

the God
of all Comfort



Grace Church
Advent 2018



the God of All Comfort

I'm sitting at the kitchen table writing, putting the finishing touches on the devotional thoughts for this Advent book you hold in your hands. Outside there is a pretty hefty storm raging – strong rains are falling, trees are being bent by the wind, lightning and thunder punctuate the gusting, driving storm. My son Jackson can't stop looking out the window. "It's scary, but cool," he said, mesmerized.

Jackson and I talked for a few minutes about the beauty and power of the storm, which was completely in God's hands. Then we talked about that also by God's hand, we were comfortable and dry inside our home even as the storm swirled outside. This conversation gave us a moment to recognize God and to praise Him for His power and protection. We were comforted.

It's a good metaphor. The storms of our lives, literal and figurative, big and small, can be both scary and cool. When we view them from our limited perspectives, they can seem overwhelming. We may not be able to see an end or sense any good in them. But when we stop to get a bit of our Heavenly Father's perspective, to remember Who He is, we can see how "cool" God is. He offers us shelter in the storm. He is in control. He is a good, good Father. He is full of love and mercy and comfort. He extends these things to us, and we can find peace and joy and hope. Even in the storms.

The season of Advent, a historical celebration of the church, can remind us of all those things. The word advent means "arrival" or "coming," from the Latin noun *adventus*. The season of Advent is the time before Christmas that is set aside to prepare hearts and minds for the celebration of Christ's first coming. It is a way of preparing us to receive our King. The Christmas season is a busy time, and we often get caught up in distractions. The whole month

of December can be a storm of its own. An intentional practice of watching and waiting during Advent can counter the buffeting winds of busyness that threaten us this time of year.

“In Advent we focus on three ‘comings’ of Christ: his arrival in history as a baby born of Mary, his return in fearsome glory at the end of time, and his intermediate entrance into our own lives,” writes Bobby Gross in *Living the Christian Year*. This booklet is designed to help you do just that each week – look back, look forward, and look around for the coming of Christ and the comfort that His coming brings. Advent gives us an opportunity to recognize that this particular moment in time isn’t the **only** moment in time; it doesn’t have the final say. We can be comforted by the lessons and truth of the past, the hopes and promises of the future. In thinking on those things we open ourselves to the comfort of Christ coming into our present moments.

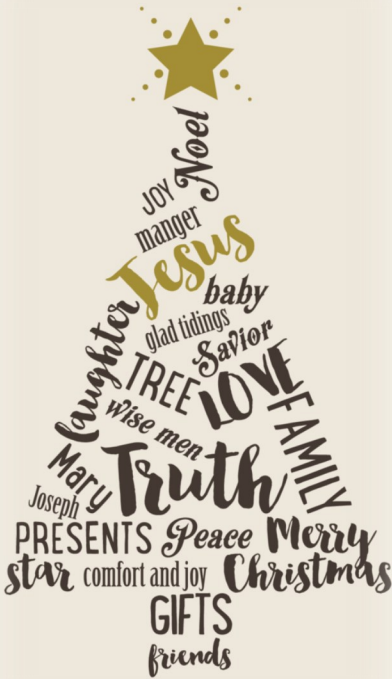
So, deliberately and expectantly, we turn as a congregation this Advent season to the theme of *The God of All Comfort*.

Maybe you are sitting warm and dry at the kitchen table while a storm roars just outside your window. Or maybe you feel like you are standing outside in the middle of the downpour. It could be you have sunny skies today with no storms in sight. You may have feelings of joyous anticipation of the coming Christmas celebration. You may have feelings of dread and grief that threaten to overwhelm you. I don’t know where you are, but I do know a few things for sure:

- God knows exactly where you are and He cares deeply about it.
- God is good and loving and merciful, and He brings comfort and joy beyond what we can ask or imagine.
- God often speaks in unexpected ways and at unexpected times, and He can and does speak into the even bleakest circumstances.
- God’s comfort and His coming are worth waiting for.

As I jotted down these thoughts about comfort and Advent, the Casting Crowns song “Praise You in This Storm” came on the radio. It made me smile. It is a song that God used to very personally and profoundly reveal Himself to me as the God of all comfort during the past year, which included its share of hard things for me and my extended family. As I have been writing these devotions about God’s comfort, what a joy it has been to study His Word and reflect on the very real and personal ways that God extends His comfort to us – no matter what the storm looks like swirling around us, no matter how long the longing for light has been going on. May He use these words and the prayers that have accompanied their composition to bring you His comfort, His blessing, His presence this Advent season. May you be encouraged to open your heart to His coming.

—Elizabeth Renicks



How to use this book:

This booklet is arranged around the theme *The God of All Comfort*, and each week we will look at a different aspect of God's comfort as it is revealed through Scripture.

