

SERMON

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT – YEAR B

“COMFORTED, BUT NOT COMFORTABLE”

ISAIAH 40:1-11 & MARK 1:1-8 / DECEMBER 10, 2017

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There's a lovely Christmas story called "The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree." It's set in an Appalachian village at the end of World War I.

The custom of the village is that each year a different family supplies the Christmas tree for the village church, and a child from that family plays the Christmas angel who announces the tidings of great joy.

In the story, this is the year when Ruthie's family is supposed to bring the tree. But Ruthie's father has been drafted into the armed forces. So, in the summer before he leaves for war, he and little Ruthie go up into the hills and search until they find the perfect balsam Christmas tree, and they tie one of Ruthie's hair ribbons to the very tip-top so they'll be able to find it in the snow next winter. And then Ruthie's father leaves for duty. During the months that follow, Ruthie and her mother struggle alone to make ends meet.

Finally, father writes that the armistice has been signed, and he'll be home soon. So, week after week Ruthie and her mother go to meet the train, and every week more men from their village return. But Ruthie's father is never

on the train. Without him, there's no one to cut the tree for Christmas, and time is running out.

On the last night before Christmas eve, the pastor comes to Ruthie's mother and offers to have another family supply the village tree. But Ruthie's mother refuses. She and Ruthie have waited expectantly – they've waited right up to the very last moment, hoping and expecting that Ruthie's father will return in time to go cut the balsam. But the time of waiting is up. So that night, they set out secretly and alone, in moonlight and deep snow, to find and cut that special tree. As they go, they sing carols up there on the mountain, and together they find the perfect balsam Christmas tree – the one that's still marked at the very tip-top with Ruthie's ribbon.

When the perfect Christmas tree appears mysteriously on the church steps at dawn the next morning, the villagers marvel at the miracle, and they tell of having heard angels singing in the hills the night before. Of course, the story within the story, the real story being told, is of how a little girl's father returns on Christmas eve. It's the story of the joy and the comfort they find in this reunion, and of how the true meaning of Christmas involves the return of the loved one.

That's the experience, or the hope, or the longing of many of us at this time of year – return of the loved one. We remember past Christmases – with loved ones who, for a variety of reasons, do not share Christmas with us any more.

To tell you the honest truth; sometimes I simply cannot bear to listen to old recordings of Christmas carols – Bing Crosby crooning ‘I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas’ can, at times, bring me close to tears. Memories – some good; some not so good – stir up emotions that can be nigh overwhelming. And beyond that longing which stirs in us, or more accurately the longing behind that longing is the longing for everything to be okay.... The longing for everything to be the way it’s supposed to be in this dark and sorry world.

At this time of year, the vision is stirred of what life should be like for everyone, young and old; of how no one should be alone; of how every child should have loving parents and every parent should have loving children, and of how whatever or whoever has gone away should be *home*. It stirs a longing for *comfort*.

The longing for comfort is a universal longing, I think – this longing for everything to be okay, this longing for home. I imagine that God planted this longing for comfort into us in creation so that we would always yearn for a home in God and so that we’d turn ourselves and our hearts to God.

We long for comfort because there’s something fundamentally not okay about the world, and I daresay most of us know this about our own lives. We live on the very edge of deep wilderness places! Perhaps there are lucky ones who escape this sense of danger. And those of us who know where our next meal is coming from and know what bed we’ll sleep in tonight may manage with some success to put our discomfort on a back burner. But at a deeper level, we all know that if we aren’t actually in the wilderness at this moment, it’s very close by. Maybe that’s why John the

Baptist went into the wilderness to announce the good news of Jesus' coming. Maybe that's why the prophet Isaiah called out his words of comfort in the wilderness – and why he summoned the people while they were yet in the wilderness to prepare the way of God's coming. John's and Isaiah's messages were for people who knew their need for comfort.

Their messages were for people who knew their need for God, and who longed for liberation from being surrounded by the dark powers of the world's wilderness. We today aren't any different. We all long for comfort, and when our longing isn't distorted by greed, it's a good longing. It's part of a longing for justice. It's part of longing for God.

None of us is far from the wilderness and its dangers. None of us is completely free of the fear of being lost and anxious. For some of us the wilderness is inside us. Our wilderness is personal: it's losing a parent or a spouse to death or estrangement. It's living with depression or addiction or with chronic pain or illness. It's aging and loneliness. It's seeing our children's families break up and it's losing our grandchildren to divorce.

For others of us, the wilderness is the world itself run amuck. It's scarce jobs, and part time work with no benefits; it's pollution in our drinking water. It's war and threats of war and people fleeing for their lives as desperate refugees; it's terrorist attacks, and crazy political leaders; it's climate change and unjust and uncaring abuse of the land. It's lack of justice, lack of economic and racial and sexual and gender justice. It's lack of affordable housing and access to adequate and affordable health care.

