

ADVENT COMFORT
Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches
December 7, 2008
Isaiah 40:1-11

In the last week I've sat with a family of a beautiful and feisty three year old whose heart surgery went bad and now this little darling is being kept comfortable as her loved ones surround her and wait for death to bring her healing. I listened to the wife of a 52 year old man dying of cirrhosis of the liver talk about the difficulties of living in a marriage where alcoholism was always an issue. We talked about the relief, comfort, grief and guilt she will experience when death finally releases her beloved, talented and very successful husband from his suffering. On Thursday evening at Hospice of Lubbock's annual Light Up A Life ceremony, a former nurse and Hospice of Lubbock board member told me in a flood of tears that she had received the news that afternoon that her lung cancer was inoperable and she may have six months to a year left to live. I promised this remarkable woman I would walk this last leg of her journey with her and that she could call me at anytime to cuss, cry, pray, throw a fit or just know that she was not alone.

On this second Sunday of Advent when our Gospel lesson always presents the troubling message of the street-corner evangelist, John the Baptist, I do not want to hear or to preach a sermon about repentance and the importance of turning our lives around so we may be open to the birth of our Lord again this Christmas. I am very aware that “our world is a mess, each of us here is not perfect and we all screw up often. (Maybe I should just speak for myself!) We get angry when we shouldn’t and we are rude when we’re tired or in a hurry. Maybe we haven’t forgiven an old hurt, or a recent one. We might spend too much on Christmas or be too influenced by advertising. We forget to pray and read the Bible as often as we should and we don’t always trust God or each other.” **(From a sermon entitled, “Listen” by Rochelle Stackhouse; Lectionary Homiletics, December 7, 2003)**

We all know that we have the power to change our world by choosing to act better in our every day lives and be more loving and kind to the family, friends, coworkers and idiots to whom we must relate. However, this knowledge is obviously not always enough to motivate us to change. At this cold, dark time of the year we need something more and I don’t know about you, but I believe what I need is to be reminded of God’s comfort in the midst of the pain and chaos I not only experience in my own life but am called upon to deal with in the lives of others.

The good news of this Advent season comes to us all in the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah who said, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

The dictionary defines “comfort” in this way: “to bring relief from distress or anxiety or to make someone feel pleasantly relaxed.”

To receive soothing, adequate words and kind, thoughtful actions in troubled times is a wonderfully comforting thing. However, the Biblical meaning of the word for comfort in our scriptures goes far beyond soothing words and thoughtful actions.

(From an article entitled, “The Storm Center,” in The Christian Century on May 31, 2003) The Rev. Peter Gomes, minister at the Harvard Memorial Church says, “the proper meaning of the word ‘comfort’ means to fortify, to strengthen, to give courage, and even to give power to.’ The God of all comfort is the one who supplies what we most lack, when we most need it. As Paul puts it, God gives us sufficient capacity that when we are knocked down, we are not knocked out. The God of all comfort is not the god who fights like Superman or Rambo or Clint Eastwood. The God of all comfort is the one who gives inner power and strength to those who would be easily outnumbered, outmaneuvered, and out-powered by conventional forces and conventional wisdom. Inner strength is what is required when we

do not know what to do with our outward power and our outward might or we do not have any left.”

The husband of 46 years who has devoted his retirement years to caring for his beloved wife as she loses her battle with colon cancer, the five year old boy who waits until he hears another’s voice so his mother will not be alone when he slips peacefully away in her arms on Christmas Eve and the family who lights a candle each Christmas day in memory of their twenty three year old son who died unexpectedly in a car accident several years ago-- --all of these and many more know something of the comfort of God and how God’s comfort has given them the strength, courage and power to not only survive these life-defining events, but to flourish and embrace life once again.

After Isaiah reminds us of God’s great comfort, he then paints a vivid picture for us of how God will be present to us in our lives. “A highway will be built across the desert, every valley will be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough places will be smooth—and then the glory of the Lord will be revealed.”

What comes next in this scripture is one of the most dramatic, radical moves in all of literature. Instead of portraying God as a grandiose and powerful king riding in on a war horse in a proud procession with trumpets blaring and banners unfurled, the image

of God we are given is one of great humility and compassion.

Isaiah proclaims: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, carry them on his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”

Isaiah’s picture of God as a shepherd, tenderly speaking, carrying lambs in his arm, gently leading the mother sheep seems to go against most people’s first image of God as an all powerful and in control king. A few years ago most good Christians were reading all of the books from the popular **Left Behind** series of apocalyptic best sellers about the end time and the second coming of Christ. I got tired of kindly making excuses for not reading these terrifying books that are not very Biblically grounded and are for the most part responsible for scaring people into heaven or turning thoughtful, intelligent people off to a responsible and compassionate Christian understanding. According to these books, Jesus’ second coming, will be bloody, powerful, and violent; very different from his first coming as a Jewish infant born in a manger on the outskirts of town to an unwed teenage mother.

