

Tidings of Comfort and Joy

Luke 1:46-55

2Cor.1:3-7

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

Have you noticed how Christmas seems to be starting earlier and earlier every year? Not just the merchandising, but other Christmas-y things too: I started hearing Christmas music on the radio a couple weeks before Thanksgiving! There are more and more Christmas movies, and Christmas movie *channels*! You can watch Christmas movies all year long if you want to. Add to that, our observation that many people put up their Christmas lights super early this year, and more people seem to be joining in the festivities of adding light and color—it appears there are more Christmas lights up than ever. We have a couple neighbors who never took them down after Christmas last year.

What this tells us is that people are hungry for something hopeful, for a sense of happiness and well-being. Some joy! Positive feelings, experiences, sensory input, and media content that makes them feel good. Or at least provides an alternative from what appears to be the depressing reality of the day-to-day news cycle. And brings a measure of relief from our personal struggles as well.

I would summarize this by saying that what people want and need—what we want and need—is comfort. Consolation. Something uplifting. Something that edifies and encourages.

In the Scripture passages that are typically read during Advent, like Isaiah 9, which we heard at the candle lighting (*the people walking in darkness have seen a great light... you have increased the peoples' joy...*), and Isaiah 40 (*comfort, comfort my people, says your God*), and Mary's song (where she sings that God has already toppled the high and mighty from their thrones, has lifted up the lowly, and a new day is dawning); in all of these, and more, there is a consistent message that's given: help is on the way; there is light at the end of the tunnel, no matter how long the tunnel might be, or what the tunnel represents for each of us; God will bring his light, God will lift up his people.

That's the good news we yearn for, and love to hear, and need to hear.

At the coming of Jesus, the message is one of true comfort, where God's good news is always greater than the world's bad news. And, greater than our struggles.

When the bible talks about comfort, it means comfort in the sense of bringing hope and encouragement, strength and consolation. Not just a hug and a pat on the back (that helps too), but a much deeper sense of all-rightness. Of *fortification*. That's the "fort" part of com-fort. To be co-fortified, as God comes alongside us, directly or through others, to be with us, to fortify and strengthen us.

I love the word fortify, or fortification. It reminds me of what we used to read on cereal boxes: "Fortified with other essential vitamins and minerals." Stuff that's really good for you. That strengthens you for the long haul. Not just a temporary fix. This is the comforting, or co-fortifying, that God does for us.

This is Paul's message from our text this morning in 2Cor, and in the assurance from Isaiah 40. "Strengthen, strengthen my people" says your God. "Fortify my people!" Build them up. Yes, console them in their hurt and their grief and their guilt, but do so in a way that brings them out stronger on the other side of it. And renewed with a fresh start.

When Jesus appears on the scene as an adult and begins his public ministry, he shows up at synagogue and reads a passage from Isaiah 61, which says:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has sent me to bring good news,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
to comfort all who mourn;
to give them a garland of beauty, instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness, instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of heaviness.

They (you! we!) will be called oaks of righteousness,

⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations.

Isn't that delightful, and encouraging?

In reading and interpreting that passage, Jesus was saying, "This is why I came." To bring good news! Jesus came to lift people up, to bring fortification in the place of faint-heartedness; to bring true comfort in whatever form it was needed: healing, restoration, and renewal.

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Everyone is in need of some kind of comfort from God. It's been a tough couple of years—for many people personally, and for all of us societally.

Perhaps the state of the world, or our country overwhelms us. Or angers us; or grieves us—or all of the above. Sometimes anger *is* a manifestation of grief, or even masks it. As the saying goes, “It’s easier to be mad than sad.” We need the comfort of hope, and of a vision for a brighter tomorrow, like that which Mary sings of. History reveals that things will get better; they really will, eventually. For now, however, we’re struggling through tumultuous times, and wait upon God with patience.

And it helps to know that Jesus was born in a similar time as what we’re living through. Jesus was not born in Camelot. The Roman empire at that time was becoming more decadent and violent and grasping for control of the world. And it was into that environment and social setting that Jesus was born.

Some of us need comfort and a lightness of being because we are weighed down with worries and fears (a ‘spirit of heaviness,’ to use Isaiah’s words)—whether for ourselves, or for someone else we worry about, or what we fear in the future. We need the comfort of the angels who said, “Fear not; I bring you good news of great joy!” I think of the wonderful words of the carol: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” How can our hopes and fears be met in Jesus? That’s worthy of our meditation this season.

Some of us need comfort/fortification because we are affected by the dreary days of winter, the darkness and clouds. And we need the assurance that Emmanuel, God with us, the Light of the World, meets us and walks with us in the darkness of winter—whether it's the literal winter of the Pacific Northwest, or a winter season of life that we find ourselves in. And God assures us: spring will come! It always does. Light is coming.

Not to be glib and oversimplistic about it, but a little hope and even joyful anticipation of things to come can help. And, helping others too, as it says in 2Cor. It's a beautiful paradox: helping others helps us. Many in the therapeutic profession recommend that in winter we try to do one thing a day for someone else. Even if it's just an email, or a text message, or go check on a neighbor, or donate some food to the local food bank. It helps us to get outside of ourselves and help others, which, in turn, helps us too.

Some of us need relief from... ourselves! I'll confess that sometimes my prayer of confession simply is: God, save me from me! We pray to God to lead us not into temptation, but sometimes I lead *myself* into temptation quite effortlessly thank you very much; or into a negative thought or unhelpful action. In some recovery/AA groups, when they recite the Lord's Prayer together, like we

do, they say the last line this way, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from *ego*.” In other words, save me from me!