There isn't one of us here, who's so sheltered and privileged, that we aren't touched and affected by the wilderness of the world, even if we happen to be spared from being in our own. This comfort God offers sometimes comes to us in a strange way. Sometimes in order to be comforted, we need to be made uncomfortable.

This I witnessed first hand when my step father, an alcoholic since his days in World War II serving in the navy, courageously made the decision to quit drinking. He wanted, desperately, to have the comfort he would receive from being in a loving family; the peace of mind and health of body he could have – if he could just stop drinking alcohol. I'm glad to say he did do it eventually, but it was incredibly hard – two 30-day residential stays in detox; intense, agonizing alcohol withdrawal; losing his best friend of many years who would not have anything to do with him if he were sober. It was the most uncomfortable experience in his life, but it led to the greatest comfort he had ever experienced, the comfort of home, love of family, pride in the person he had become – a person that others loved and respected and most importantly, he became right with himself and with his God.

John the Baptist came proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people came to him, confessing their sins and were baptized in the River Jordan. Repentance and confession entail facing the truth about ourselves and changing the direction of our lives. Repentance and confession both require a searching and honest look back. There are no shortcuts. As my stepfather found out. As we all find

out. And yet, as we do this we discover that the valleys become filled and the hills become level, the curves straighten out and the rough spots are smoothed off -- so that we might see and experience God's glory filling us with that comfort for which we so long.

Yes, there is a road through the wilderness, whatever that wilderness is for us, which leads us to the comfort for which we long. Maybe for those of us who live in a relatively safe country, for those of us who have all we need – a roof over our heads, food, clothing, safety, we can become comfortable, which is different from finding comfort. And we can feel that being comfortable is enough, perhaps until life takes a disastrous turn. We can take God's presence in our hearts for granted. But this isn't the comfort Isaiah is talking about. Isaiah's comfort is an overwhelming truth that surpasses the feeling of having 'enough'.

Isaiah's comfort is the comfort of our God, who lives deep in our lives, even when we don't think about it, even if we may not believe it, even if our fears, or the distractions of life, blind us to that presence.

When we turn to God, in trust; when we confess our shortcomings and seek to repent – to change the direction of our lives – God will raise the valleys up and the mountains will be laid low.

No, Isaiah isn't talking about a disastrous environmental event; he's using an image to show how the coming of God will level the way for all people to experience God's glory and share in God's goodness. What a wonderful image! Instead of struggling over the rocky wilderness paths up into the

mountains and down across arid deserts, the people will have a safe highway, broad and smooth. Even in life's most difficult moments, God leads the soul along that safe, broad highway.

“But,” we may want to argue, “look at our world. See the things happening to people that would make a rocky path and an arid desert walk look like a picnic in the park. This image doesn't work.” And there's truth to that. Life does seem to throw ever more obstacles into our paths.

And so, we continue reading the prophet's words and find that, yes, we are all grass, and grass withers and fades; in other words we are mortal, and life is often difficult. So, to make this highway image work at all in our world, we are told we must work together. We must, collectively, want this world to change.

“...All people will see it together...” Says Isaiah. One way to think about this image is that we won't see it if we harbour exclusion in our hearts. When we choose to separate ourselves from our neighbours, we begin to see only ourselves. We may not be aware of it, but doing that makes us stumble the rocky path of injustice and sadness – a path that causes us to circle only inward, blindly into the darkness of self.

Another way to think about it is to look at what happens when groups join forces out of hatred for others, or ignorance, or fear. Children get caught up in bullying, out of fear or a need to be accepted. Young people join gangs. Others are recruited into terrorist organizations, to the horror of their families and friends.

Sadly, we can be lured off the highway of our God by temptation and the false, bright promises of evil. But God calls us into community – a community where we are not identified over against others. To use the words of St. Paul, we are not identified as Greek or Jew, slave or free, man or woman. Rather, as human beings we are God’s children; As Christians we are followers of Christ.

We are not identified by our nationality, our colour, our sexual orientation, our socioeconomic status, our gender identity, but by our connectedness as part of God’s good creation, and as Christians by our allegiance to Christ.

We are to be a community that embraces difference and celebrates diversity; yet a community that is one in our adhering to the values Christ teaches. Together a community can offer healing and love to those who have been excluded and help one another to travel the broad, smooth road to see God’s glory and receive God’s comfort.

The comfort is there. If you don’t feel it yet, continue steadfastly to hope for it. Believe it will come and wait for it expectantly, the way the Appalachian mother and child in the story waited for the father’s return at Christmas. Comfort is always there because God promises it. And it comes to us precisely in our wilderness. It comes to us as the father comes home. It comes to us as God comes to us in Jesus at Christmas. The voice in the wilderness cries out, “Comfort my people.”

The voice cries out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of God.” God wants to make sure each of us hears those voices, receives that comfort, prepares for the good and abundant life to which God, in Christ, calls us. Amen.

Major Sources:

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