

“Christmas Is Caring” - Isaiah 40:1-11 - Rev. Jeffrey B. Childs

“Oh, Tidings of Comfort and Joy!” For some people this is a painful and difficult season. For those who have had a loved one die in the past year or two or the anniversary of a death near Christmas, it brings back painful memories and a profound emptiness in their lives. Grief and depression can grow deep, and anxiety may attack as some people get stressed out over having the perfect Christmas. Overspending or overextending can leave its toll. Whatever is the worst part of Christmas for you, can you come and hear these words of the prophet speak to your heart and soul. The people of ancient Israel had been defeated by the Babylonians and some of them had been carted off as prisoners of war some six hundred years before the birth of Jesus. The temple and the holy city were in ruins and great despair came over the people. And then God spoke words of comfort, joy and hope to the bereaved and hopeless. Prisoners were being set free and coming home! Jesus used illustrations of a shepherd finding a lost sheep, a woman finding a lost coin, and a father finding a lost son to express the joy of the end of the turmoil, anguish and pain. God is the eternal comforter. And in God’s time all will be comforted.

A beacon of light shines through the bluest of Blue Christmases. Last Sunday evening I was blessed to participate in a worship service at Brook Hill UMC for those experiencing grief the Christmas. We will have one here at Mt. Carmel at 7pm on Wednesday, Dec. 20. All who are grieving are invited to come on what is the Longest Night of the year (the darkest of dark times) to experience the love, comfort and peace of Christ.

Do a word search and see how many times Paul uses a form of the word “comfort” in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7: *May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be blessed! He is the compassionate Father and God of all comfort.⁴ He’s the one who comforts us in all our trouble so that we can comfort other people who are in every kind of trouble. We offer the same comfort that we ourselves received from God.⁵ That is because we receive so much comfort through Christ in the same way that we share so many of Christ’s sufferings.⁶ So if we have trouble, it is to bring you comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is to bring you comfort from the experience of endurance while you go through the same sufferings that we also suffer.⁷ Our hope for you is certain, because we know that as you are partners in suffering, so also you are partners in comfort.*

This morning we heard these words, “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*” (Isaiah 40.1) Where do you find comfort? Sometimes it happens by simply changing our clothes. We kick off the shoes get out of the work clothes and put on something more comfortable. This time of year it is a sweatshirt and sweatpants. And if it is a little chilly we can wrap up in a comforter! This time of year I find that there are also some special comfort foods. There are some out there year around but aren’t there some just around at this time of year? I have a nutcracker and my father’s bowl and remember eating nuts with him as I crack each one. Ribbon candy reminds me of my mother and her mother! I have been looking for boxes of ribbon candy to share with my sister this year but have not found one yet. May you find or make all of the favorite memory foods of your loved ones and be comforted by their love.

One of my favorite authors of short stories is Robert Fulgum, best known for the title piece in his first book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. There is another little story in the book that makes me laugh and brings me to tears as he retells of his encounter one

fall with a little 8-year-old boy who came to his door asking if he would like to hear some Christmas caroling. When he asked where the choir was, the little boy simply replied, "I'm it." Fulgum wrote that Christmas came for him that day as a little neighbor boy came to sing with the gusto of the Christmas spirit. On Friday and again this coming Saturday I am ringing bells at the Salvation Army kettle at the Food Lion in New Market. While I am there greeting people coming and going, I also sing Christmas carols as a one-man choir. I hope some of you will join me this Sat. or come sing with us when we go caroling next Sunday afternoon. In the spirit of Christ, and in the spirit of Christmas what else might you do? How might you offer yourself to bring comfort and joy to others this year?

"When You Care Enough to Send the Very Best!" Do you remember that old slogan from Hallmark Cards? God cares that much! And Jesus is the best gift of all. When we receive communion, we are reminded that Jesus cared enough to give his life for us. If you think about it, communion is the ultimate comfort food! Are there some around us having real difficulties this year? How can we bring comfort and joy? How might we retell the old story to allow those who are hurting know that God cares? Might you go sing carols with a shut-in neighbor, or make a batch of cookies for a down-hearted coworker?

God gave us Jesus. Jesus gave us his life. What might you give in return? Give the best gift of all, give yourself! Give it all you've got. You are God's plan A, and there is no Plan B! As we used to say as children, "tag, you're it." Alleluia and Amen.

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Rev. Jeffrey B. Childs 11/25/23

Christmas is caring,
Christmas is sharing,
People caroling,
Joy to the world sing,
God's love descending,
As the newborn king.

On this Christmas Day,
What more can we say?
Jesus is the way,
To him let us pray,
Celebrate today,
For it's his birthday.