For me, Jesus’ humble beginnings and the image of God as a faithful and nurturing shepherd who gathers his lambs in his arms and carries them on his bosom are powerful reminders to us that mercy really is at the heart of God.” (**“Living by the Word,” The**

Christian Century, 13 December 2005). A God who says, “Comfort, comfort my people,” and is portrayed as a shepherd who tenderly speaks and carries the lambs in his arm and gently leads the mother sheep—that is a radical theology, a radical notion of how God acts and a radical notion of what it means for us to love and follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. **(Excerpts from a sermon by John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, 12/4/05, “The Comfort and Joy of Home.”)**

In the book, **The Beatitudes**, Hugh Martin writes: “Some people’s strength is all drawn from themselves. They are like isolated pools with limited reserves. Others are more like rivers. They do not produce or contain the power, but it flows through them, like blood through the body. The more they give, the more they are able to draw in. That strength is theirs, but it is not their own. The strength that God gives is available to those who care for others, for they are showing the spirit of Jesus and the power of God fortifies them.” As we seek the comfort of God that helps us not only to endure but to flourish, may we look beyond what we can get, to what we have been given and to whom we can give.

In searching for a story that depicts the comforting presence of God as one who will feed his flock like a shepherd, gather the lambs in his arms, carry them in his bosom and gently lead the

mother sheep, I was fortunate to find a gem. (**From a sermon entitled, “Hospitality” by John Buchanan at The Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, December 24, 2000.**) Kent Haruf, who teaches English at Southern Illinois University, wrote a wonderful novel, **Plainsong**, about life in a small Colorado town. It is a deceptively simple story about the lives of ordinary people, to whom ordinary things happen and who respond in ordinary ways, and who are, on occasion, capable of extraordinary grace and courage: the characters are a public school teacher caring for her aging and increasingly difficult father; a seventeen-year-old girl, pregnant, alone; and two elderly brothers, bachelors, cattle ranchers who live seventeen miles south of the small town of Holt, Colorado.

Victoria’s mother has thrown her out of the house because of her pregnancy. Maggie Jones, the schoolteacher, has taken her in, but Maggie’s demented father is making the situation intolerable. So one day, Maggie drives seventeen miles south of Holt to the ranch of the two elderly brothers, Raymond and Harold McPheron. The brothers are on a tractor, returning to the house. They’d been feeding cattle out in winter pasture.

Maggie stepped away from the barn and stood waiting for them. They moved heavily in their winter overalls. "You’re going to

freeze yourself standing there," Harold said. "You better get out of the wind. Are you lost?"

"Probably," Maggie Jones said. She laughed. "But I wanted to talk to you."

"Uh, oh. I don't like the sound of that."

"Don't tell me I scared you already," she said.

"Why [heck]," Harold said. "You probably want something."

"I do," Maggie said.

The three of them enter the modest bachelor farmhouse with stacks of magazines and greasy pieces of farm machinery on all the furniture. They sit down.

"I came out here to ask you a favor," she said to them.

"That's so?" Harold said. "What is it?"

"There is a girl I know who needs some help," Maggie said. "She's a good girl but she's gotten into trouble. I think you might be able to help her. I would like you to consider it and let me know."

"What's wrong with her?" Harold asked. "Does she need a

donation of money?"

"No, she needs a lot more than that."

"What sort of trouble is she in?" Raymond asked.

"She's seventeen. She's four months pregnant and she doesn't have a husband."

"Well, yeah," Harold said. "I reckon that could amount to trouble."

Maggie explains that the girl's father abandoned the family years ago, her mother won't have her in the house, because she's gotten pregnant, and the father of her child doesn't want anything to do with her.

"All right then," Harold said. "You got our attention. You say you don't want money. What do you want?"

She sipped her coffee and looked at the two old brothers. "I want something improbable," she said. "That's what I want. I want you to think about taking this girl in. Of letting her live with you."

They stared at her. "You're fooling," Harold said.

"No," Maggie said, "I am not fooling."

They were dumbfounded. They looked at her .as if she might be dangerous. They peered into the palms of their hands and looked out the window.

"Oh, I know it sounds crazy," she said. "I suppose it is crazy. But that girl needs somebody. She needs a home for these months. And you," she smiled at them, "—you old [solitary boys] need somebody too. You need somebody or someone besides an old red cow to care about and worry over. It's too lonesome out here. Well, look at you. You're going to die someday without ever having enough trouble in your life. Not the right kind anyway. This is your chance."

