

Rebecca Miller
Advent 2
Year B
December 10, 2023

TEXTS:
[Isaiah 40:1-11](#)
[Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13](#)
[2 Peter 3:8-15a](#)
[Mark 1:1-8](#)

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen.

Please be seated. Good morning!

I invite you to join me in a short visualization exercise. The word is “comfort” and the exercise is to select a specific, personal memory of yours when you received some measure of comfort, large or small. Anything from sitting by a warm fire after a walk in the rain, to falling into the arms of a friend as you navigated a great loss, or perhaps your favorite comfort food after a difficult day. Any memory of comfort that lights up in your brain – get the idea? Ok. I’ll pause for a few seconds while we do this together.

(Count to 15)

Ok, do you have your memory? Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to turn to your neighbor and talk about it, though I do encourage it if you want to after the service. 😊 But now that you have a specific moment in mind, take a second to really sink into this memory. What stands out to you? What are the emotional highlights? How did it feel to receive the comfort in your body and soul? And what changed or was different going forward as a result of the comfort you received?

The memory of comfort that came to **my** mind as I prepared this sermon is something that happened during my grandmother's funeral. My husband and daughters weren't able to join me and though I was surrounded by extended family members, I felt suddenly alone in my grief. My grandmother and I were very close. I am the oldest of her granddaughters, and was the only one to have had the privilege of living in her home for the four years I was in college. We shared a special bond.

As I sat watching others pay their last respects I was overcome by a wave of emotion and quickly bowed my head, embarrassed, not really wanting to be seen. My cousin Daniela was sitting next to me, she did see me struggling. Without speaking, she put her arms around me and enveloped me in such heartfelt warmth and unconditional acceptance of my grief in all its awkwardness and messiness. Because of her awareness and responsiveness I was able to relax and receive the comfort she offered. I knew she was with me. I knew she understood the grief we shared. It was healing.

God says to Isaiah in the first two verses of our old testament passage: "Comfort my people, speak tenderly..."

The people who heard this message had been in exile in Babylon for years, following the destruction of their homeland. And now at long last, some good news. The news that God is coming! The struggle is over and justice and peace are on the horizon. The voice in the wilderness proclaims, you may be in a desert wilderness now but get ready! Prepare a path, a highway for God!

The prophetic voice continues with a contrast between the frailty of humanity compared to the vast power and strength of the Lord. We are weak, fade away, we don't last. There's not much good news there until it's contrasted with our God. Our God does NOT fade like the flower, God is not here momentarily and gone the next. God's presence is near to his people and his word can be counted on throughout the ages. God will endure and fulfill what he promised because God is timeless and God is powerful.

Ok so what kind of power are we talking about here? The prophet says "the Lord God comes with might."

Mighty power. We may be inclined to start imagining what mighty power would look like. I'm sure Isaiah's listeners did, as they looked forward to this new word from God and the promised end of their oppression. How **would** the God of the universe choose to display this mighty power?

I have an idea of how humans would. All we have to do is look at any period in history to find examples of great power that have generally been evidenced by military conquests, excessive wealth, economic

influence, etcetera... and of course that makes sense to us because we are human and that is a very human understanding of power. We value physical strength and ability, exceptional intelligence, and amassing material wealth. We tend to celebrate the people who achieve acclaim and status because of these things.

But this is not the way the biggest, ultimate power of the universe shows strength. God COULD do and achieve all of that. Jesus COULD have arrived on scene with a mission to wow and impress us so that worshiping him would have been a complete guarantee. He could have blown us away with all kinds of heavenly and earthly power. But he didn't. In fact, he did the exact opposite.

The image Isaiah gives us of the mighty, strong God is at the very end of the passage and it got my attention immediately. It's breathtakingly beautiful to imagine the all-powerful God of the universe arriving on scene to rescue and redeem and the very first thing he does is nurture. He *feeds* his flock, *gathers* the lambs in his arms, and *gently leads* the mother sheep. He truly is the great comforter, promising

there is nothing to fear in his presence and that he will carry us whenever we cannot continue on our own.

God's power and wisdom meets us in our vulnerability and does not demand we change or even be impressed by him before he helps us, He came as near as he could possibly be to humanity.

He is very human in all the ways we didn't expect.

This is what advent is all about.

Emmanuel - God with us. It is out of this "word-become-flesh" that EVERYthing follows.

