

December 4 – Second Sunday in Advent

“Waiting on God”

Comfort

Isaiah 40:1-11

As we continue to look at the challenge of waiting on God we recall how last week we talked about the feelings of impatience. Once we have begun to grasp that God is not going to act on our time table and have begun to trust in God’s timing, even if at this moment it is hard to do, what we want and need is comfort.

When we are small we understand the importance of comfort and are not shy about demanding it. Whether it be that favorite stuffed toy or “blankie” that we needed before we could settle down to sleep, or a nightlight on at night or needing those reassuring arms to snuggle into when life is tougher that we want it to be we knew we needed comfort. As parents or grandparents we appreciate this basic need and we do our best to provide it.

For Sophi, she needs to pinch the skin between your thumb and first finger for comfort. When she is upset or just needing to settle she will crawl up on your lap and if you do not automatically give her your hand she will say, “Pinch.” It was cute when she was younger but now we have to remind her to be gentle or it can become very painful for the one offering their hand.

Somewhere along the journey towards growing up we decide or are told, that we need to quit demanding that others comfort us. After all, it would seem pretty silly and childish if I needed now a special stuffed toy in order to go to sleep at night. So we struggle through life, trying our best to deal with things, not letting our vulnerability show. This often messes us up leading to addictions, insomnia and ulcers as people try to find comfort in unhealthy ways or try to prove to themselves and the world that they don’t need to be comforted.

God understands our needs and realizes that even if it has been many decades since we were a child that we still need comfort. Hear again the words from Isaiah that I read today: Comfort, comfort my people...speak tenderly...tell her that her warfare is ended.

Do you hear those words of reassurance? God understands that when we are going through tough times we need to be comforted. See? Our loving parent still takes care of our needs as much as when we were a child and mom or dad comforted us. We just have to not be stubborn about reaching out for and accepting that comfort.

Where does it come from, this comfort? Some of it comes from the caring of others. Now I am going to talk to the men here, for just a moment. Most of us were raised with the ideas “that when the going gets tough the tough get going, or we are to pull ourselves up with our own bootstraps.” So asking for and welcoming comfort; whether it be found in kind words, hugs or our shedding a few tears, is alien to our rearing. But we need it and it is offered by God through others. We need to remember that if comfort was good and necessary when we were two it is still valid today. God continually wants to offer it and we need to accept.

Secondly, as this passage from Isaiah shares, we gain comfort in this time of waiting by remembering that whatever difficult time we might now be going through it will not last forever. Last week we talked about how that portion of Isaiah was written after they had returned from captivity in Babylon. This was written while they were still in bondage. Part of the message of comfort was that this time would not last forever. They would be returning home. To help them see that it was God who was at work the prophet talks about how God would level the mountains, fill up the valleys and make the way a smooth path so all would see the glory of God revealed. Now we know that it didn't literally happen this way. They had to trek through the dessert for many a day between Babylon and the ruined city of Jerusalem but that image of the smooth highway was one to share as a reminder that things were going to get better. Even though it is tough right now this is not going to be the last word.

This is a word for us. There is great comfort and strength in realizing that when we are going through hard times that this period of trouble will end. It may not always end the way we would wish. When we have a loved one going through serious health issues we want healing and that doesn't always happen, as just one example. But God is always pointing us forward. When we are waiting and struggling and maybe becoming impatient God says ultimately this time will be behind you. Take care of yourself right now.

Finally there is this beautiful reminder that we are not going through this time alone. God is nurturing and caring for us. I love these words, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." We are not going into the future alone. God is leading and caring for us just as God provided manna for the people of Israel long ago.

Think about some of the difficult times in your life and how you experienced comfort, hope and nurture. I will be always grateful to a woman in my last congregation. She was a hospice chaplain and she scheduled an appointment with me a few days after my father's death and funeral. After the usual bit of chit-chat, because we were friends, she said, "And when are you taking bereavement leave?" This caused me to sit back in my chair as if she had physically struck me. I tried to explain to her that it was fall, charge conference was coming and then Advent and Christmas. I told her I planned to take some time off after the holidays, which was about 12 weeks away. She smiled and said, "That isn't acceptable." She went on to let me know I wasn't indispensable to the church and how I had just dealt with a great emotional loss and needed time to process it. Then she said, "I want an effective pastor leading this church and preaching on Sunday and until you take some time off that won't be you." Here was God, in the form of my friend, offering me comfort and healing and a way forward through my grief. But I did not recognize the voice of God. Being the typical male I thanked her for her concern and moved on to another subject. She cut me off and looked me straight in the eye and said, "You have a choice. Tonight is SPR and you can ask for the time off or I will go and demand that you take it off before you re-enter the pulpit." I knew that with all of her experience in hospice that the committee would listen to her instead of my concerns about my busy schedule. I meekly said, "I will ask for three days off next week." She said, "make it four."

I did what I was told and it was the best thing I could have done. I really did not know how raw my emotions were. After a couple of days of hiking, talking with Jenny and having a couple of good cries as I looked at pictures I was ready to go forward.

God offered me comfort, peace and nurture and I was almost too stubborn to accept it. I am sure you all have stories of when God has provided comfort in the midst

of tough times and that has helped you get through them to a better place and in that tough journey you realized you were never alone.

So hear the message of comfort. God loves us and cares about us just like a loving parent would do. Let us, like a child receive that comfort.