

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, December 14, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"GOD'S COMFORT"

Isaiah 40:1-11

Years ago, the Canadian journalist Pierre Berton wrote a book called "The Comfortable Pew". Now the wooden pews in most churches are hardly comfortable. But some are worse than others. At least ours have padding. One church on my first charge had pews with narrow seats and backs that were straight up and down. The only comfort one could find in those pews was sitting forward in a posture of prayer. Maybe the design was deliberate. But "The Comfortable Pew" wasn't about a church's seats. Rather, it was an indictment of those who go to church for spiritual comfort, while their personal and social attitudes remain unchanged. It was a rather unfair charge, really, coming from an avowed sceptic.

But what's wrong with coming to church to find comfort? For we all need soul comfort and we're going to find it somewhere.

A recent article in the Toronto Star was entitled "Comfort Me with Apple Pie." It read in part, "As the days grow dark and chilly and the economy worsens, nothing soothes the soul like a slice of deep-dish apple pie. Or meat loaf with mashed potatoes. Or macaroni bathed in cheese. Or a honking big, bacon, eggs, toast and home fries medley. Comfort food is our solace in tough times as the carbohydrates send happy messages to our brains. At the College St. Fran's Restaurant people clamour for the \$10.99 all-day Big Breakfast which includes two of everything: eggs, bacon, sausages, pancakes, toast and jam, and a pile of home fries." The article said that when you eat comfort food, "It's like the food's wrapping its arms around you. On a cold day, it's like getting a hug."

Now finding comfort in food is fine to a point but many people seek comfort in harmful substances. So why not come to church to seek the true comfort of the living God? In ancient times God gave the prophet Isaiah a message of comfort for the exiled Hebrews. It's recorded in Isaiah chapter 40. Now previously Isaiah had brought God's message of judgement to the people, but this time his message was different. Isaiah told the people what God had told him to do. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem..."

Now there is a time for a preacher to proclaim God's challenge and God's judgement but there is also a time to proclaim God's comfort. And in these uncertain days, I gladly bring you God's message of comfort. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Of course, it's not me, but God who does the comforting. God comforts us. In various circumstances and in several ways God comforts us.

First, in our sin, God comforts us with a word of forgiveness.

For 70 years the Hebrews had been living under foreign rule, humiliated and disgraced. Once-glorious Jerusalem had become a ruin. It was all a result of the nation's sin - idolatry, injustice, adultery. But now God was sending Isaiah to the people with a comforting word of forgiveness. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." The people had paid enough. Their sin was forgiven. God was bringing the people home.

Sin is individual, yes, but it is also national or corporate. And there is always a price to be paid for sin. This recession is the price we're paying for the greed and excess of many. Even if we did not personally sin in that way we suffer because others did.

There is always a cost to sin, always. Last spring Prime Minister Harper rightly apologized to Canada's aboriginal community for their historic mistreatment. But there's an ongoing cost to Canada for what happened - a money cost, and the scars which natives still bear in their souls and their community.

Now to a degree we can pay for our sins through repentance and reparation. When a child is "grounded" or writes a note of apology, they are paying for their wrong-doing. When a person loses their home and family because of a gambling addiction they are paying for their sin. Even guilt and remorse is a price we pay for our sin.

But sin is not just against others and ourselves; it's also rebellion against our holy Creator God. Can we pay for our sin against God? Well yes, in a way we could. We could pay for our sins against God by being forever banished from God's presence. "The wages of sin is death," says Paul, and by death he doesn't just mean being buried in the ground. He means final spiritual separation from God.

But God loves us and doesn't want us to have to pay that price. So he sent

his only Son into the world to be our sin-bearer. "You shall name him Jesus," said the angel to Joseph, "for he will save his people from their sins." Jesus Christ, born in human flesh to a maiden mother named Mary, grew up in all ways as we do, except that he was without sin. Then in obedience to the Father's will he suffered and died in our place, enduring separation from the Father in those dark hours on the Cross. And in all that, God himself paid for our sin, more than double, really. He paid an infinite amount. He paid it all.

