

# “Comfort”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – December 15, 2019*

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Isaiah 40:1-11

“A voice of one calling: In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.”

Centuries after this text was written in Isaiah, the ministry of John the Baptist helps us to realize that God had kept this promise to comfort his people; that the waiting – even if that time of waiting seems to go on for a long time – does not negate God’s promises. For even if we, ourselves, never see those promises fulfilled, we can rest assured that they will indeed come to pass; because though the grass may wither and the flower may fade, God’s word of hope endures forever.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” For anyone who reads through the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah – what is called First Isaiah, or 8<sup>th</sup> century Isaiah – these words come as a shock. 8<sup>th</sup> century Isaiah blasts the people of Israel for their sins; namely a refusal to care for the poor, the widow, the stranger, and the orphan. The message of First Isaiah is about God’s anger with Israel for their continual failing to follow the divine will and way.

Then, like a bolt out of the blue, comes Isaiah 40; and though we now know that we are hearing from different writer – Second Isaiah, 6<sup>th</sup> century Isaiah – these opening words sound like a balm to the spirit. The audience is now the people of the exile, those who had been carried off to a foreign land by their enemies and kept in prison camps. The city of Jerusalem and its temple had been destroyed. They had been forced to endure a full forty years of dislocation from home and hope. Now was the time for comfort.

We don’t have a biography, or even a name, for the writer of Second Isaiah. His personal life remains anonymous, but this author must have known what it meant to have both given and received comfort and compassion. Second Isaiah assures the exiles that God would come and feed them like a shepherd feeds his flock and carry them in his arms. They would be embraced with God’s love and given what they needed to go through the challenges that they faced. The way for them would be made straight; a highway leading them home to Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

Our God is a God who comforts; who stretches his hand to pull us up when we are down. Often, when we find ourselves in difficult situations, we want God to answer prayers immediately; one more day, one more moment of struggle feels too

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Markwart, “The Miracle of Comfort”

long. God comes to us when we are tired, struggling, and suffering. But God often responds to our prayers with a message that says: *the road is being prepared, a highway is being built; in time, God will come and your prayers will be answered and God's promises will become reality.*

Today, we are exiles of a different kind – exiles from our homes and our hope. If our true home is in God, who calls us to love our neighbor, to care for the poor, and to make room for the stranger; if our call as Christians is truly the same as was the call to the people of Israel in ancient times, then we are in many ways far afield from this home. Hence, our enormous need for the comfort of God. Instead of divine anger or frustration, we hear today in this passage a word of compassion – the promise of a new day and new possibility.

Every morning, noon, and night, God comforts by listening to our prayers: our requests, aches, pains and complaints. You may offer yours while you're in the shower, or driving in the car, or lying in your bed before drifting off to sleep. I try each day to pray what is called the daily office – knowing that I am praying in community the same words as others around the country and beyond, even if sitting in my office, alone.

Everyone has their particular aches and pains, troubles and concerns that they are dealing with at any particular moment. It may concern your family or friends; it may be about a job or not being able to find a job; it might be about loneliness, or financial problems, or various health concerns. Everyone has these; and God always listens. We don't know exactly how this works, how God can hear and absorb the prayers and concerns of the whole world. And yet, by hearing us when we pray, God comforts us.

It should not surprise us, then, that Jesus named the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. The Greek word for comforter is *paraclatos* which means “to come to the side of.” When you are sick and in bed, you want somebody to be at your side to care for you, to attend to you. So, this name reveals who God is and what God does. God's name is comforter; standing beside us, listening to us, strengthening us.<sup>2</sup>

The Apostle Paul says, “Blessed be the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our pain, so that we are able to comfort others in their pain.” As we have been comforted by God, so we are to give comfort to those around us. The best comforters are those who themselves have been comforted.

On Thursday, I had the opportunity to share some of the fruits of your labors with someone in particular need of comfort. Rev. Charlie Hurst, pastor of North

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<sup>2</sup> John Holbert, “The Unbreakable Love of God”

Presbyterian Church – our mission partner congregation in downtown Cleveland – called to ask if we could put some things together from the Pass-It-On store – which he saw when he was here to lead worship in October – household items to help outfit an apartment for one of their church members who was transitioning from living at the men’s shelter to having his own place. And so, our generous volunteers put together a vanload of pots and pans, blankets and towels, a table and chairs and much, much more.

I drove with Pastor Charlie to the apartment building and met Mark. When he came downstairs and saw what was in the van, his jaw dropped. As we carried his new stuff up to his 4<sup>th</sup> floor apartment, Mark told me how wonderful it had been to sleep the first few nights in a room alone; rather than in one shared with sixty other men. He sends along his appreciation to everyone who has given towards what he has now received.

Of course, as a minister, I get lots of opportunities to see this kind of comfort come to life. I see it when people are uplifted and transformed by worship experiences and spiritual practices. I see it when I am in hospital rooms and listen to people talk about a feeling of peace when they sense that God is at their side. And I see it when our children and youth begin to understand the real presence of God in their lives during conferences or mission trips.

As each of us has been comforted, so we also have the ability to give comfort to others who may be going through similar circumstances. Every person has gone through a particular type of hardship or challenge. No one is exempt. All of us have been in that place where we cannot imagine having to wait any longer to be comforted. Therefore, all of you have a special type of comfort that you can give people now walking the path you have already trod. Everyone hurts, everyone despairs; therefore, everyone has a special word of comfort to share with others in similar circumstances to their own.

What does comfort look like today? For the people of God, it means that we need not deny the brokenness of the human condition; or the depth and variety of the challenges that we face as individuals and as a community. And for us, comfort comes when we come alongside those who are in need of it; in the same manner as others have come beside us. And ultimately, it rests upon God’s promise that the unexpected can happen; that the rough and crooked road can be made straight. It may not happen right away; but we can rest assured that our waiting – and our trust in God’s promises – is worth it. Amen.