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Sermon: “God Our Comforter” (Isaiah 40:1-2)

December 4, 2011

Today we are beginning the Youth Confirmation Class here at Christ Church, which will mostly consist of 8th graders—so I remembered something that happened to me in 8th grade... One day I got home from school and my mom and I were talking. She read the Bible a lot and told me that she had been reading the Gospel According to Matthew that day and came across a verse that she felt God wanted her to share with me. Then she handed me a Bible, The King James Version (which this year is celebrating its four hundredth anniversary and is, of course, the version Jesus used), and I read the following verse: “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic” (Matthew 17:15) ©. Oh well... like the saying goes, “If it’s not one thing, it’s your mother.”

There are 929 chapters in the Old Testament, and today I have the privilege of preaching from my favorite, Isaiah 40. In my opinion Isaiah 40 is one of the most comforting and encouraging chapters of the Bible.

Arguably the greatest of the Old Testament prophets was Isaiah, whose ministry was in the eighth century B.C. and lasted about fifty years. His prophecies about the coming Suffering Servant, referring to Jesus Christ, are among the high points in all of scripture. Today I am preaching from Isaiah 40:1-2—“‘Comfort, O comfort my people,’ says your God. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem... that her penalty is paid.’”

This time of year one of the greatest pieces of classical music ever composed, Handel’s *Messiah*, is often performed. George Frideric Handel composed the music *Messiah* over the course of only twenty-four days in the summer of 1741. The lyrics, a combination of scripture texts from the King James Version of the Bible and *The Book of Common Prayer*, were compiled by Charles Jennens. The first words sung in *Messiah* are directly from Isaiah 40: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.” It’s beautiful and quite moving.

To comfort means “to soothe, console, or reassure.” The Hebrew verb *nachamu* translated “comfort” here literally means, “to cause to breathe again.” In other words, God is speaking through Isaiah, “You can breathe easy again.”

These words of comfort were directed to Israelites who were in exile away from their home, and who were anything but comfortable. After the reign of King Solomon, Israel was divided into two parts: the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. In 722 B.C. the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and those who survived were taken away into exile. Then later in 586 B.C. the Southern Kingdom of Judah, including Jerusalem, was conquered by the Babylonians, and those who survived were also taken into exile.

These comforting words from Isaiah 40 applied not only to the people of Israel and Judah back then, but also applies to all of us right now, because there are many of us who are taken away

into exile by the circumstances in our lives to places where we don't belong, places where we don't want to be. Perhaps you are in a place like that in your life right now. And when we are in those places of exile in our lives what we need most of all is... comfort.

Sometimes we look to other people to give us that comfort, perhaps a spouse or boyfriend or girlfriend or parent or child. And yet that comfort often falls short, because on one level or another, everyone hurts and needs comfort. When seeking comfort from others, people often receive the opposite, *discomfort*.

Early on in Shakespeare's classic tragedy, *Macbeth*, one of the characters, a Sergeant, looks out at the sea and says this about comfort:

“As whence the sun '(be)gins his reflection
Shipwrecking storms and direful thunders break,
So from that spring whence comfort seem'd to come
Discomfort swells” (Act I, scene 2).

When hurting people look to others for comfort, sometimes “*discomfort swells.*”

A powerful example of this in Scripture involves Job. You may remember that Job lost his children, lost his wealth, and lost his health. In the face of all his tremendous loss did Job receive comfort from his wife? Not exactly. When Job turned to his wife for comfort, her response was rather curt: “Curse God, and die.”

Job had three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar (all of which are popular names for kids these days ☺), who heard about Job's sufferings and went to visit him. Scripture tells us that when they saw Job, “They raised their voices and wept aloud (and) sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (Job 2:12-13).

I would imagine that the silent presence of Job's friends for that week brought him some comfort. But then his friends made the mistake of opening their mouths. The ensuing chapters in Job recount their trying to explain to Job that his suffering was brought about by his sin, that in losing his children, wealth, and health, he was getting what he deserved. As you can imagine, Job did not find this very comforting, and eventually told them bluntly, “Miserable comforters are you all” (16:2). When Job looked to his wife and friends for comfort, “*discomfort swelled.*”

Job of course eventually received comfort, but this comfort did not come from Eliphaz, Bildad, or Zophar. It was not even come from his wife. It came from God, who eventually restored Job completely.

The reality is that when people suffer and are in need of comfort but receive none, they often begin to feel a deep sense of isolation and abandonment, and then resort to other things for

comfort. As a result, all kinds of addictions develop. I don't need to list these addictions; I am sure you can fill in the blank.

For those of you waiting for my rock 'n roll reference in this sermon, here it is: one of the most popular rock albums of the 70's was *The Wall* by Pink Floyd (1979), an album that is all about seeking comfort in the midst of pain. At one point on the album David Gilmour sings about addiction: "I have become comfortably numb," and then proceeds to play a jaw-dropping guitar solo of epic proportions.

The problem with becoming "comfortably numb" is that eventually the numbness wears off, the hurt sets in again, and the thing to which one is addicted fails to bring any actual comfort at all, and instead only exacerbates the pain

And it's not just addicts who need comfort— although in my opinion most people are addicted to something even if on the surface it's not self-destructive—everyone needs comfort from time to time.

Little kids need comfort when they're bullied at school. Middle and high school students need comfort when people post mean things about them on Facebook. College students need comfort when facing the daunting prospect of final exams and papers after spending hundreds of hours playing *Call to Duty*. Middle aged people need comfort when they feel stuck on auto-pilot, simply going through the motions in an attempt to keep up with the demands of life. The elderly need comfort when the reality of their mortality begins to descend on them.

