

## Comfort, Comfort You My People”

2 – Songs of Christmas

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

December 4, 2011

Second Sunday of Advent

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Christmas offers a unique coming together for us each year. Maybe we make too big a deal of it, but fact is Christmas is huge, and getting home for Christmas is about something more than geography. It is about orienting, about centering. It is about connecting and reconnecting. We send cards and go to parties and travel in order to connect and reconnect with family and friends and God. In doing so we really are following the pattern we find in the Bible where God connects with us, divinity and humanity interfacing, of heaven and earth, “Heaven and nature sing!” And Advent is the time we get ready for this great convergence.

This time of year our Scripture readings are rich in symbolism as they remind us of both our brokenness and the brokenness of our forebears, many who suffered greatly, and yet of God’s persistent wooing of a wayward people. People who walked in darkness. People who persisted in sin, still promised unimaginable blessing and deliverance, from a God who comes to us with comfort and consolation. “Blessed be the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our affliction,”<sup>1</sup> says Paul to the Corinthians.

These lessons today all speak of a divine hope, watching and waiting and well-being.

“In accordance with his promise, we wait.”

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.”

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

“The Lord will speak peace to his people.”

### I

A quartet of assuring phrases leap out from Psalm 85, a Psalm of God’s deliverance, as the Jewish Exiles return to Jerusalem from 50 years of Babylonian captivity. These big four are **Steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace**. These four capture the heart of God’s character and God’s action toward us. These four portray the dynamic nature of God’s ways with us.

They are strong themes found throughout the Hebrew Bible.

-**Hesed** is God’s **steadfast** “I will never leave or forsake you” love.

-**Emet** is God’s, I am there for you always, **faithfulness**.

-**Sedeq** is God’s plum line always dependable **righteous**.

-**Shalom** is God’s active engaging **peace**.

These four phrases express virtues that each of us wish to find instilled within ourselves. These four phrases are divine attributes which remind us there is purposeful movement in this sometimes chaotic world. Though coming 500 years before Christ they well reflect the coming of Christ and the kingdom he brings.

John Calvin comments,

“I cordially embrace the opinion which is held by many, that we have here a prophecy concerning the kingdom of Christ...

The fruits which he (the Psalmist) represents as springing from this reconciliation are, first that mercy (steadfast love) and truth (faithfulness) meet together; and secondly, that righteousness and peace embrace each other...

There is described in these four words all the ingredients of true happiness...

Whence it follows that nothing can contribute more effectually to the promotion of a happy life than that these four virtues should flourish and rule supreme...”

Calvin even adds -

“The chief happiness of the Christian is comprehended in these four blessings which he had specified.”<sup>ii</sup>

Amazingly, these big four – steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace come together. They meet. There is even this intimate imagery that they kiss, a beautiful shorthand picture of what God does for his people in leading them from slavery to freedom, from exile to return, and what God does for us in Christ in leading us from sin and separation into intimate ongoing relationship, which Jesus’ coming at Christmas announces to all the world.

## II

As I have listened to people in recent weeks I have sensed the heaviness many of you are bearing. It is a hard time for so many. Quite a number of you are hurting. Some have been through the death of ones deeply loved in recent months. Some have suffered from an assault on your body that has left you suddenly limited - physically, emotionally, spiritually – undergoing a sudden and unexpected surgery, being placed on a chemotherapy or radiation regime, and now you are dependent on doctors and nurses and hospitals in ways you never expected. Still others have lost a job or the job you have has been cut back, curtailed amid economic hard times. Still others are struggling with memories of childhood hurts and abusive treatment, maybe on the playground, maybe right in your own home, wounds that go deep and leave lasting scars.

Somehow this time of the year makes these hurts all the more intense and painful. We recently said good bye to Harry Murphy, beloved curmudgeon, as he called himself, a longtime

faithful member most always present at our 8:30 worship. Harry was a lifelong bachelor. He had many friends, but the holidays were hard for Harry. He had a little group of friends he would gather with for some holidays, like 4<sup>th</sup> of July, but others, like Christmas, were especially tough for him, and year after year, and he would literally vanish away all by himself to a hotel in the Caribbean for Christmas. Some of you know that feeling of holiday blues.

Well to all of you who struggle with this time of the year, hear this word from God himself. “Comfort, Comfort, comfort my people says your God.” A tender word from a caring compassionate God, a holy loving Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, who knows what we are feeling, who has entered into our suffering, who promises to stay with us and lead us through.

Isaiah turns a corner with chapter 40 opening what is known by the scholars as “Second Isaiah”, as an anonymous prophet writing in the spirit of Isaiah offers comfort. He embraces these exiles, with deep empathy and abiding compassion, recognizing all that these people have suffered and endured, and extends God’s word of comfort, and promise, to come and meet us where we are. “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” The promise extends to changes that will come to the natural world, where valleys shall be lifted and mountains leveled and a great highway built over which God will come, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.

Comfort is extended, well-being is promised, not based on us picking ourselves up by our own bootstraps and taking care of ourselves all on our own, but of our being able to receive what God promises to come and give. “Here is your God!” A powerful defender, “See the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.” But also a nurturing protecting caring mother, “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”<sup>iii</sup>

To people who are feeling disconnected, disoriented and discouraged, as exiles in a foreign land, God offers this comforting, caring word of hope and restoration. This promise that exile is not eternal, but God’s steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace are.

### III

I have always loved this section from Psalm 85 about these big four, because they so beautifully and intimately summarize what God is making possible for us, steadfast love and faithfulness meeting righteousness and peace kissing. They tell us that, in a world where people get hurt, and relations fall apart, and nations war against each other, that something stronger and more long-lasting, something holy and good is going on. God is at work in this world and in our lives to make whole what was broken.

