

Fortified

Isaiah 61:1-4 2Cor.1:3-7

Theme of comfort. As mentioned earlier, we're going to have a little bit of Christmas in July. The next two songs we'll sing are Christmas carols that were requested. Bring comfort, lift our spirits, and instill hope, like the first ones we sang bring comfort, lift our spirits and instill hope.

I'm reading from the NIV (I like their choice of words in the translation)

2Cor1:3-7: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

This is the word of the Lord!

What do you think of when you think of comfort? Warm blanket? Or maybe at this time of year, a cool breeze or cold beverage. A particular kind of food (comfort food)? cozy pajamas... familiar songs... the voice of someone you love or who loves you. The sound of rain in the morning on a fall day; the smell of baked goods.

When the Bible talks about comfort, it certainly can include those things, and more. In addition to these, as God's people, we benefit from remembering and availing ourselves of the comfort that God brings, through the Holy Spirit. Comfort, in Scripture, means comfort in the sense of bringing hope and encouragement, and, especially, strength. Not just warm feelings and a pat on the back, but a much deeper sense of inner strengthening. Of fortification. That's the "fort" part of com-fort. The Latin word for strength is "fortis," from which we get the word comfort. So, to be comforted is to be co-fortified, as God comes alongside us, with us, to fortify and strengthen us. It's the same word that is used to describe the Holy Spirit. Jesus spoke of the coming Holy Spirit as "the comforter" which, literally, is, "The Strengthenener." It's the same principle as in last week's passage from Ephesians 3, where Paul prays that all of us saints would be "strengthened in your inner being with power from the Holy Spirit." Pretty cool. Strength and comfort, they go together.

So when trouble, pain come what the Spirit gives us is not just a way to feel better, but an inward fortifying; strengthening.

Like a castle. Imagine a castle; perhaps one you've seen or visited. The strongest part of a castle: the keep. It's the most *fortified* part of a castle. It's the place a king or queen and their court would go to protect themselves from a siege; and, it often served as the queen or king's residence and main dwelling place. I have a good friend who, when he is feeling under siege from worry or fear or the difficulties of life bearing down on him, would imagine going into a castle—a castle of God—and go into the keep to meet Jesus there. And they would talk, or he would simply rest in that place to feel secure and protected, and built up, to strengthen him to return to his daily life and challenges. Just like “in the garden” where he walks with me and talks with me, and tells me I am his own; but it's more “in the castle” where he walks with me and talks with me. And comforts and strengthens me.

Teresa of Avila, that spunky 16th century nun, actually wrote a book titled “The Interior Castle.” Similar idea, of finding God within, and knowing that she would find strength and consolation there, amongst the fortified walls of God's love and protection.

This is Paul's message from our text this morning in 2Cor, and in the reading from Isaiah 61. That word from God in Isaiah talks about the great exchange, of beauty in the place of ashes; the oil of gladness in the place of sorrow; an uplifted spirit in the place of "a spirit of heaviness" (as the old King James says it), or a spirit of despair. Fortification instead of fainting might be a good way to put it.

When Jesus first appears on the scene and begins his public ministry, he shows up at synagogue and this is the passage that he chooses to read—this passage from Isaiah 61—and in reading and interpreting that passage, Jesus was saying, "this is why I am here." To bring good news! Jesus came to lift people up, give a lightness of being instead of a heavy spirit; to bring true comfort and strengthening in whatever form it was needed: forgiveness, healing, restoration; renewal; justice.

Now, I'm going to make a bold statement and say that everyone here, and out there, is in need of some kind of comfort from God right now. You, me, your close relative, your not-so-close relative, your next-door neighbor, your friends and the people you like; and the people you don't like. The people who seem happy as they walk up and down Alderwood Mall. We all are in need to comfort these days.

Some of us need comfort because we have lost a loved one in the last year or two. Some of us need comfort because of a loss of another kind: health (our health, or someone we love), loss of a job, a relationship that became strained or just stopped working.

