

Welcome

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Welcome guests and visitors – we are grateful you chose to come and worship with us during this special season.

Advent is a time of reflection and remembrance of the gift of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. Jesus’ birth is a foreshadowing of Easter, just as Advent can be looked at as a path to the season of Lent. Advent was originally a “mini-Lent”, a period of solemn reflection. Today, we see Advent not just as a remembrance of what God has done in Christ, but as a celebration of who and what Jesus is to us today – the Savior, sent to us. We are also filled with gratitude at Advent for what God will do when Christ comes again with glory and honor.

This week, we light another candle in our Advent wreath to signify the increasing presence of God’s Light in the world.

Sending with Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Go in peace.

Message: Mortal Comfort

Have you ever been a “clown of God”?

“Trudy Harris works with terminally ill children in a hospice program. Sometimes the children are in the end stages of a chronic illness, like muscular dystrophy or cystic fibrosis. Sometime newborn babies with weak hearts die in her program. She will always remember one special child and the nurse who cared for him. The baby was born with only a partial brain stem and the parents faced the dilemma of allowing him to die in the hospital or taking him home to be with his family until God called him to heaven.

The family chose to take the baby home, and his parents and siblings welcomed him into their family. The baby cried a great deal and it was hard to figure out exactly how to make him comfortable. The woman assigned to oversee the home care was more full of love and life than anyone Trudy ever encountered. Her avocation was being a clown, dressing up in a complete clown outfit when visiting her patients, which always brought gales of laughter from both the patient and the family. They couldn’t wait for her visits.

One day she stopped by to see the special baby who had been assigned to her care. He seemed inconsolable when she entered his nursery. His parents had done everything to comfort him, to no avail. Picking the baby up in her arms and laying him in her lap, she began to gently sway her legs back and forth in a rhythmic motion. He immediately stopped crying, nestled into her arms and fell asleep.

God allowed this nurse to know exactly what to do to comfort this child and his family. She visited him much more often than one usually visits a patient, but everyone knew that she was chosen to be ‘**a clown of God,**’ and God used her mightily in this very special way. She kept her clown outfit at her fingertips until the baby was safely in heaven just a few weeks later.”¹

¹ <http://www.guidепosts.org/blogs/glimpses-of-heaven/a-clown-of-god>

What a remarkable gift! To be able to bring comfort, peace and joy to the lives of those who are living in depression, sorrow and darkness is a wonderful call and gift. I pray God will bring us such comfort in our need and help us to be a ‘clown of God’ to help others in their pain.

Today we continue on our Advent journey, looking at the extraordinary life God has created for us and then revealed in such a comforting way.

Our first stop was Isaiah 64:1-9 and the prophet’s appeal to God to help us when we are in conflict. We need God’s intervention because we are utterly sinful, regardless of the covenant God made with humanity. We rebel against God every opportunity we get, turning away from God to follow our own ambition. Worst of all, we blame God for our faults and failures, lying to ourselves and making excuses when what we need to be doing is begging God to be merciful.

Our second stop is Isaiah 40:1-11. You may recognize some portions of the passage from annual Advent lessons. Today we’re going to take a brief, but deeper look at what the prophet was inspired to write by the Holy Spirit. As we begin, it’s helpful to remember what was happening in Israel. After seventy years in Babylon, the exiles returned home. There was great pain in Israel, pain from their loss, which they were reminded of every day. Some of the pain was due to the reality that it was hard for people to come back together after a long time of hardship.

We feel similar pain today. There are conflicts in families which lead to separation, divorce, depression and unhappiness. There are conflicts in our communities, which lead to prejudice, crime, violence, and death. There are conflicts in our society, which lead to income inequality, injustice, racism and greedy, rampant consumerism. And yes, there are conflicts in our churches, which lead to selfishness, division and loss of our Christian witness. We are drowning in an ocean of self-gratification, intolerance and sin.

Isaiah’s message is a lifeline to people who are struggling, feeling lost and alone, disconnected from their home, family, culture and community of faith. It offers comfort and hope to those who have lost their hope, who are uncomfortable and in pain. “*Comfort, O comfort my people*” are the words of God in v1. God is speaking through the prophet, telling the

people they will find comfort. Their sorrow and pain is not the life God intends. In v2, God speaks “tenderly” to the people, letting them know they have served their time; the penalty has been paid in full. God made an example of the people of Israel, showing what happens to those who turn away with stubborn willfulness. God is also revealing the fact that God is a God of mercy. God heard the cry of the people of Israel in exile and responded.