You are encouraged to set aside a specific and regular time each day to spend with the Lord. You will need a few things with you each day besides this booklet – a Bible, a pen, and perhaps a journal or notebook to record your thoughts – or you can write in the booklet itself. There are blank pages inserted after each week's devotional thoughts where you can jot down notes. Plan for at least 15 minutes of uninterrupted time. If you have the opportunity for more, all the better.

Every week, this booklet will guide you through a theme that correlates to the sermon text each Sunday in Advent. On each Monday, you will be guided through thoughts related to the passage used for that week's sermon. The next three days you will look at Scriptures that help you focus on the three different comings of Christ into our world – past, future, and present.

On Fridays, you will be invited to interact with Scripture using a very ancient prayer practice called *Lectio Divina* – Latin for “divine reading.” This is a slow and contemplative way of praying God's Word involving reading of a single passage, listening for the direction of the Holy Spirit, and meditating on how God is speaking to you. You will find instructions for this simple practice in the Friday entries. Finally, each Saturday, you will have the opportunity to reflect over the lessons and events of the previous week using a set of questions tailored to that week's theme. This is a form of prayer and purposefulness modeled after another ancient prayer practice, called *Examen*.

There isn't a specific “right” way to use this booklet. Let the Holy Spirit be your guide as you seek the God of All Comfort through the pages of His Word and these times apart with Him this Advent season.



That We May Change

Holy God – in this precious hour, we pause
and gather to hear your word –
to do so, we break from our work responsibilities
and from our play fantasies;
we move from our fears that overwhelm
and from our ambitions that are too strong.
Free us in these moments from every distraction,
that we may focus to listen,
that we may hear, that we may change. Amen.

- Walter Brueggemann

the God
of all Comfort

Week 1

Simeon: A Model for Advent

We are anchored in relationship with God and this brings us **hope**.

God who said:

*“From the womb of darkness
let the light shine forth!”
has now made his light
shine in our hearts,
so that the knowledge of the glory of God
that is on the face of Christ
may be resplendent there.*

2 Corinthians 4:6



When Jesus was a baby being presented at the temple, a man named Simeon experienced the deep blessing of seeing the glory of God in the infant Messiah’s face. Simeon’s heart was full with God’s light that shone there. This week we will consider Simeon’s encounter with Christ, and how it speaks of hope and comfort for us as well.

“Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:5). Years before the Apostle Paul penned these words to the Romans, Simeon experienced hope and comfort by the power of the Holy Spirit. He awaited the coming of Christ; he was not disappointed. We, too, await. May we encounter Him and experience the comfort of our hope in His coming, in His bringing light to our darkness, in the truth of His deep and abiding love for each one of us. We can expect comfort from God.

(pages 16-17 have been provided for notes and reflections from Week 1)

Monday, November 26, 2018

Reading for today: Luke 2:25-35

Before you read today's passage, invite the Lord to guide your time in His Word, bringing your attention to what He especially wants you to see. Read through the passage, allowing your mind to think back over the different points and questions raised by the sermon preached yesterday. Take note of anything the Lord points out to you.

Then, read the passage a second time. Slowly. Notice that within this text are glimpses of all three of the "comings" of Christ into our world. First, in verse 25, we see Simeon "waiting for the consolation of Israel." This is an echo of Old Testament prophetic language in which God's people, longing for Messiah, looked with hope to redemption from oppression and suffering. Then in verses 32-35, notice the forward-looking language Simeon uses concerning Jesus as he prophecies over the infant Messiah. We, too, can look forward with joy to further revelation of Jesus' glory on this earth, just as Simeon looked with joy into what Messiah's arrival meant. Finally, pay attention to how Simeon experienced a relationship with God in the midst of his life and circumstances. Verses 26-31 reveal a man who was comforted by the presence of the Holy Spirit, who went about his regular daily life and work, and was blessed with comfort and peace in the presence of the Christ child. We too can experience this.

Present in this short passage are so many of the traditional themes of Advent – waiting, watching, the light of Christ, hope, revelation. And, of course, the theme of comfort. Ask God to prepare your heart for an Advent journey in which you consider the comfort of Christ coming in the past, the comfort of His promised glorious future return to earth in power and triumph, and the immense comfort of His coming to you daily as you invite His presence into your every day world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Tuesday, November 27, 2018

Reading for today: Isaiah 40:1-5 and Isaiah 52:7-9

Before reading the Isaiah passages, consider again these words from Luke 2:25 concerning Simeon: *“This man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.”* Notice how Simeon is described: righteous and devout, the Holy Spirit upon him – in other words, he knew God intimately and worshiped Him. Even so, he was still longing. He was waiting for comfort, described as “the consolation of Israel.” He was looking for Messiah. Perhaps you find yourself in the same boat – you know the Lord, you worship Him, and because of a faith relationship with God you have the Holy Spirit upon you. But you are still in need of comfort. Perhaps you are looking for a deeper encounter with Messiah this Advent season.