Shakespeare picked up on this convergence in his play “The Merchant of Venice” where justice and mercy are being weighed, and Portia delivers that most famous speech about “the quality of mercy.”

“But mercy is above this sceptered sway,

It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
 It is an attribute to God himself  
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
 When mercy seasons justice.  
 Though justice be thy plea consider this,  
 That in the cause of justice, none of us  
 Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy and that Same  
 prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy.<sup>iv</sup>

Comfort; steadfast love and faithfulness meet, righteousness and peace kiss.

Where have we seen it? I saw it in a family I knew in Kentucky where a son had not seen his mother in over 40 years since she just walked away from the house one day when he was a little boy. Then one afternoon the phone rang and it was her. She was in Louisville, two hours away, her body riddled with cancer. And this son went up there and was reunited with his mother. He brought her home, took care of her on a hospital bed set up there in his living room, until she took her last breath. He gave this woman who gave him life, back to her Lord. Comfort!

I saw it in a young soldier from Alabama who went off to Afghanistan and came back with only one arm and one leg. What could have destroyed another, became for this young man an opportunity to trust God and rebuild, and after many months of therapy at Lakeshore he has been off successfully climbing the tallest mountains in the world. Comfort!

I saw it in my friend and former teacher at Princeton Seminary, Sandra Brown, who taught us Pastoral Care and Counseling. She later went on from Princeton to be a counseling pastor at a large Presbyterian Church in Ohio. One Christmas Eve she was up in the chancel with five other pastors on the staff there leading the worship, when she saw a man come late into the balcony. He pushed his way in, was loud, and was making something of a scene, so she slipped off the chancel and went up to the balcony. A number of people in the pews had already moved away from him, he was so obnoxious and unruly. She sat down beside him, smelled the alcohol and the body odor, and asked him if he would like a cup of coffee. They stepped out of the service and went down to the staff lounge, where she listened to his story and then got him to a shelter.

After many months of counseling and rehabilitation, this man ended up going to seminary. One Sunday, many years later, Sandy happened to be driving through a little town in the South on a Sunday morning, and she stopped in randomly at a Presbyterian Church to attend worship. And who should be up in the pulpit but this same man. He literally leaped off that chancel and ran back to embrace this woman who had brought him comfort – who brought him a new chance at life. Steadfast love and faithfulness meeting, righteousness and peace kissing.

I saw it as folks find their way through one of the many doors of this church, some coming for food or gas money, some looking for a support group who will not judge them for the failures they have gone through in their lives involving emotional or mental imbalance, drugs or alcohol or sex, but seeking friends who will help them heal. Still others come in and sit in a pew,

maybe off in a back corner, needing simply to let the music and the scriptures and the prayers wash over them, cleanse them, give them a sense that in spite of all they have done or failed to do, there still is a God who loves them, who cares for them, and who comes for them. And somehow in the quiet of a worship service here they make the connection. They, Lloyd Ogilvie says in the title for one of his fine books, “Let God Love You.”

Now to do this, to let God love you, to receive the comfort God has to offer, you have to let go. You have to release your hold, open your tight grip. That is what Mitch Albom’s aged rabbi says in his wonderful story, “Have A Little Faith”. It was on as a Hallmark Hall of Fame Movie last Sunday night. You have to open your hands to receive, release your clenched grip. Let God love you. Let God in. St. Augustine put it like this in his “Confessions”,

“O Lord Jesus Christ my strength and my redeemer, how suddenly and comforting it was to lose the false comforts of the past! I had long feared losing them and now it was a joy to cast them away. Truly it was you who put them far from me, my true and supreme comfort; you put them far away from me, and sat yourself in their place in my heart.”<sup>v</sup>

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”

To receive God’s comfort requires an inner change. We get stuck in bad habits, discouraging routines that become self-fulfilling. We need inner change that comes only as we are able to let go and let God. Then fractured frayed disconnected parts of our lives come together and we are changed. We are put together again. We are restored and revived. Then we feel the divine embrace as steadfast love and faithfulness meet and righteousness and peace kiss.

It is interesting how this psalm envisions the uniting of earth and heaven, in the same way that the Good News of Jesus coming at Christmas promises, when the angels of heaven sing and the shepherds of earth hear and respond. Convergence, coming together. “Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.” The two come together, the muck and mire of earth, the glory and grandeur of heaven. Together such convergence is what Christmas is all about.

You may have noticed, we are using the weighty, ponderous Nicene Creed throughout the Advent Season, which sums up the great themes of the Church’s teachings and beliefs, and comes at the last phrase to affirm, “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” In that affirmation we say we are in forward motion. We are making progress, we are part of this great ongoing repairing of broken things God is undertaking.<sup>vi</sup>

Advent gives us this opportunity, to connect with our past, to remember and build upon that faith foundation God has established, and then to move ahead, confident, that though we may find ourselves in a rough spot, in a dark patch, and may not know where we are at a given moment, we know where we are going, because we know where we have been.

This Advent, dear friends, receive comfort, comfort from God who loves you. Let God love you. Let God use you. Then trust confidently that God will bring together all things.

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
Righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its  
increase.”<sup>vii</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 2 Corinthians 1: 3-4

<sup>ii</sup> John Calvin, John Calvin, Calvin's Commentaries – Psalms, Psalm 85, p. 375-377

<sup>iii</sup> Isaiah 40:9-11

<sup>iv</sup> William Shakespeare, “The Merchant of Venice”, p

<sup>v</sup> Augustine, Confessions, 9:1

<sup>vi</sup> Peter Gomes, Sermons, Advent

<sup>vii</sup> Psalm 85:10-13