

Year B, December 10, 2017  
2 Advent  
Christ Church, Mexia

Give us comfort, O Lord, and remove the obstacles and hindrances that block our way to you. Amen.

"A message was announced over the plane's intercom: 'Number four engine has just been shut off because of mechanical trouble. There is nothing to worry about, however; we can still finish the flight with three engines. Besides, you will be reassured to know that we have four pastors on board.' One passenger called the flight attendant and said, 'Would you please tell the captain that I would rather have four engines and three pastors?'" (Hodgin, 661) The captain, of course, was offering comfort or peace, but sometimes we find other things more comforting.

The basic concept of comfort in the Bible, whether Old Testament or New Testament, is generally defined as encouragement, either by words or physical presence, especially in a time of need.

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." These are the words that begin Second Isaiah. I know, those of you who know your Bible are thinking – there's only one Isaiah. However, biblical scholars believe that the first 39 chapters of Isaiah were written in the late eighth century before the exile of Israel to Babylonia and before Christ, while the Second Isaiah consists of the final 26 chapters, written in the last half of the sixth century BC, come after the exile. Second Isaiah is often referred to as "the volume of comfort" because the author lays aside accusation and blame and focuses on hope, peace and joy, not only in the present, but also in the future.

Mark begins his gospel by referencing Second Isaiah and adding the comfort provided by John the Baptist, who is preparing the way for Jesus. In our reading from Isaiah today, we also heard that although almost everything is temporary, "...the word of our God will stand forever" and that God will take care of his people like a shepherd cares for his sheep and lambs. God will comfort God's people. And we know that we are all God's people.

John the Baptist (or baptizer as he is called in Mark) did much to prepare the way for Jesus in ancient times. And he called upon the people to repent prior to baptism. To repent is to change our

perception, to recognize that the reign of God is at hand, that life in the world to come has already begun. Repentance is not lamenting all the sins we have committed or the evil we have done, rather it is to be converted – to perceive life and our lives, in a new way.

The problem is that we tend to need to be converted over and over again because we keep losing the vision during our human pilgrimage. The repentance therefore to which we are called as Christians is a continuous, lifelong process. "Conversion is not complete until every aspect of the human personality is driven out into the light of God's grace and transformed," according to John Westerhoff. What wonderful imagery. (repeat)

Conversion then is a long and difficult process of building upon past experiences, examining new aspects, learning from relationship to relationship – another reason that we need each other. And during this time of Advent, we should be paying particular attention to – working towards - those transforming moments.

Repentance is not like the person who sent the IRS a check for \$150 with a note, "If I can't sleep, I'll send you the rest." True spiritual growth and conversion involve hard work. And therefore, we will need comfort. Where shall we find it?

Kay Arthur, a Bible teacher and author, wrote in a section of the book, *What My Parents Did Right*: "(She was) getting out of her car one day, arms loaded with books, and not wanting to go into her house. She was a young widow with two children, and it had been a bad day. She was hurting.

As she stared at the grass, her mind went back to a time in her childhood when she had been running through the grass toward her dad, terrified and screaming. He had scooped her up in his arms and given her comfort. She wished she could be that little girl again. She wished that she had someone to hold her right then.

As she turned to go into the house, she suddenly saw herself in her mind's eye, a little girl in pigtails, flying down a vast marble corridor. Oil paintings bigger than life hung on the walls. She could hear her little shoes on the marble floor and see the tears that ran down her cheeks.

It was a long corridor. At the end, two huge gold doors glistened in the sunlight which filtered through beveled cathedral windows. On either side of the imposing doors stood two magnificently dressed guards holding huge spears and blocking entrance into the room beyond.

Undaunted the little girl ran straight toward the doors, still crying, 'Abba!' She never broke stride for, as she neared the doors, the guards flung them open and heralded her arrival: 'The daughter of the King! The daughter of the King!'

Court was in session. The cherubim and seraphim cried: 'Holy, holy, holy!' and the elders sat on their thrones, dressed in white, wearing crowns of gold, and talking with the King of Kings. But none of this slowed his daughter! Oblivious to everything going on around her ... she catapulted herself into the King's arms. She was home and wrapped in the arms of his everlasting love. He reached up and, with one finger, gently wiped away her tears. Then he smoothed the sticky hair on her face into her braids and said, 'Now, now, tell your father all about it.'

Kay Arthur walked into her house, left her books on the table, walked through her house, and knelt down by her bedside. (And) she told her (God) all about it." (Morgan, p. 130)

We take comfort in a number of earthly things - too numerous to mention, but we know from experience that none of them last. The word of our God will stand forever. The love of God knows no bounds. The mercy and grace of God are unlimited. Take comfort in God!

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.  
Amen.