

## **December 23** – Fourth Sunday in Advent

Sermon: We Are Comforted

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 1-4, 9-11

Do you remember a time you were feeling sad? Your eyes were filled with tears. You felt lost, or alone? Do you remember that dark feeling? Do you remember a time you wanted to do more, give more but you didn't have the time or the resources to respond as you wanted? Do you remember those feelings of frustration? Do you remember a time you stood at a fork in the road of life and both directions seem scary? Do you remember your feelings of fear? We all have these moments, it is part of living.

Now I want you to remember how, into that time of sadness, a special person came and enveloped you in a hug. Do you remember how that feeling of comfort caused the dark feelings to subside, at least for a moment? Do you remember how when you were feeling frustrated by your lack, yet you did something, anything, how good it felt? You were comforted that a little gift is better than nothing. Do you remember how at that fork, when you finally took the first step not knowing if you were on the right track that there were people with you, walking beside you, encouraging you? Do you recall how that comforted you and the feelings of fear went away? Do you remember?

Today I wanted us to get in touch with those dark and sometime challenging feelings that we have. Then we begin to understand how Madelon, our little shepherd girl was feeling. As we begin to hear the good news about how comfort that was given to her, we can be assured it is given to all of us.

One of the great words of this season is that our God is a God of Comfort. Chapter 40 in Isaiah is a bridge chapter. Before, in Isaiah, there were prophetic predictions of destruction if the people did not turn to the Lord. Now, we realize, some time has passed. Jerusalem's walls have been breached, the temple destroyed and the people taken into captivity. They were experiencing a time of great darkness, fear and doubt. It would be easy for them to wonder if God cared about them anymore now that they are a captive people. It is then that Isaiah again shares a new word from God. I am

sure the people were expecting words something to the effect, "See you have made your bed now lie in it." Or, "God has punished you and rejected you forever." Instead, the word of the prophet is "Comfort, Comfort, speak tenderly to Jerusalem." Can you imagine what it must have felt like to hear those words for the first time? Especially when you are in such a dark and miserable place, a place of your own creation. The warmth, the feelings of love, of hope that they experienced are still offered to all of us.

The scripture we read today is a reminder that God understands our struggles and our pain. Even when the mess we are in is of our own doing, God still sends comfort to us. One of our most beloved verses from the Bible is John 3:16 "For God so Loved the world that God sent his only Son into the world." We do not always remember the next verse. "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him." Do you again hear that word of comfort? Jesus didn't come to condemn but to save. The birth of Jesus is the message that God the comforter is on the move.

So where do you need comfort this day? Are you facing an uncertain future because of health concerns? Are you at a crossroads and life is forcing you to make choices? Has someone you loved disappointed you greatly? Are you fearful for the world, this country, or other institutions you care about? Hear that word, "Comfort." God knows your pain, God is in the midst of that situation. You will not be facing it alone.

How does God send us comfort? Just as in the story, sometimes God sends someone to come along side us who listens to our pain, sympathizes with us and sometimes gives us words of encouragement or points us in new directions. In our story when the angel comes to Madelon it wasn't to scold but to help. God doesn't want us to be stuck. In our story Madelon was stuck. She wanted to see the special baby but felt great anguish because she had no gift. Even if her sorrow about not having a gift was irrational, she was not put down by the angel. Instead, the angel listened. He realized that ultimately her tears were not so much about a lack of a gift as a desire to be a part of the great work of God. She wanted to give her love and felt as if she were inadequate to do such a thing. Her tears were a symbol of love. That was why they turned into a

rose. For the greatest gift we can give to God is the gift of love, and for her it would be symbolized in something tangible, a miraculous bunch of roses.

Love through tangible deeds is always one of the ways God gives comfort. I think of people facing challenging situations who tell me of friends or family who come alongside them to help. Their presence is a great comfort. Or, I hear of people feeling they could never forgive another for something they did to them or to a loved one. The anger and anguish they feel inside keeps them from feeling comfort. Then one day, because of a friend's words, they are able to pray, not for God to forgive, they might not be ready to do just that, but a prayer saying, "God, this person is a child of yours. Love them." Giving them to God begins to put cracks in the shell of rage that we have surrounded them with, and we are a bit comforted.

Think about those challenging times like I mentioned at the beginning. Think about how you found comfort. Do you see the hand of God at work? Do you hear the message of this season? We need to give thanks for all those who comfort us.

Also, I believe, we are called to be agents, angels, for God to give comfort and love to others. Madelon needed help to find comfort. God sent an angel. Others need help, as well, to find comfort. Is God asking you to be an angel for them? Think about it and ask where are you called to be agents of comfort for others. And often, in giving of ourselves to others we find new life, love and perhaps comfort as well.

I recall a story of a 20-something who was feeling really down as Christmas time arrived. She had recently lost her mother. It had been just a few months between diagnosis and her passing. All she was thinking about is the things that wouldn't happen. Mom wouldn't be there for her wedding, mom would never see her children. And so the list went on. She was having one huge pity party. Her dad, siblings and boyfriend could not do anything about it. She had decided that she was not going to celebrate Christmas that year. She had told everyone not to give her gifts. She wasn't even sure she would come home from college. She might just stay there. She was active in the college group at a local church and went to their meeting that first Sunday night in December. She almost didn't go but she had promised a friend that she would come. Upon arriving they were talking about plans to bake cookies and go caroling at

the local nursing home that next weekend. She was not in the mood. She sat there glumly until a foreign exchange student said, "Would you teach me the carols? I feel so lonely being away from family." Hearing her anguish she agreed, they got together every evening for carol singing practice, sharing lots of laughs, made cookies with the group and went to the nursing home. By that Saturday evening she had an idea. She called her dad asking if she could bring her friend home for Christmas! And, they would have to decorate the house and make it special because it would be the only time she might ever experience a Western Christmas. In comforting one, she was comforted. In giving, she received.

Whenever we are down, we need to remember that God is at work in our lives and in the world. God does not leave us to figure it out on our own. We may feel, for many reasons, that now is a time of darkness. We need to hear the word "comfort." The light will shine anew. God will never abandon us. We need to remember that God is always breaking into our lives and into the world bringing comfort and opportunities to share love and peace. When we give God our desires, our fears and our pain, we have the assurance that God is with us, working to help us.

The people of Israel heard words of comfort. Ultimately, they returned from exile, Jerusalem was rebuilt, and a Messiah was sent. Madelon finds comfort. God, through her tears, gives her the Christmas Rose to give as a gift. God wants you to hear words of comfort for whatever is distressing you. Open your life and soul to God and to the angels God might send to comfort, guide and help you until you again find the light.