God demonstrates what TRUE power is by lifting up the weakest and the most fragile. True strength, the "powerfulest" power, is humbly using that power to lift up the vulnerable, the minority, the overlooked, those who are on the margins. Those who are power-LESS.

Especially those without voices, and those who aren't in control.

People who are **not** consulted or honored. God sees these individuals, and not just sees them, makes a point to seek them out and BE with them and share strength and courage. He is with us in all our humanity to give us hope and show us the way to life.

This kind of doesn't make sense to me. It's really not how I would write the story of God appearing to the world he created. How does a God described this way recruit any followers? Who would want to go into battle alongside a bunch of lambs and their mothers? It is so counterintuitive, yet this is exactly what God does and invites us to do as well.

This is what's so captivating about Jesus. He is able to relate to every aspect of the human condition and show us new ways of living that are more fulfilling than we could have ever dreamed on our own.

God seeks to use the power he has to subversively strengthen, lift up, meet us in our weakest spots and most fragile, vulnerable places. Then, he works in and through us and gently restores those tender places so we can move through our lives with hope and strength, continually growing and healing as we encounter the hardships life inevitably throws our way.

Depending on what season of life we are in, some of us are receiving that comfort and others of us become that comfort to those who are in need. Still others are proclaiming the good news of a God of comfort! The command to “comfort my people” is an invitation for all of us, who have been comforted by God, to extend that comfort to others and participate in God’s work.

To go into the broken world and announce the good news available to all. God is HERE to comfort the broken hearted, the weary, those of us who are at the absolute end of our ropes. What a message of hope.

It’s irresistible!

This good news of a God whose upside down power is accessible to all starts in the heart and grows from there.

We, being made in God’s image, have the profound honor of representing (RE-PRESENTING) God to those around us.

As followers of Jesus, we can bring God’s comforting presence into our interactions with every person, without even talking about God.

We can choose to put our own egos and any corresponding displays

of human might and strength aside, and become, as God did, Jesus to the people around us.

We don't even have to be particularly spiritual about it! This isn't a job for only the ordained or those in ministry or who have a special calling. We are ALL called and for that reason we are never alone.

I doubt Daniela thought twice about her hug for me that day, but the memory of it has remained for almost 6 years now, because in THAT moment she represented God's comfort in a tangible way, perfectly timed to meet my need.

I bet you're not even aware of all the times God has used you to minister to the needs of others. How fun to be on this mission for God without even realizing! Just by virtue of us being ourselves, we often bless others.

It could be as simple as turning toward someone and listening with compassion and full attention as they vent about a bad day or circumstance.

Or maybe providing a meal for someone, or giving them a ride.

It could be a back rub.

It could look like reading a story, or taking out the trash.

We who receive God's comfort become participants in the comforting of this weary world.

Paul summed it up perfectly in his second letter to the Corinthians when he says:

Corinthians 1:3–5

- 3 ^aBlessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and ^bGod of all comfort,
- 4 who ^acomforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in ¹any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.
- 5 For just ^aas the sufferings of Christ are ¹ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through *Christ.*

Now a word for those of you who are aching and desperate for a sign of God's presence and comfort in your current situation. You have been waiting and you ARE waiting still. You wonder if it's even worth the effort, why bother to hope for relief and resolution, it seems like nothing ever changes. You're in the middle of a particular pain, heartache or struggle and can't begin to imagine God OR his supposed comfort ANYwhere. All memories of past comfort are of little solace.

And then here comes advent, marching right into center stage, declaring God's presence to be revealed in it all? If those words ring empty or seem implausible to you, don't lose heart. Keep on keeping on. God IS here, with us already, even as we wait for the promised comfort.

Lewis Smedes says in his book "Keeping Hope Alive For a Tomorrow We Cannot Control":

"Waiting is our destiny as creatures who cannot by themselves bring about what they hope for. We wait in the darkness for a flame we cannot light, we wait in fear for a happy ending we cannot write. We

*wait for a not yet that feels like a not ever. **Waiting is the hardest work of hope.***”

So keep going. Often God’s comfort will come from the people right next to us, as it did for me with Daniela. Receive the comfort of those who walk with you as you are able. We are not promised a life free of suffering, but we are promised God’s presence in the middle of it all, even when, especially when, we aren’t yet aware.

Some of us are called to comfort, and some of us will receive, and these roles are exchanged many times. No matter where we are in this story, God’s great power is revealed in his great comfort: past, present, and future. We can place our hope in that until at last the weary world rejoices!