

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Comfort My People”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Advent 2--December 9, 2017

Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8.

Last Sunday morning at Westminster Church down the street, the tenor soloist sang the opening aria from Handel’s *Messiah*: “Comfort, comfort ye my people, saith your God.” He did it beautifully, to the extent that one member was reported as saying that it was too bad that communion was such a distraction to his wonderful singing.

These words, of course, come from the prophet Isaiah and were spoken to a people in the depths of despair. They were living hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem, away from the Promised Land. They had been there in exile for years and most of them felt that away from the Temple, away from the holy city, away from the land of Israel, there just wasn’t a way to communicate with God. “How do we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” They had heard from others about what God had done in years gone by; some maybe could remember in their own lives, the wonder, the joy, the mystery and majesty of basking in God’s presence. Yet all of that was years ago. Now they were in exile. And to them the voice of God proclaims: “Comfort, O comfort my people.” For you see, God is not simply in the Temple; God is in the exile. God is not only in the holy city; God is in the wilderness. Here where people suffer, here where children are hungry, here where people and families sometimes get broken, and loved ones get sick, and faith sometimes goes stale, here where human lives too often are considered with little account and we continue as a society to value lives of people of color as less than others, here where the world is not what it is meant to be, here in our exile God proclaims comfort: *Comfort you my people.*

James Carroll, who used to be a Roman Catholic Priest and more recently is known as an author, wrote the foreword to William Sloane Coffin’s book, *Credo*. He writes about his experience of being jailed for trespassing at the United States Capitol in 1972 in an anti-war protest. In that jail, in separate cells, were another two dozen prisoners who were part of the demonstration. Carroll was raised to revere authority and obey it and was disoriented, depressed and afraid. “Even now, when you think of the Dark Night of the Soul, you think of the chill of that steel wall against your shoulder. And you think of that feeling—a steady sinking—you yourself the stone falling in the well of your own chest.

“Even now you have no idea what prompted him to do so, but at some point in that night, the man in the next cell began to sing, softly at first. His resolute baritone gradually filled the air as he moved easily into the lyric of what you soon recognized as Handel’s *Messiah*: “Comfort, comfort, ye my people.” And then you recognized the voice as that of William Sloane Coffin, the most familiar voice in the group.... Coffin sang as if he were alone on earth, and the old words rose through the dark as if Isaiah himself had returned to speak for you to God—to speak for God to you. Others in the cell block soon joined their voices to Coffin’s—“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light”...You suddenly felt awash in an unexpected gratitude, for you realized those words expressed your deepest faith, and that sung as they were, those words had an absolute integrity that far transcended your fearful hesitance. You *did* believe that your Redeemer liveth, and, more than that, you believed that your Redeemer had stood upon the earth with you, bringing you to that most unlikely place. You saw, indeed, that you belonged there, in that cell block, and that you were plenty strong enough for whatever lay ahead.”¹ Comfort, O comfort my people. Those are words for

¹ James Carroll, Foreword, in *Credo* by William Sloane Coffin. Westminster/John Knox Press. © 2004.

Advent.

Now we all know the joy of this season, seen especially in the eyes of our children. Yet we also know that every year there are people who find this season impossibly difficult for all kinds of reasons. They see others celebrating, full of what Father Mulcahey on M*A*S*H used to call “jocularity” while they themselves can hardly get out bed, or wonder where they will find presents or food for their families, or live with broken hearts, feeling utterly cut-off from all the excitement. Those who see them sometimes mistake them for “Scrooges” when in fact they are simply people in pain, people living in exile.

The message of Advent is especially for those who know about wilderness living. The voice that cries “Comfort my people” also cries: “Prepare the way of the Lord, *in the wilderness.*” John the Baptist, his work was in the desert. That’s where God’s highway begins. God is present here, in the place of exile, in the place where we seem cut off, in the place where the world is not as it should be. God is not simply back there in the time when everything seemed right; God is here, where we are now. In our despair, in our hurting, in our confusion, in our pain, in our cries for justice, God is coming to meet us where we are. It’s like the Exodus. God has not forgotten us. When we are at the point of giving up on God, God does not give up on us. God remembers and hears our cry. God in fact is coming and right here in the wilderness where we live. Prepare the way.

We do that by comforting God’s people: working for justice, caring for the sick, lifting up the downtrodden. Anyone with little children knows all about comforting. You know how a little attention, a little love, a hug or a snuggle, can heal a bruise, can ease a fear, can dry a tear. Maybe you can show the rest of us how to comfort God’s people on a larger scale, and thus prepare God’s way.

Some of you might know the story told by Dr. Lewis Thomas about cancer patients at Memorial Hospital in New York City. Dr. Thomas writes: “A few years ago Hubert Humphrey was a patient, in for treatment of the recurrent bladder cancer which eventually killed him, fully aware of the gravity of his situation, worried and somber on the evening of his admission, quiet and thoughtful, alone in his room at the time of my visit. We talked for a while; he was well-informed about his plight, knew that his chances for survival were slim, almost nil. But the “almost” was the focus of his attention. Over the next few days he transformed himself, I think quite deliberately, into the ebullient, enthusiastic, endlessly talkative Humphrey--not so much for his own sake as for what he saw around him. There were about forty patients on his floor, all with cancer of one type or another...

“Humphrey took on the whole floor as his new duty. Between his own trips to X-ray or various other diagnostic units, he made ward rounds. He walked the wards in his bathrobe and slippers, stopping at every bedside for brief but exhilarating conversations, then ending up in the nurses’ station, bringing all the nurses and interns to their feet smiling. During the several weeks he was in and out of the hospital, Humphrey’s rounds became famous. One evening I saw him taking Gerald Ford along, introducing him delightedly as a brand-new friend for each of the patients. Together, Humphrey in his bathrobe and Ford in a dark-blue suit, nodding and smiling together, having a good time. Ford leaning down to be close to a sick patient’s voice, they were the best of professionals, very high class.

“It was an unusual event because of the eminence and conversational skill of Humphrey and his visitors, including especially Muriel Humphrey--one of the world’s nicest women. But this sort of thing goes on all the time in Memorial. Patients who can be up and around are constantly circling the floor, finding new friends, stopping by the bedsides of others, making small talk. One hears, down the corridor, someone’s voice saying, ‘Oh, I had that and it was nothing, really nothing. You just wait, you’ll be feeling better.’”² Comfort, O comfort my people, says our God.

² Lewis Thomas, *The Youngest Science. Nots of a Medicine Watcher.* Bantam Books © 1983.

I dream about how we here might be able to comfort our wider society in the midst of all our division right now. We know about justice and we know about the hard, continuing work of understanding each other and celebrating the full humanity and dignity of every single one of God's children. How might we live more deeply together? How might we model for the world a community where difference need not breed fear, but rather knowledge and understanding and celebration?

We prepare God's way by comforting people. We prepare God's way by lifting up the valleys and those stuck in the valleys. We prepare by lowering the mountains and making smooth all those rough places in this world. It is there in that work that the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh, every single one of us, the old and the young, the oppressed and the oppressor, the poor and the rich, the strong and the weak, the broken and the whole, all of us will see God's glory together.

Right here in the wilderness, God is building a new highway. It is a road for the likes of us and as we walk that road, God comforts us, gathering the lambs in her arms, carrying them in his bosom, feeding the flock like a shepherd.

In this place of exile, where all is not as it should be, we are invited to prepare God's way, by walking on God's highway, offering comfort and standing for human worth and dignity in every single one of God's children. Prepare the way and comfort God's people.

Let us pray: Help us O God to prepare your way by comforting your people, by standing for justice, by living as you would have us live. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.