Simeon, being devout, would have been well acquainted with the prophecies concerning Messiah that had been handed down through generations for some seven centuries before his lifetime. Simeon’s expectations regarding the Messiah would have come through his own looking back to the promises of God’s Word. Perhaps Simeon clung to the very words we will read today from Isaiah 40, a passage that promises comfort and revelation of the Lord’s glory. Or perhaps He rested in the picture painted in the words of Isaiah 52 – watchmen rewarded for their faithful attentiveness with the news of the Lord’s comforting and redeeming presence.

As you read through the words of Isaiah’s prophecies today, cast your eyes backward into the Christmas story and its reality as fact. Consider the historical arrival of Christ into our world that we reflect on and celebrate in Advent and Christmas. Take comfort from this real man Simeon whose watching and waiting for Messiah was rewarded in an encounter with our newly born Savior those many years ago. As you read through ancient words of comfort and hope from Isaiah, recall the truth of Hebrews 10:23: *“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for **He who promised is faithful.**”*

Wednesday, November 28, 2018

Reading for today: Isaiah 60:1-3, 19-20 and Revelation 21:1-4, 23

Simeon, you will recall, described the infant Jesus as “a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to [God’s] people Israel.” Indeed, Jesus himself declared, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). Today let us consider this Jesus – a light of revelation and a light for glory.

Light plays a specific role in the Advent season. We light progressively more candles on an Advent wreath as we draw closer to the celebration of the birth of Christ. Bobby Gross, author of *Living the Christian Year*, notes, “By lighting a new candle each week, by accumulating the brightness, we signify our hope in the coming light of Christ, even as daylight diminishes and darkness rises with the approach of the winter solstice.” As the season of winter draws nearer, we are perhaps greatly in need of the warmth and light. Jesus, who shines light into the darkness even now, will return again to this earth, bringing a permanent light that will eradicate any trace of sin and darkness. This is a comforting hope.

The Isaiah and Revelation passages you will read today describe a fully redeemed future. Take note of the role of light in the texts and note the parallelism of the descriptions in Isaiah 60:19 and Revelation 21:23. For all eternity, Jesus – the glorious Lamb of God – provides all the light we could ever need. We can draw comfort and hope from these images of His unfettered glory lighting up the new Heaven and new Earth described in Revelation 21. Simeon’s encounter with the child he called “a light” allowed him to experience deep and settling peace. He looked into the tiny eyes of the infant Messiah and saw an expansive future of redemption and light. May we, too, look into the light of Christ today and be able to see an expansive, comforting, and hope-filled future of redemption and life.

Thursday, November 29, 2018

Reading for today: Mathew 13:10-17 and 54-58

Consider for a moment what spiritually attuned eyes Simeon must have had to have recognized a tiny infant as the instrument of God's redeeming power and love. Simeon's intimate relationship with God enabled him to "see" beyond the world of appearances and with the eyes of the Holy Spirit. Part of what Simeon saw is that Jesus would be a controversial figure who would cause *"the fall and rising of many in Israel"* and be a warning sign that was opposed (Luke 2:34-35).

In today's readings we can see some of that reality. In the first part of the reading, Jesus is addressing the disciples' question about why He speaks in parables. Perhaps the message we can glean from Jesus' words here is that there is always more going on than meets the eye. It takes faith, perseverance, and hope to see beyond the world of appearances to the world of deeper truth. The disciples, it seems from Matthew 13:16, have received the blessing that comes from this type of insight. Where did they get eyes to see and ears to hear? Through relationship with Jesus; through faith in Him.

Contrast the fruits of the disciples' relationship with Jesus with another group of people who had a relationship with Jesus – the folks of his hometown described in the second portion of today's reading. These neighbors had seen Jesus all his life; perhaps they thought they knew all about him. At the very least, familiarity with who they thought Jesus was kept them from the faith that would have allowed more of Jesus' glory and power to be manifested among them.

And so it is with us. God is revealing Himself to us all the time. Daily Christ desires to come to us, to fellowship with us. Do we have eyes to see? Ears to hear? Do we hope in Him? Invite the Lord to grace you with ears to hear Him more, eyes to see His presence everywhere. What comfort in the knowledge that He desires to give us just that!

Friday, November 30, 2018

Reading for today: 2 Kings 6:15-17

Today we will use the ancient practice of “Lectio Divina” or “divine reading.” This is a slow reading and praying through a passage of Scripture. Quiet yourself before the Lord today. When you are ready, use the text in 2 Kings to work leisurely through the four “movements” of Lectio Divina outlined below.

Lectio: Read the passage aloud slowly; listen for those “words for today.”

