

“The Comfort of the Unknown”

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BASED ON THE THEME, “CHRISTMAS COMFORTS”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Isaiah 40: 1-5 [NRSV]

¹Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak 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.

³A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every 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. ⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Life’s journey takes us along many roads doesn’t it? There are easy roads and hard roads. There are familiar byways and then there are times when we seem to have taken the wrong exit and we are down some strange road where all kinds of unknown streets. We expect the familiar roads to take us where we want to go and we fear that the unknown paths will take us places we don’t want to be. Even in this techno-loving age there still isn’t any GPS or Google Earth map that is going to help us know where life will take us.

As we journey through time the holidays come along like a comfortable rest stop on the road of life. Part of what we like about holidays like Christmas is that they are chock full of things that comfort us because they are familiar. We like the traditions that are familiar. But even in the midst of the familiar things of Christmas there can be unexpected things that leave us unsettled

and uncertain. The economy, loss of a job, a health crisis, or a relationship issue may all affect us and leave us with little sense of comfort even in this season of “comfort and joy.”

The Prophet speaks God’s word of comfort to the people of Israel. He tells them the hard times are over and the rutted mountain trail will be made over into an interstate highway. They are headed home. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” God says they have suffered for their sin. Isaiah was speaking to a people still in exile, away from home. God had spoken through the prophets for generations, urging them to do what was just and merciful. God urged them to provide justice for the poor, the aliens among them, and the socially marginalized. But Israel had gone about business as usual. They had allowed judges to give favorable rulings to the rich. Their political leaders had lined their own pockets and those of their

cronies while increasing the misery of the powerless. The religious leaders had justified the powerful and the privileged and ignored the plight of the rest. The result was that their spiritual core was little more than a brittle crust. When difficulty came in the form of conquering armies they had no strength to resist and were carried off into exile. It was the natural consequence of their refusal to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with their God.

But they had been away from home long enough to begin to have a change of heart. God knew it and God was ready to help them grow strong enough spiritually to come home. The road was a long one. In reality it was a road to redemption – a road back to God and the true comfort God offers. It is one thing to long for the comfort of home and another thing to long for the comfort of being at home with God.

Todd Weir has written that, “Isaiah imagines a highway that will connect people to God.... The hope of this physical journey mirrors the spiritual journey with all the travails and promise of finding our home again with God. Isaiah understands that this journey must travel through a wilderness, for there are times when it seems that a dry desert separates us from a loving God. He could not have envisioned the vast American freeways, traveling at great speeds in the comfort of a minivan with air conditioning, a VCR and at least one cup holder per person. Journeys were arduous adventures, life changing pilgrimages that toughened the feet and opened the soul to the wonders of the

world.” He says, “We all have some idea of what it is like to feel a desert between ourselves and God. We long for some kind of on-ramp, a map of the highway that will take us back to the heart of God.”¹

Christmas is one way Christians have envisioned the way to come home to God. It really talks about the way that God has chosen to come to us, rather than wait for us to prepare the way and get on the road back to God. But what has happened is that we have let lesser comforts take the place of the greater comfort of coming home to God. All the decorations and comfort food and parties and presents are good. They are fun and in many ways they give us comfort whether times are hard or times are good. But what we have to be careful of is that these lesser comforts don't take the place of the greater comfort of being at home with God.

I have to confess that I fall into that trap of wanting to focus on the wrong things at Christmas. It is not because I don't recognize the spiritual dimensions and their importance. It isn't because I am any busier than anyone else is. I have to confess that, at least in part, it is because I find myself captive to the thoroughly American culture of Christmas. I wish that I could buy all the gifts that I would like to give those I love. I know that it isn't about the money and the gifts, but I have been thoroughly infected with that consumer aspect of the holiday. That combined with that wish to have the “perfect Christmas” every year I find myself

¹ Todd Weir, bloomingcactus.org, Nov. 28, 2005.

fighting depression and dread because I cannot “make everyone’s wish come true,” including my own.

But God is not a wish-granting God. God is a far more serious and loving God than that. Wish-granting may seem to hold the comfort we want, but it may not hold the comfort we need. I think the word God speaks to his people both then and now is that there is a journey we must make if we are to find comfort in the midst of discomfort. The journey involves many more unknowns than knowns. There is much about what lies ahead on the road that we do not know and there is much reason to fear and to distrust what we do not know. But I heard something this week that has made me confront my sense of dread and try to work through it spiritually.

In a series of meditations I have been listening to the speaker says we have to learn to “trust the unknown.” I think when God calls to us in our exile and speaks of comfort and of returning to the place where we will see his glory God is asking us to trust the unknown. In essence that is the definition of faith - it is trusting the unknown. We do not know what the future will hold. We do not know when the job we need will come along. We do not know when the treatment will finally heal. We do not know when the grief we suffer will ease. We do not know when the love we long for will come. But God asks us to trust the unknown.

In essence God is asking us to trust God. For in reality, God is the ultimate unknown. Oh, we talk a lot about God. We have a lot of beliefs about God and

we even talk about some of them, but our living often betrays our lack of trust in the unknown part of God. We often are willing to trust just about anyone or anything more than God. We are willing to trust our political parties and our armies more than God. We are willing to trust our own abilities and knowledge more than we trust God. I think learning to the trust the unknown is one of the keys to finding real comfort in the Christmas season.

One of those unknowns is how faith takes hold and helps us find our way on this road to redemption. As hard as it is to know how it takes hold in ourselves, it is exponentially harder to know how it takes hold in others. In the case of teenagers we might often assume that they are even further away from trusting the unknown, but that may not be the truth. Maybe the reason Jesus said we needed to become like children to enter the Kingdom of God is that children have to trust the unknown because so much more is unknown to them.

I was talking this week with Tex Sample, as we were developing plans for the upcoming workshop for the Worship Grant. He shared the story of a young woman in the congregation where he worships. She was a young teenager who had come for years with her mother – a single mother – and had that aspect that most teenagers have when they are in church: bored, disinterested, looking like she wished she were anywhere else, maybe even in school rather than there. They were talking in the Bible study, sitting in a circle, talking about

Christmas and Christ coming and all that stuff. They could barely afford even a small Christmas tree and few decorations and the barest of gifts. The mother wasn't asking for sympathy or for a hand out she was just sharing why Christmas was hard for her spiritually and emotionally. Her mother was confessing how much she dreaded Christmas, for many of the same reasons I have, especially that she couldn't get her daughter something nice for Christmas, just once. Times were hard for her and there just wasn't the money for much in the way of gifts.

Tex said the daughter suddenly sat up out of her slump-seated position where she had been sitting silently through the whole Bible study, as she had mostly for years. She did the classic teenage eye-roll and said, "But it isn't about the gifts and the decorations and the stuff, Mom. It's about the spiritual gift of God's love. Christmas is about knowing that God loves us even though times are hard for us. It's about knowing that God comes to us even when we can't get to him!"

Well, Tex says he and the rest of the adults sat there slack-jawed in amazement for a few moments before the conversation continued. Then Tex commented on how amazing it was to think that this young woman who he assumed, like most adults do, was simply sitting there tuned out to what was going on all those years, when instead she had fully absorbed it. In fact, she had maybe taken it to heart more fully than all those adults, who were supposedly more mature and spiritually developed.

There is an awful lot I don't know. I'll even admit there is an awful lot I don't know about God. So I guess faith is about trusting the unknowns. We can't map the road of life on GPS, or Google Earth, or even Rand McNally. The good news is that the God of the unknown is not only preparing the way for us, but is already making his way to us. AMEN.