The need for comfort never goes away.

And it goes both directions. Some people want to give comfort to others but for whatever reason are unable to do so. About a month ago in the *New York Times Book Review* I read about a conversation between two literary giants of the 19th century: Fyodor Dostoyevski and Charles Dickens. The following is from a letter of Dostoyevski in which he described this conversation:

"He (Charles Dickens) told me that all the good, simple people in his novels... are what he wanted to have been, and his villains were what he was (or rather, what he found in himself), his cruelty, his acts of causeless enmity towards those who were helpless and looked to him for comfort, his shrinking from those whom he ought to love... There were two people in him, he told me: one who feels as he ought to feel and one who feels the opposite" (Nov. 6, 2011).

What a piercing insight into the conflicted human heart. How often have you felt like there were two people in you? How often have people looked to you for comfort and instead you've given them "acts of causeless enmity."

If you can relate to this, you are certainly not alone. Even the Apostle Paul was conflicted, as he reveals in his Letter to the Romans: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (7:15).

So there’s the problem. Most people are in some kind of pain and therefore need comfort, but often they neither receive comfort from others, nor are able to give comfort to others.

And that is where the gospel comes in. Why did God say, “Comfort, O comfort my people”? Because “(our) penalty is paid,” or as it says in the King James Version, “(our) iniquity is pardoned.”

In other words, the debt for our sins has been paid in full.

And that is where the gospel comes in, because the Suffering Servant about whom Isaiah prophesied so often was none other than Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for all of our sins, who pardoned all our iniquity.

Each year beginning on Black Friday people tend to spend a lot of money Christmas shopping, but then the January credit card statements arrive in the mail, and some people nearly fall over when they see how much they owe. Credit card statements tend to show both the “amount you owe” and the “minimum payment due.”

The good news of the gospel is that because of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross the “amount you owe” for your sins is \$0.00, and your “minimum payment due” is \$0.00. Your sin debt has been paid, entirely, all of it.

This past summer the great Anglican scholar John Stott died. Interestingly enough, during his final hours do you know what he was listening to? It wasn’t Pink Floyd ☺. It was Handel’s Messiah, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people... for her iniquity is pardoned”

In his profound book, *The Cross of Christ* Stott wrote about how in his death on the cross Jesus paid our sin debt in full:

“God’s love must be wonderful beyond comprehension. God could quite justly have abandoned us to our fate. He could have left us alone to reap the fruit of our wrongdoing and to perish in our sins. It is what we deserved. But he did not. Because he loved us, he came after us in Christ. He pursued us even to the desolate anguish of the cross, where he bore our sin, guilt, judgment, and death... It is more than love. Its proper name is ‘grace,’ which is love to the undeserving. (God) himself in his Son has borne the penalty for (our) law-breaking” (pp. 83 and 190).

And when Jesus suffered and died, he received no comfort at all. When he said he was thirsty, he was offered vinegar on a stick. He was literally surrounded by miserable comforters. And yet

when he died he paid our sin debt entirely so that we could be comforted. In fact Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to be our Holy *Comforter* (not Holy Lecturer or Holy Motivator), to comfort us.

The fact that we have been forgiven, completely forgiven of our sins—that our debt has been completely paid by Christ—gives us comfort. But we forget, and we need to be reminded again and again.

That's why immediately following the confession and absolution in the Holy Eucharist, Rite One service in *The Book of Common Prayer* the priest says the “comfortable words,” scriptures that remind us that Jesus has indeed paid the debt for our sin. In fact, in the First English Book of Common Prayer, compiled and written by Thomas Cranmer in 1549, the priest was to say the following:

“Hear what *comfortable* words our savior Christ sayeth, to all that truly turn to him. Come unto me all the travail and be heavy laden, and I shall refresh you. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, to the end that all that believe in him, should not perish, but have life everlasting.

Here what St. Paul sayeth. This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners.

Hear also what St. John sayeth. If any man sin, we have an advocate with the father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins.”

Every week the priest was to comfort the congregation by reading all four of those verses to remind them that they were forgiven, that their sin debt had been paid in full. The reality is that our need to be reminded of this has not changed since 1549.

One more illustration... One of the most comforting songs I have ever heard is Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge over Troubled Water* from 1970, a song I don't remember ever *not* knowing. In case you were curious it comes in at number 47 on *Rolling Stone's* “500 Greatest Songs of All Time.” It is pure gospel as they sing:

When you're weary, feeling small
When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all
I'm on your side when times get rough and friends just can't be found
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down

When you're down and out, when you're on the street
When evening falls so hard, I will *comfort* you
I'll take your part when darkness comes and pain is all around

Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down

(Paul Simon wrote this final verse for his then wife, Peggy, who was discouraged because she had recently noticed her first gray hairs):

Sail on silver girl, sail on by
Your time has come to shine, all your dreams are on their way
See how they shine
When you need a friend, I'm sailing right behind
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind

The good news of the gospel is that God cares for us when we're weary and feeling small, that God will comfort us, that God took our part, that God is sailing right behind, especially when the waters of *discomfort* swell.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus died for all us, that the amount we owe on our sin debt is \$0.00.

Jesus died for the abandoned and the isolated and the addicted.

Jesus died for 8th grade lunatics and silver girls, for classical composers and brilliant playwrights.

Jesus died for conflicted novelists and rock 'n roll icons, for those who need comfort and those who are miserable comforters.

Jesus died for the exiled who find themselves in places they don't belong or don't want to be.

And Jesus also died for you, so today you can be comforted—soothed, consoled, reassured—that you have been forgiven, that God loves you all the time, no matter what.

Today you can breathe easy again.

Amen.