God is still a God of mercy and wishes to comfort us. The character of God has not changed in 3,000 years and will not change for all time. Hebrews 6:17 affirms the unchangeable nature of God, “*when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath.*” And Isaiah 40:8 tells us “*the word of our God will stand forever.*” God shows mercy and offers comfort when we are in pain – that’s part of God’s eternal and loving nature.

So why is there pain and suffering in the world? Why do our bodies hurt, our hearts fill with sadness, and our heads ache? I believe the answer to those questions lies in the consoling words Isaiah offers in vv3-11 and in the biblical narrative. We suffer because we live in a fallen world, a world that rejects God, willfully turning away to follow its own objectives. Romans 1:28 warns us about the consequences, “*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.*” And in v31, “*They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die - yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.*” We are suffering from the symptoms of the bad decisions our ancestors made, compounded by the bad decisions we make. God is merciful. God is also just. God hears our cries and works to save us – to bring good out of bad, but we still have to live with the consequences of our actions.

In late 1999, my business was failing with the added pressure of losing my parents’ and friends’ money. My former girlfriend had broken up with me and I wasn’t sure how I was going to make ends meet. In late January 2000, I fell to my knees and offered my heart and my problems to God. God responded and I felt the presence of the Spirit within me. I

was born again. However, I had to live with the consequences of my poor decisions – the business failed, the relationship failed and I ended up unemployed for almost two years. What God gave me during that trying time was hope and assurance everything would work out and it has – greater than I could have ever dreamed! I am blessed to be with you today and to have my lovely wife Esperanza at my side.

To me, that’s what vv3-5 means. The ‘voice of God’ - messenger of God, cries out to those who are suffering and in pain. God orders a highway to be built in the desert to make it easy to see the glory of God. God makes it easy for those who are suffering to find hope. Hope is revealed when we discover God or return to God. The desert – our pain, is then revealed as a place of discovery and renewal, not just a place for divine punishment and spiritual desolation. This is a paradox. And that’s why we struggle to understand pain and suffering. The role of pain is to help us develop a deeper relationship with God, because it causes us to turn away from the hills and valleys of life and our own way to find the super highway that leads to God’s grace and peace.

We join the chorus in v6 when, the voice says, “*Cry out!*” We answer, “*What shall I cry?*” We don’t know how to respond. The answer is found in v9, “*Here is your God!*” God is revealed to us and we are called to join the chorus proclaiming the good tidings to everyone in the world. This is the mission of the Messiah, the one who is to come. It is the message of the community of faith, who need God’s mercy in our pain. The revealing of God’s promise works to make us fearless and ready to proclaim God’s Word from the mountain tops.

Isaiah reminds us of our mortal, selfish side in vv6-8. To God, we are like grass or desert flowers, which blooms and then fades in a very short time in comparison with God’s eternal nature. What this is saying is this: God’s plans and purposes can’t be thwarted or defeated. God’s promises always come true, they are completely reliable. At the same time, we can’t do anything to save ourselves. We need an eternal, all-powerful God to give us comfort and to care for us. We need a Messiah, sent by God to comfort, defend and care for us.

This Messiah is described in vv10-11. The Messiah is the one sent by God who is strong and in charge, restoring what was lost and rewarding us for our faith. We can rely on the Messiah to defend and lead us. At the same time, the Messiah is a caregiver, the good shepherd, caring for those who are weak, vulnerable, in pain and afraid. The shepherd leads the sheep, because they cannot provide for themselves. The shepherd guides the sheep, particularly those with young, because they do not know the way on their own. We are the sheep and the Messiah is our good shepherd.

Jesus is our good shepherd, the Messiah sent to save us from our suffering by offering us the hope of eternal life. This is the meaning of the Light that dispels the darkness of conflict, pain and suffering. It is the Light that offers comfort, reassurance and hope in the days to come. During this season of Advent, I pray you will embrace the Messiah in your heart, mind, body and spirit. May the glory of God fill your heart and mind with peace and comfort.

I also remind you that you are called to respond to the voice of God. Will you cry out? What will you proclaim? The greatest Christmas gift you can offer someone is the invitation to come and experience the presence of God. It will change their lives and heal their pain. Be bold and fearless: invite someone to church at Christmas.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, you are a God of power and might, righting wrongs and making things right with justice and compassion. You are a God of mercy and love, tenderly and gently caring, gathering and guiding those in your flock as the best shepherd of all. Shine your Light into our lives this day, alerting us with your voice and revealing Jesus Christ, the Messiah, to our weary, hurting souls. By your grace, comfort and defend all who cry out to you and to others who, with love, proclaim your glory to all the world. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1–11 (NRSV)

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1–8 (NRSV)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”