

Sermon: Com-fort Isaiah 40:1-10 December 10, 2023, Advent 2
Rev. Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church Ottawa ON

The prophet Isaiah writes: *Comfort, comfort my people says your God.*

At a Bible Study a few years ago, one of the saints of our congregation -Helen Groeneweg - shared that when she thought about God, she thought of a comforter-a big warm blanket wrapped around her and all of God's people. Just think about, feel, sink into that lovely image for a moment...God as a comforter wrapped around you. Feel the warmth and security and peace...

In the gospels Jesus refers to himself as one who brings comfort – and promises that after him another comforter – the Holy Spirit- will come. Imagine with Helen the Holy One as a comforter, enfolding us with warmth and care.

Since 2007 our congregation has had a prayer shawl ministry. Shawls are prayerfully and creatively knit and then are blessed and are given to those who might appreciate something that makes Gods care tangible. They can wrap themselves in the care of our congregation, enclose themselves in the care of God.

When we bless prayer shawls, one of the prayers we use includes these words:

May those enfolded in these shawls feel Gods loving embrace.

May those warmed by these shawls know the warmth of Gods care.

Comfort Comfort my people says our God.

Isaiah's comforting words were written in a time when Gods people were distressed. Soon their land would feel the wrath of a foreign invader. The prophet predicted that they would be sent into exile; the people would soon be taken forcibly into faraway Babylon.

And even in this time of growing shadows, the prophets of God are encouraged to speak of Gods abiding comfort. God will always be near, ready to offer comfort, ready to enfold Gods people in God's grace.

Comfort. Comfort says God to Gods people.

In the Hebrew of Isaiah, the word we translate as comfort carries a great wealth of meaning: comfort, turning to God, consolation... In Hebrew, the word comfort is rooted in a word that suggests a sigh or a deep breath. In the comfort of God, we can breathe in relief.

The English word comfort has interesting origins too.

Com-fort

The second syllable- fort comes from the Latin fortis or forte which means strong, powerful, brave. The prefix "com" – like in the word community- it means "with," "together,"

So, the word comfort means strong, brave together.

Comfort, comfort my people – says the Lord. Comfort – we are stronger together.

That there are challenges before us that require our collective strength, there can be no doubt. Climate change. War. Antisemitism and Islamophobia. Transphobia. Poverty.

And we know that there are challenges to pulling together. Disinformation. Polarization. The information silos of social media. Political leaders who use fear and loathing to gain and keep power...

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That we are stronger together than we are fragmented or alone, that's something we know.

Think of the pandemic, that challenging not long-ago time. In a global review of how nations fared in their response to COVID, we Canadians did very well, relative to other places in the world. Our governments – federal, provincial, and local - got middling grades for their response to the public health emergency that we faced. Particularly, the poorer members of our society suffered much under covid.

But the Canadian population got very high grades for the way in which we pulled together, for the way most Canadians demonstrated concern for the most vulnerable among us. It was our collective response to the emergency, and our care for neighbors that created a strong national pandemic response.

Or think of how we as a congregation are able to do more together than we can do alone. Together we work to help 175 households in our community through Christmas Cheer. Collectively we put together 147 gift boxes for the children and young people in the area of the Banff Community House. Pooling resources we will welcome four new refugees in the coming weeks, reuniting a family long separated by war and conflict.

The word comfort is part of funeral liturgies that we use when we celebrate a life lived. When we endure loss or hardship, there is comfort, strength in being together; there is comfort gained from being in a faith community. We are not alone.

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In his book, *[The Better Angels of Our Nature](#)* Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker argues that humanity becomes less violent and more compassionate and humane, when people of other races, languages, ethnicities, cultures, religions, sexual orientations, genders...are seen fully as human beings, equal before the law, equally deserving of dignity and security. When the divisions we create are erased, and we see ourselves as being together, there is strength and we treat each other more kindly, more gently. When we are connected, good things result.

Comfort Comfort says your God. The ultimate comfort comes from *the* Comforter, a word used in the Hebrew tradition for God. Jesus took on the role of Comforter in the Gospels and Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter who would always be near.

Isaiah spoke words to people living in a time of distress and peril, to remind them that God would always be near offering comfort. In Advent we wait for God to draw near in Jesus; in Advent we express a longing for God to come close, drawing us together, enfolding us in love.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Amen