Meditatio: Take note of words or phrases the Lord highlights for you. Meditate on them. What meaning or application might they have for you today? What hope do these words bring to you? Repeat them. Memorize them to carry with you throughout the day.

Oratio: Speak aloud the words or phrases you have meditated on as a prayer. Consider the possible ways these words could be prayed – as worship or adoration, as petition for yourself or others, as thanksgiving. Consider your needs and speak to the Lord about them. Perhaps something in today’s reading has touched on a desire or longing you have for comfort or hope. Talk with Jesus.

Contemplatio: Rest quietly with the Lord. Practice listening for His release for you to end your time of contemplation.

Saturday, December 1, 2018

Today you will reflect on the past week. Using a series of questions you will identify where you have seen God in the past week and your responses to His invitations. You will close with response to the relationship, the hope, and the comfort God offers.

“Come let us walk in the light of the Lord.” Isaiah 2:5b

- Begin by asking the Lord to make you aware of His presence with you. You might want to place your hands, palms up, as a sign of invitation. Sit quietly until you are settled and aware of His nearness.
- As you think back over this week, thank God for some of the blessings, big and small, that you have experienced this week. Were you comforted? Did you experience hope?
- Reflect on ways you have experienced new or deeper “sight” of the Lord this past week. Replay in your mind different events, conversations with others, times in God’s Word, or other experiences in which you caught sight of the Lord, felt hope in Him, or experienced His comfort. As images come to mind, ask yourself, “Where was Christ in this moment? How did He come to me? What caused me to notice His presence? What sort of response did I have toward Him?”
- Speak to the Lord about your relationship with Him. If you sense a need for more spiritual sight, ask Him to bring you more awareness of the light of His presence. If you experienced a deepening of awareness of His nearness this week, tell Him how that made you feel.
- Look to tomorrow. Think of how you need Christ to be present to you in the coming day or days. Do you need him to be teacher? Friend? Savior? Comforter? Bringer of hope? Tell Christ what you need or desire from Him.



the God
of all Comfort



Week 2

Comfort in God's Word

We are anchored in the Word and this brings us **peace**.

*In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God...
And the Word became flesh
and dwelt among us,
and we have seen his glory,
glory as of the only Son
from the Father
Full of grace and truth...
and from his fullness
we have all received
grace upon grace.*
John 1:1, 14, 16



We are doubly blessed with grace upon grace. We have access to the written word of God, the ancient and Holy Spirit-authored words and story that bring us face to face with the love of God. Additionally we have access to the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, who came into history and changed everything by His incarnation, His life, His death, and His resurrection.

This week, we will consider how we are able to encounter God and receive peace and comfort through His written Word, which points us always toward the Living Word, Jesus. We can look back into these words of Scripture – records of the past and of God's faithfulness throughout history.

Monday, December 3, 2018

Reading for today: Psalm 119:49-56

We are using God’s Word – the Scriptures preserved for us by the Holy Spirit for thousands of years – as the basis for all our reflection and worship this Advent season. This has been the way that Christians have practiced Advent for generations and generations – finding peace and comfort that is rooted in God’s Word, contemplating His truths, allowing His Word to shape us.

During the Middle Ages, a grouping of seven Psalms were designated as Psalms for Advent, and they were used weekly by Christians celebrating this season. In 15th century England one of the most widely used forms of prayer was called *ruminato*, a word that means “to consider, to meditate upon, to ingest and to chew upon.” Today you are invited to join in this same practice as your Spiritual predecessors as you slowly pray and ruminate over the words of Psalm 119.

Ask the Lord to settle your mind and thoughts as you prepare to read His Word today. Take a few moments to invite the Holy Spirit to speak specifically to you through the Psalm you will be reading. When you are ready, read through the passage slowly, taking note of words or ideas that stand out to you freshly today. Also note any specific points or questions you have from the sermon yesterday. Spend a few moments talking with the Lord about these things... you may be led to places of worship and thanksgiving, to places of repentance and confession, or simply to places of deep joy and peace as you consider the ancient yet ever-new words this Psalm has for you. Allow this reading of His Word to be personalized for you by the Holy Spirit.

Tuesday, December 4, 2018

Reading for today: John 1:1-17

One of the things that God knows about people is that they don't have an easy time of remembering things. Throughout the redemptive story of God's Word, He reminds his people again and again to look to His Word for comfort and to bring peace. Often these reminders come at critical points where things are changing or are in chaos. He knows we need to remember His ways, His love, His provision, His perfection.

One example of this is Deuteronomy 6:6-7 when Moses is bringing the law of God before the Israelites. He says: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." Much later, God sent a reminder to his people during the turbulent time of divided kingdom and oppression from foreign invaders, urging through the prophet Jeremiah: "Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls" (Jeremiah 6:16). A few verses later in the same text God issued a warning to those who would not remember His Word.