Sometimes we need comfort from life’s difficulties... In Isaiah 40, God says “Comfort, comfort my people... tell them that they have served their term (sounds like the end of a prison sentence), or, that “their warfare is accomplished.” You can substitute the word “term” or “warfare” here for “difficulty” or “hardship” or “ordeal,” and let that message of good news be spoken to you direction.

In Israel’s case, they had been in exile in Babylon for 70 years and now it was ending, and God was sending them home. Their ordeal is over. And sometimes we need that word from God that says our ordeals, whatever they be called, won’t last forever; they will come to an end. God is going to release us into something new, and refresh us with a new beginning.

And of course, he also says their wrongdoing has been covered, doubly; what was owed from their sin has been paid for. That’s a significant part of the comfort that God brings—the comfort of forgiveness, and the assurance that God holds nothing against us. Clean slate.]

God desires to bring his comfort, God’s strength, God’s joy, God’s *fortification*. At this time of year we are invited to hear and receive good news—

good news of great joy, for all people, as the angels sang it. Once again, as I have read through the words of the prophets and the Christmas narratives, including John the Baptist “leaping” for joy in utero—that’s supposed to be a positive thing, but it sounds potentially painful—as I read through all of the promises and fulfillments, I am reminded how much the announcement of the coming of Christ is *good news*. Good news! Jesus came to help human beings thrive, and to bring refreshment to the world.

I’d like to pull this all together with one encouragement to us, and remind us that, while God always makes the first move toward us in love and in a desire to strengthen us and fortify us, we have a part to play, and there is something we can do. That is...

We can choose joy. Joy is something that *comes to us, and is announced to us*, and... it is also something we can *choose*. Because, we find comfort and fortification in exercising joy. As Nehemiah told the people rebuilding the wall in Jerusalem after they returned home from exile, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Dutch pastor Henri Nouwen, who wrote so beautifully about the Christian life and faith and prayer, asks: “Is it really possible to be joyful in the midst of the shadows of difficulty and sorrow?” He answers his own question: “Joy,” he

writes, "is the experience of remembering and knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – not sickness, not failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away. Thus joy and sorrow can not only coexist; joy can even be found and expressed in the midst of those circumstances." Hence the apostle Paul can say, "Rejoice in the Lord *always*" and "be joyful in *all* circumstances."

And because we are fortified, comforted, by the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally, and that nothing can take that love away, we rejoice in anticipation of good things coming. Of good things in our future.

The joy we celebrate on this third Sunday of Advent is the joy of anticipation. Obviously the anticipation of Christmas and remembering that Love (capital L love) became incarnate in the person Jesus Christ. And also... as part of our choosing joy, we rejoice in anticipation good things coming in our life and in the world. In yesterday's devotion from the little Advent devotional (which came in the Advent bags): "*Joy is incomplete until it is expressed.*" And one way to express it is to look for, or plan for, good things to come.

On a very practical level, let's do a simple exercise here. Think to yourself, what is one thing, just one thing, that you are looking forward to in 2022? Something you know, for sure, is coming up. We talked about the comfort we

need, and hopefully will receive in our various circumstances, but how about the joy of anticipating something wonderful and life-giving in 2022? Have you thought of something? If you don't have something, plan something!

Some of you are probably anticipating the birth of a grandchild, or a great grandchild. Or the wedding of a family member. Some of us are probably anticipating a trip or a vacation, now that we can travel again (and hope it stays that way!). We can anticipate a new learning opportunity through a class we will take, or a volunteer opportunity that teaches us some new insight, or skill. We can all anticipate spring! Some who have the space in their yard plant bulbs and plan gardens. Or, one of the things we do in winter is go outside and look at shrubs or trees that are bare, or ground that is bare, and imagine what it will look like come March and April. I appreciate the beauty of a bare-branched tree, but I also have fun imagining again what that tree will look like in full leaf.

Now, some will say, "But, our nation's politics and divisions!" "Covid!" "The Seahawks are bad!" I'm familiar with those sentiments, and realistically it's probably gonna be a bumpy ride for a while (maybe the Seahawks will improve in short order, but the other stuff...). And to that I say (to myself, primarily), Does that determine your state of heart and mind? Does that control you? How much power have I given to all of that to dictate how I feel?

And I go back to the joy of anticipating the good things coming up this year. While remaining active in working to make the world a better place, and building God's Kingdom through the Lord's ministry. But I work to not let all of the turmoil tell me who I am and how I feel (or am supposed to feel) or whether or not I sleep at night. That last one is still a work in progress, to be honest. I don't know if any of you are middle-of-the-night waker-up-ers, but it happens more often for me these days than I like. But even then, singing (in my heart 😊), and praying and rejoicing is a decision I can make, instead of fretting over things I can't control.

And I try to come back to the importance of hope, and where our hope ultimately lies. Where have we put our weight down, in terms of our true hope and trust? For what, or whom, are we truly waiting?

Hear the words of Psalm 146

Do not put your trust in princes (read: people in power)
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
Happy are those, rather, whose help is in God,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who brings justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down.

This is the Bible's way of saying, "Who's really in charge here?" It isn't usually the people who *appear* to be in charge, or who *think* they're in charge. Rather, it's God the Creator, who is forever-faithful.

The invitation is to lift up our eyes and see a bigger picture. The bigger picture of God at work, in our lives and in the world. To rejoice in it, like Mary did. To receive the comfort, the fortification we need, because nothing can separate us from his love.

Let's celebrate this by singing Joy to the World