Some of us—or more likely almost all of us—are covid-weary. We have pandemic fatigue. We seem to be coming out of it, but maybe not, and it's the uncertainty that's exhausting and we feel the need for strengthening, inwardly.

Phases of collective trauma response chart: even on the way to rebuilding and restoration, there are dips and lulls. And it's in those places and times when we need to be reminded that God still gives beauty instead of ashes, joy instead of sorrow, fortification in place of fainting. Remember, this is at least a two-year process. We're 18 months or so into it... So, we need strength and comfort to persevere.

We may need comfort because the state of the world, or our country, politics; it overwhelms us. Or angers us, or grieves us. We need the comfort of hope, and of a vision for a brighter tomorrow. History reveals that things will get better; they really will. For now, however, we're struggling through tumultuous times. And it helps to know that Jesus was born in a similar time (to pull in the Christmas theme for a moment). Remember, when Jesus arrived on earth, king

Herod was on the throne, and he was probably one of the most vicious narcissistic rulers, ever. He massacred a whole generation of baby boys because he was so threatened by this “king of the Jews” being born. God comforted people then at Christ’s coming, and God can comfort us if the state of the world is causing inner churn, or worry or fear. We need the comfort of the angels who said, “Fear not; I bring you good news of great joy! Christ is born!” Emmanuel, God with us.

And to all of us, God desires to bring comfort, strength, and joy. As I was reading through and praying through the song lyrics for this morning, it became clear to me that in all of them we are invited to hear and receive good news. Some hymns and songs are songs of praise and thanksgiving; some of them teach; some of them challenge us to action or to deeper trust. Today’s songs invite us to hear and receive good news and be encouraged and strengthened inwardly.

I also read through the announcements of the prophets and the Christmas narratives (why not?), and I was reminded how much the announcement of the coming of Christ is *good news*. Good news of great joy! Jesus came to help human beings thrive, and to bring refreshment to a weary world.

Part of the comfort and lightness of being that God brings, is the *hope* that he gives us—the promise of all things being made new when all is said and done, in the grand scheme of things; the promise of his power to redeem and restore.

And, the great affirmation is that God is present, God is with us, and God will bring light to dark places. In a moment we're going to sing It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, and I'd like us to pay close attention to the magnificent words written in this carol.

This carol was written by a man named Edmund Sears in 1849, about a decade before the outbreak of the civil war. He saw what was coming. And while the civil war provides the context for this Christmas carol, think of the words of this carol in light of any war: whether a war between nations, a war between next door neighbors, or even within families.

The carol's focus is the song of the angels: peace on earth; goodwill to all. And each stanza invites us to hear *that song*, no matter what is happening in the world, or in our lives. What he's saying is, don't miss it. Don't get so bogged down or distracted that you miss the song of the angels. Lift up your eyes, and open your ears! Nothing that is happening in our lives or in the world can drown out the song. We just need to be able to stop and still ourselves long enough so we can hear it. The 4th stanza speaks to this so poignantly:

"And you, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,

Who toil along the climbing way, with painful steps and slow,

(Anyone feel that way? To those who do, the hopeful invitation is:)

Look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing;

O, rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing.”

The word is: Don't miss it! Take time out to hear and receive the good news. Find a way to quiet the noise of the world, the noise of social media or cable news, the noise of advertising, or the noise of our monkey mind, to hear the song. Can you hear it? It's being sung. God is with us, and promises peace and comfort.

And as we hear that song, and receive comfort and strength—fortification—our strengthening and fortification becomes a blessing and gift to others who are in need of comfort.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

In other words, nothing goes to waste from our experience. As God lifts our spirits, we lift others' spirits. As God strengthens us, we can come alongside others for their strengthening. As God creates beauty from ashes in our lives, we see beauty and call it forth in others. We co-fortify others, with God. We become

partners with God in the comforting of others, just as others have partnered with God in our comforting.