As we look back to the story of Christ's incarnation through today's reading of John 1, recall how often God instructs us to find comfort and guidance through His Word. Pay special attention to the promises of life and light that are throughout this familiar passage about Jesus, the incarnation of His Word. Where do you find peace and comfort in the narrative of Christ's coming to earth as one of us?

Wednesday, December 5, 2018

Reading for today: Isaiah 40:6-8 and Revelation 19:11-13

God accomplishes His purposes. We are assured of this in Scripture. Isaiah 55:10-11 compares the word that goes out from God's mouth to nourishing rains or snows that bring about life. *"So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth,"* God declares. *"It shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it"* (Isaiah 55:11).

Our texts for today emphasize the eternal and lasting nature of God's Word. Its truths are more long-lived than any of us. Indeed, the Isaiah passage was penned at a minimum of 2,600 years ago. Revelation was written approximately 1,900 years ago. These are such long spans of time that we cannot truly conceive of such breadth. Suffice it to say that for every bit of human history, God's Word has been at work bringing about His redemptive plans and purposes. This redemptive work will culminate in a sin-free and worship filled eternity with Christ. What comfort and peace!

As you read through today's selections in Isaiah and Revelation, consider them in light of the truth that God's Word will always accomplish its purpose. Does this idea bring you peace? His purposes are redemption, reconciliation, and relationship. Is this a comfort to you? God's written Word points to the Living Word of Christ. The same Living Word that *"became flesh and dwelt among us"* (John 1:14) is the Living Word described in Revelation 19. Marvel at the fact that through centuries of history, the Holy Spirit has preserved the text of Scripture, the Word of God, for our comfort and instruction. Take time to name several of the benefits you have found in God's Word and thank the Lord for His provision.

Thursday, December 6, 2018

Reading for today: Hebrews 4:12 and Colossians 3:16-17

One of the ways we can celebrate Christ's coming during the season of Advent is to remember that Christ comes to us daily. He is always reaching out to us. One of the most tangible ways this is true is through His Word. We can receive the comfort and peace of His coming to us in the present by welcoming His Word to us. Today we will look at that in more detail.

In the Hebrews text we get a picture of the capacity of God's Word. As you read, ask yourself, "What is true of God's Word? What does it do?" This passage may not, at first glance, seem all that comforting or peaceful – after all this text compares the Word of the Lord to a double-edged sword. But look beyond the surface. Notice the adjectives to describe God's Word in the first sentence of this verse: Living. Active. Take note of the things that God's Word does when we let it have its way with us. Isn't there comfort and peace that comes in realizing that God has chosen not leave us trapped in our own potentially erroneous thoughts, preferences, or limited perspectives? Talk to God about what you are feeling as you read this verse several times.

Next, turn to the Colossians passage. Here we receive direction on how we are to interact with God's Word. You may want to make a list of the plentiful commands or imperatives found in these few lines. As you think through these instructions, invite the Holy Spirit to show you where you are engaging with them. Are there places and times in your life in which you practice these things? Do you sense the Lord calling you to a deeper place of comfort in His Word? Ask Him what that might look like in your daily or weekly schedule.

Friday, December 7, 2018

Reading: Psalm 119:9-16

Today we will again use the ancient practice of “Lectio Divina” or “divine reading. Quiet yourself before the Lord. When you are ready, use the text in Psalm 119:9-16 to work leisurely through the four “movements” of Lectio Divina outlined below.

Lectio: Read the passage aloud slowly; listen for those “words for today.”

Meditatio: Take note of words or phrases the Lord highlights for you. Meditate on these ideas. What meaning do they have? What application do they invite you to today? What peace is offered? Repeat the words. Memorize them or write them out to carry with you throughout the day.

Oratio: Speak aloud the words or phrases you have meditated on as a prayer. Consider the possible ways these words could be prayed – as worship or adoration, as petition for yourself or others, as thanksgiving. Perhaps something in today’s reading has touched on a desire you have or has revealed a place of unrest that needs a touch of God’s peace. Speak freely to your Savior about your needs.

Contemplatio: Rest quietly with the Lord. Practice listening for His release for you to end your time of contemplation.

Saturday, December 8, 2018

Again this week we will sit with a series of questions representing a “weekly examen” reflecting back over the themes of this week’s Advent readings: comfort in God’s word and the peace of Christ. This week you will read a passage of Scripture in the midst of the questions, so have your Bible nearby.