Do your sins ever cause you regret and grief? They should, you know. Truthfully, we all need comfort in our sin. So turn to the Cross, where you see God's Son dying against a dark middle eastern sky. And from that place comes God's comforting word of forgiveness. It's for you and for me. "My son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven." Trust in the redeeming blood of Christ and you are forgiven by God. You also receive God's power to amend your life and change your ways. Oh, it takes a long time, and we have to go to the Cross again and again to have our sins blotted out, but in time the power of Christ makes us more as God intends us to be. In our sin God comforts us with the word of forgiveness. So hear and trust that word of forgiveness. Hear and trust also the rest of Paul's sentence, "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Secondly, in our trials God comforts us with his strengthening presence.

(Vs. 3 & 4) 'A voice cries out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord... make straight a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain made low; the uneven ground shall become level; and the rough places plain.'" (v. 9) "Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings; lift it up, fear not; say to... Judah, Here is your God."

God was bringing his people home to Jerusalem, through the wilderness, through valleys, over mountains, across rough places. But the people should not fear. For God would be with them. He would lead them and give them strength for the journey. (V.11) "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather lambs in his arms, carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."

We all face trials in life, when valleys become deeper, mountains higher, and the way rougher than we had imagined. Some of us may be in such a wilderness right now. But we can take heart, for it's in the wilderness that God comes to meet us with his strengthening presence. Let's not forget that the word "comfort" means "with strength." When God comforts us, he reinforces us and strengthens us for the journey. It is in the wilderness that we can say,

"Here is our God."

Mark 1:1: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Then Mark takes us to John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness. The good news of Jesus Christ so often begins for us, not in times of ease and success. Instead, the good news of Jesus Christ begins for us in the wilderness of trouble. There Christ meets us and imparts to us his grace. The presence of the living Christ somehow fills in the valleys, levels the mountains, smooths out the rough places, and brings us to a place of hope and light. I know, and you know, that we have come through trials, not on our own but with the strength of the living God. Perhaps you don't see it at the time, but in retrospect you know that you came out of that valley or climbed that mountain or made it over that rough place with God's help. God prepared the way. And when you saw it, your faith in God was greatly strengthened. In our trials God comforts us with his strengthening presence.

Finally this. **In our fragility, God comforts us with the promise of permanence.**

Isaiah 40, verses 6-8 "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

Our human bodies are fearfully and wonderfully made, says the Psalmist. But we are also fragile. Too many of those big breakfasts at Fran's take a toll. But even if we take care of ourselves, these bodies still wither and fade. We are all mortal. Do you remember Jim Henson, who created the Muppets? He had a minor infection, or so he thought. It was a weekend. He didn't want to bother his doctor. By the time he finally went to the hospital it was too late. This creative man was suddenly gone. We all know a similar story about someone, perhaps one very close to us. Life is fragile.

But in our fragility God comforts us with the promise of permanence. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." Does Isaiah mean the Bible? Yes, but perhaps without fully realizing it, he was pointing ahead to something more. For the ultimate word of our God is Jesus Christ. "In the beginning," says John, "was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God...and the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." Jesus Christ lived and shared our fragile human nature. He died and was buried but was then raised by the Father to live forevermore, to rule and reign and to bring his people home. The word of God, Jesus Christ, lives and stands forever. Yes, we are fragile, but if we are joined to Christ by faith, we share his eternal nature. Joined to Christ, God will raise

us from mortal death and give us a new and permanent resurrection body fit for life in heaven where our lives will be fulfilled. Christ came from heaven to share our fragile nature so that we might share his eternal nature. In our fragility, God comforts us with the promise of permanence. "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."

Yes, we come here to find God's comfort. And that's great. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." I hope that God has touched and comforted you today. But Paul tells us what keeps the church from being only a refuge for comfort-seekers. It's that having been comforted here we are to then go out to comfort others with the comfort, with the strength, we have received from God.