After a long silence, Harold says, "Let's get back to the money part. Money would be a whole lot easier."

"Yes," she said. "It would. But not nearly as much fun."

Maggie asks them to think about it and leaves. The brothers return to work "as mutely and numbly as if they had been stunned into a sudden and permanent silence by such a proposal.

Later, when the sun had gone down in the late afternoon, the brothers did talk. They were out in the horse lot, working at the stock tank. "All right," Harold said. "I know what I think. What do you think we do with her?"

"We take her in," Raymond said. "Maybe she wouldn't be as much trouble," he said.

"I'm not talking about that yet," Harold said. He looked out into the gathering darkness. "I'm talking about—why [heck], look at us, old men, alone. Decrepit old bachelors out here in the country seventeen miles from the closest town which don't amount to [much] even when you get there. Think of us, crotchety and ignorant, lonesome, independent, and set in all our ways. How you going to change now at this age of life?"

"I can't say," Raymond said. "But I'm going to. That's what I know."

"And what do you mean? How come you say she wouldn't be no trouble?"

"I never said she wouldn't be no trouble. I said maybe she wouldn't be as much trouble."

"Why wouldn't she be as much trouble, as much trouble as what? You ever had a girl living with you before?"

"You know I ain't," Raymond said.

"Well, I ain't either. But let me tell you. A girl is different. They want things. They need things on a regular schedule. Why, a

girl's got purposes you and me can't even imagine. They got ideas in their heads you and me can't even suppose. And [darn] it, there's the baby too. What do you know about babies?"

"Nothing. I don't even know the first thing about 'em," Raymond said.

"Well, then?"

"But I don't have to know about any babies yet. Maybe I'll have time to learn. Now, are you going to go in on this thing with me or not? Cause I'm going to do it anyhow, whatever."

Harold turned toward Raymond. The light was gone in the sky and he couldn't make out the features of his brother's face. There was only this dark familiar figure against the failed horizon.

"All right," he said. "I will. I'll agree. I shouldn't, but I will. I'll make up my mind to it. But I'm going to tell you one thing first."

"What is it?"

"You're getting [darn] stubborn and hard to live with. That's all I'll say. Raymond, you're my brother. But you're getting flat unruly and difficult to abide. And I'll say one thing more."

"What?"

"This ain't going to be [no Sunday] school picnic."

"No, it ain't," Raymond said. "But Harold, I don't recall you ever attending Sunday school either." (pp. 112-113.)

This beautiful story reminds us that the comforting message of Christmas is how God's love continues to be born in to our hearts and lives where we need to know that we are accepted and wanted and loved and valued and cherished. God's love is born where our grief, losses and sufferings are deepest and most profound. God's love is born where we are most vulnerable; God's love is born into our fears, anxieties, hurts, hopes, and dreams where we can be strengthened and moved to share our life, love and talented unfinished selves so that our world is made more whole and we become more complete!

"Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 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."

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious and Loving God,

We gather in this place on the second Sunday of Advent and we are already busy with our Christmas preparations and activities. We often get lost in the chaos of our frantic pace, the demands of work and home, and the stresses of our relationships. During these Sundays before Christmas, help us to remember the new things God did long ago in a cradle in Bethlehem as we wait and hope and yearn for God to do new things now in the cradles of our own unfinished lives. When we honestly look at our lives and our motivations, we see that much of it is about us—our petty complaints, or unmet needs, and our unsettled souls. Come to us again and save us from ourselves and our narrow vision of what life and faith are really all about. When we have gotten ourselves into binds and predicaments from which we have no hope of extricating ourselves, help us to not lose hope and to begin to see the endless possibilities of life and love that you seek to give to us.

During this Christmas season may we prepare an empty manger in the midst of our hurts, failures, and vulnerabilities in which You, Lord can continue to be born. May we be more fully

aware of the love that comes to us as a gift and may we be willing to let our lifestyles and our choices reflect the love of God incarnated in Jesus. We give thanks on this day for the birth of Hailey Hope Hoel, for the contributions of life and love she already brings to our world and for the family and friends that will nurture faith, hope and love within her. We also pray on this day for Jim Prather as he deals with cancer and a repaired hip. We ask that our loved ones and friends who are sick, grieving, distressed and not up to par this season understand more fully that the emptier our hands and the poorer our quarters, the more clearly we perceive that our hearts were meant to be Christ's home here on earth. In the days ahead, help us O god to hear once again the singing of angels, the baby's cry and your eternal, life-giving words to us, as we pray together, Our Father who art in heaven...AMEN.