***“Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.”
Psalm 119:18***

- Begin by asking the Lord to make you aware of His presence with you. You might want to place your hands, palms up, as a sign of invitation. Remind yourself that you are in the presence of the Lord.
- Think back over this week and thank God for two or three of the blessings of this week, especially times you experienced His comfort or His peace.
- Slowly read through Deuteronomy 30:11-19 about the Word of God and our responses to it.
- Looking over the past week, ask yourself “Did I choose life or death this week? Was the overall direction or tone of my week toward walking in the ways of God’s Word or in walking away from it?” Do not overanalyze individual events or experiences, just look for the pattern of the week. Was it toward life or toward death? Speak to the Lord about whatever these questions bring to the surface for you. You may feel led to thanksgiving and gratitude, or perhaps to a posture of confession and repentance. In any event, know the safety of speaking to someone who loves you more than you can imagine.
- Now, prayerfully imagine the days coming up. Ask yourself, “If I were to more intentionally choose life tomorrow or this week, what would my days look like?” What about those images bring you peace? Comfort? Speak with God about what it means to choose life. Thank Him that it is only by the power of His Holy Spirit within you that you can fully walk in the paths of life. Rejoice that the Living Word Jesus came to us to bring about the possibility of consistently choosing life in obedience to the Word.

the God
of all Comfort



Week 3

Comfort in Salvation

We are anchored in praise and this brings us **joy**.

Christ is born:

Give him glory!

Christ comes from heaven:

Go and meet him!

Christ is on the earth:

Rise up (to heaven)!

Sing to the Lord,

All the Earth!

—Fourth century Christmas Hymn



As we journey through Advent, anticipating the celebration of Christ's birth, let us be mindful of the great comfort we experience in the salvation we have in Christ. From before Jesus' earthly birth, it was His mission to offer to us a true and lasting salvation that could come about through no other means. An angel announced just this truth to Joseph. Concerning Mary, the angel said: *"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for **he will save his people from their sins**"* (Matthew 1:21).

This week, we will focus on how proclaiming and praising Christ Jesus brings us deep joy. Joy is a source of comfort and relief in even the driest desert or the darkest valleys. It is a buoyancy that fills our most delighted and pleasing days. May the comfort of joy in your salvation be yours this Advent season.

(pages 36-37 have been provided for notes and reflections from Week 3)

Monday, December 10, 2018

Reading for today: Isaiah 12

Before you read today's passage, invite the Lord to guide your time in His Word, bringing your attention to His specific word to you today. Read through the passage, allowing your mind to think back over the different points and questions raised by the sermon preached yesterday. Take note of anything the Lord points out to you.

Next, take a second, closer look through this text. Notice the first line of the passage – *“you will say in that day,”* used both in verses 1 and 4. Isaiah is pointing his original audience to a future time in which true salvation would come through Messiah. Jesus Messiah has indeed come, offering salvation to all who will receive Him. For those who follow Jesus, we are *“in that day.”* So, what is to be our response, according to this text? Take a few minutes to consider that question, using one or more of these suggestions:

Read through the passage and look for all the verbs (*“give thanks,” “trust,”* etc...). Consider the many actions we are called to take as ones who have encountered the comfort of salvation in Christ. How does practicing these actions look for you? How do the acts of giving thanks, trusting, proclaiming His name, or the others listed bring about joy in your life? How often and where do you do these things?

Verse 3 says, *“With joy we can draw water from the wells of salvation.”* Read through John 7:37-39 and think about how what Jesus says there relates to this image in Isaiah 12:3. How are you sustained, nourished, or comforted by your salvation? What does *“drawing out”* this water look like for you? Speak with the Lord about this. If you are struggling to find joy or comfort this Advent season, ask God to pour out His Spirit upon you and reveal how your salvation in Christ can bring life to you.

Tuesday, December 11, 2018

Reading for today: Micah 7:7-9, 18-20

Advent is all about waiting, an activity that, generally speaking, our instant-gratification society detests. Perhaps one of the ways Jesus' salvation is meant to comfort us is by slowing us down. Perhaps by asking us to wait. Perhaps by asking us to flex our trust muscles and look to our God whose plans may be hard for us to figure out, but are always good and best.

The prophet Micah was writing to a people who were waiting for salvation and rescue, and their circumstances were not anything to envy. When today's text was penned, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was being overtaken by the vicious and cruel Assyrians. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was faring little better, living through seasons of corrupt leadership and the threat of destruction of everything that marked Israel as God's chosen people. Micah, along with his contemporary Isaiah, brought God's words of warning to His apostate people. But Micah also proclaimed a God who, **in His time**, would provide salvation worth waiting for – mercy, comfort, triumph over darkness.

Today's text is rich with the themes of salvation, comfort, and joy. As you read today, think of the trust and confidence spoken of in verse 7, or rejoice with the light and righteousness of Christ that is prophetically described in verse 9. Perhaps you will find comfort in the long history of God's ultimate faithfulness to His people that is recalled in the words of verse 20. As you think back through these historical words of proclamation and praise, consider this: this ancient prophet found comfort in just the **promise** of salvation. We get to **experience** this salvation. Hallelujah!

