Genesis 2:5**

The rest of creation was created by a word but people were “formed” and breathed into. We are creatures created by touch and it should be no surprise that when our worlds are rocked that a touch is important.

And so Isaiah makes his point- God is vastly above all creation- but He is a God who touches that same creation.

Unless we understand the vastness of God there can be no appreciation for what this means.

And this relationship between God and the world He loves now is made even more specific by Isaiah-

**He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. Isaiah 40:11**

To God's love for His creation another contrast is given- compared to His love for us- His love for creation is nothing.

#### **#4. God's Love and Touch Extends Directly To Me**

This is a contrast that might not look like a contrast because in fact the Bible is clear that God loves His creation deeply. But in fact it is a contrast because humanity has been set up to such a high place within creation that it is intended to be a contrast.

We have been placed into a category within creation that is appropriately called "infinite value." That is what every human being has.

In contrast to this, creation has a very high value but distinctly finite. We can measure the value of animals and things but we cannot set a value on the human soul [we can even determine the value for our bodies and do it by our determination of how much we are prepared to pay by way of taxes.]

But this expression of God's love is not just a theoretical statement of Biblical truth- it is something that is supposed to be understood and built into our very beings.

And now the language of touch that is so beautiful when applied to creation applies directly to you and me.

God reaches out and wants to care for us in some of the most personal language of God and me, that the Bible has. This is very personal.

This is the language of the Good Shepherd- that of God loving people in the most personal way.

So how does that feel when you have just had your nice world wiped out? Frankly in the moment there is often very little comprehension of God's touch.

It is why we need to get the knowledge into our brains before a crisis hits. Why did Isaiah's words ring about in my brain after the crash? Because they were in there before the crash.

Once our worlds are turned upside down a certain automatic response kicks in. It is not that we don't have control over it [and frankly the more we are able not to act merely instinctively the better it often is] but there are sides of this response that we are not even really aware of. When a crisis hits then we need to hope that the teaching and training that took place before the crisis was adequate to carry us through the fog.

And when the fog lifts we can begin to see what took place in the middle of the crisis- that God's hand was on us the whole time.

We have been and are loved and cared for, very specifically by God who loves us like a shepherd loves his sheep.

We of course don't live with sheep here in Nanaimo but I think we can easily understand the picture.

We are a culture that glorifies pets. Of course everything can and is taken to inappropriate extremes- BUT the attraction that we can develop towards our pets is actually a very good illustration of what the Bible is trying to convey about God's love.

As people there is a mechanism of love for pets that can kick in which, I believe, is what Isaiah and other places in the Bible uses to help us understand how God loves us. God want to care for us- through all of the crises that life brings our way.

And all those add up to why that somber cry, "All men are like grass" is actually vital to Isaiah's message of comfort.

There are times when are worlds are rocked in big and little ways. They are times when we need comfort- and Isaiah's message is exactly that.

### **And That Is A Comfort In Every Season**

And that is why the message is called, The Good News. When that is understood we see why Isaiah adds this hymn to his message-

**You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" Isaiah 40:9**

The very Good News about all this is that this is not just good news when you crash- it is also Good News when life is good- when the ride on a beautiful mountain road is exactly that. After all God has given us His creation as a blessings for us to enjoy.