Wednesday, December 12 2018

Reading for today: 1 Peter 1:3-9 and Revelation 7:9-17

Peter knew the power of praising and proclaiming the salvation of God. He experienced that power and joy regularly as an apostle – famously preaching the first sermon of the early church (Acts 2:14-41) and continuing to proclaim the Gospel despite imprisonment and other threats (see Acts 4 and Acts 12). Peter was no stranger to suffering and obstacles, yet he kept His eyes forward, focused on his salvation in Christ and in the joy of the eternal future he had with his Savior. You can hear the joy in Peter’s words in today’s text from one of his letters. Notice how future-oriented his thoughts are, especially in the words of verses 4, 5, and 7. Peter takes comfort and finds joy in the fact that salvation means something that lasts for all time.

In the second text for today, we see a glimpse of what that salvation joy looks like. Look carefully at the descriptions found in Revelation 7:9-10 and try to imagine this scene in your mind. Can you picture the joy? The incredible diversity of praise and proclamation coming from lips from every possible corner of humanity? The act of praise and proclamation of God’s salvation brings about a culture of pure joy. Let the pictures in this text draw you nearer to the reality of the blessings of your salvation. Notice the promises of verses 16-17 – we shall be guided to living waters by the Good Shepherd, the Lamb who sits on the throne. May these promises of our future with Christ be a joyous blessing to you during this season.

Thursday, December 13 2018

Reading for today: Ephesians 1:3-14, Romans 8:1-2

Throughout our Advent readings, we have been focusing each week on three different time frames for the coming of Christ – in past history, again in future glory, and daily in His presence with us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Today we turn our eyes to the coming of Christ’s salvation into our present circumstances, looking at how comfort in salvation is a means of grace for us each day.

Our day-to-day circumstances often feel like a minefield, and they are indeed a very real battlefield for the believer in Christ. God’s enemy Satan wants to bring as much chaos and disruption as possible to those who have placed their faith in Christ, and one of the primary ways he seeks to do this is by poisoning our thoughts, often with lies and fear. For this reason, Paul reminded believers to put on the “*full armor of God*” (Ephesians 6:10-18), including the helmet of salvation. Bible teacher Priscilla Shirer reminds that salvation is not only about redemption, but it is “a defensive, protective device.” Salvation gives you “everything you need to remain safeguarded against the attacks of the enemy,” she writes in *The Armor of God*.

Remembering, recounting, and rejoicing in your salvation daily is the perfect antidote to the lies of the enemy who seeks to tear down your trust in God. This is a means of “*taking up the helmet of salvation*” referenced in Ephesians 6:17. Today’s Ephesians text gives you the opportunity to relish a detailed list of the many gifts that are yours through salvation in Christ. Take some time to really dwell on the words found here; you may want to make a list of the treasures in this passage.

Finally, turn to Romans 8:1-2 and proclaim that truth to yourself again and again. These are words that are worth committing to memory. Pause with them and let the joy of your salvation soak in and comfort you. Christ has come; He is coming again; He comes to you each day with freedom and salvation.

Friday, December 14, 2018

Reading for today: Luke 1:46-55

Today's text is a portion of traditional Advent passages found in the opening chapters of Luke. *Springtime of the Liturgy* author Lucien Deiss describes Luke as "the evangelist of messianic joy. He delights in showing that the Lord's coming unseals the wellspring of joy in the people who...praise and glorify God." The Magnificat, or Mary's song of praise, is not just a beautiful poem of worship, it is a declaration of truths of God's salvation.

We will again use the ancient practice of "Lectio Divina" or "divine reading" with this passage. Quiet yourself before the Lord today. When you are ready, work leisurely through the four "movements" of Lectio Divina outlined below using today's text.

Lectio: Read the passage aloud slowly; listen for those "words for today."

Meditatio: Take note of words or phrases the Lord highlights for you. Meditate on them. What meaning or application do they have for you? What joy do they bring to you? Repeat the words or phrases several times, allowing them to settle into you. Carry the words with you throughout the day.

Oratio: As a prayer, speak aloud the words or phrases you have meditated on. Consider the possible ways these words could be prayed – as worship or adoration, as petition for yourself or others, as thanksgiving. What joy, comfort, or need do these words evoke for you? Speak freely to your Savior about this.

Contemplatio: Rest quietly with the Lord. Don't rush this time. Practice listening for His release for you to end your reflections.

Saturday, December 15, 2018

Our “weekly examen” for this week will be a time praise and rejoicing in the past week with an emphasis on the theme of comfort in our salvation.

“Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!” Psalm 95:1

- Begin by asking the Lord to make His presence known around you and within you. Rest with Him, allowing your mind to quiet down and your breathing to slow and deepen.
- Spend time praising the Lord. Say quietly to Him, “I praise you, Lord... I praise you, Lord.” Recount gifts and joys He has brought to you this week, whispering phrases such as, “I praise you for your gift of _____” for each one.
- Next, praise God for some of His attributes that you have seen this week, for example: “I praise you for your mercy to sinners. I praise you for your kindness to me in the events of my week.” Be as specific as you can.
- Recall now some of the gifts God has lavished upon you through Christ. You may wish to re-read the Ephesians 1:3-14 passage we read earlier in the week. Pray aloud prayers of thanksgiving for the benefits of salvation with words like, “I thank you that you have sealed me with the Holy Spirit,” or “I am so grateful that you have forgiven all my sins.”
- Finally, think ahead to the coming week. Perhaps you have many events or family gatherings coming up. Or perhaps you feel the press of shopping, cooking, or other seasonal tasks. Imagine the Lord with you each of those places. Proclaim the truth of your salvation aloud, allowing the joy of it to comfort you as you anticipate the coming days. “Thank you that I am a new creature in Christ!” “I praise you because I am set free in Jesus.” Carry the joy of your salvation forward into the days to come.

the God
of all Comfort



Week 4

Comfort in Affliction

We are anchored in the Body of Christ and this brings us **mercy**.

*The God of all grace,
who has called you to his eternal glory
in Christ Jesus, after brief sufferings,
will himself restore you, steady you,
strengthen you, make you unshakeable.
To Him the power forever and ever. Amen*
1 Peter 5:10-11



Alfred Delp was a Jesuit priest imprisoned by the Nazis as a traitor during World War II. From his prison cell, he penned an essay on Advent shortly before he was hanged in 1945. In a world that was utterly upside down with chaos, personal affliction and evil, Delp wrote this: “If we want to transform life again, if Advent is truly to come again...then the great Advent question for us is whether we will come out of these convulsions with this determination: Yes, arise! (*Watch for the Light*, p. 84)”

What a note of hope – “Yes, arise!” This is the posture of Advent – looking ahead in hope to the victorious light that is promised, regardless of the darkness you now know. Delp knew “the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our affliction” and was able to experience His light in the darkest of places. He experienced God’s mercy, something that a recent sermon reminded us begins through helplessness (*Guarding Our Hearts: Mercy*, preached November 4, 2018). When we experience affliction or suffering or even simple difficulties, we are reminded of our neediness before God – this is a place in which we can experience God’s comfort and His rich mercies, which are “new every morning” (Lam 3:22-23).

“Advent is the promise denoting the new order of things, of life, of our existence,” wrote Delp. One of the most powerful ways this is lived out is through shared life within the Body of Christ. This week, we will focus on how the God of all comfort meets us in affliction, especially through community. When we are anchored to community within the Body of Christ, we have a tangible means of both experiencing and offering His comfort and mercy.

Monday, December 17, 2018

Reading for today: 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

It is clear from the whole of Scripture that we cannot reasonably expect a trouble-free life on this earth. Despite the reality of hardship in a fallen world, we are not left just to suffer endlessly. Jesus told us we would have troubles in this world, but He instructed us to “take heart” because He has overcome the world (John 16:33). Paul, in his second letter to the church at Corinth, echoed this theme, reminding those early Christians that even when they were in the throes of many afflictions, they could experience the deep, merciful comfort of Christ. Even more, there is purpose in suffering; one purpose is the knitting together of the Body of Christ. The afflicted Corinthian Christians were invited to share the comfort they received from God with others who also experienced “any affliction” (2 Corinthians 1:4).

In this passage there is a fluid, interconnected stream of comfort and mercy, pouring out from the heart of our Heavenly Father into our own, and then out from us to others. We are told that when we need comfort, we can receive it not only from God, but also from brothers and sisters in Christ who have been comforted. When we are given comfort, we are tasked with sharing that comfort with others. What a beautiful glimpse at not only God’s tenderness toward us, but at the rich ways in which we are woven together in the Body of Christ through sharing our lives openly and deeply with one another.

Today as you re-read this passage that was the basis of yesterday’s sermon, think back on the points of yesterday’s message. Ask the Lord to help you process the emotions or questions that the topic affliction raises within you. This is no light subject; the question of suffering is a hard one, and one that many in our culture don’t want to come face to face with. What comes to the surface for you today? Speak with the Lord about it.

Tuesday, December 18, 2018

Reading for today: Luke 1:26-45

As we look back in time today to the events surrounding the first coming of Messiah, consider these familiar words through the lens of our themes for this week – comfort in affliction, the role of community and mercy in the life of a believer. The first portion of our passage is often called “The Annunciation” – the announcement of the Incarnation by the angel Gabriel to Mary.

Alfred Delp described those who announce good news as a significant image of the Advent season. “The angels of annunciation, speaking their message of blessing into the midst of anguish, scattering their seed of blessing that will one day spring up amid the night, call us to hope,” wrote Delp from his small Nazi prison cell. “...they bring God’s questions and proclaim to us the wonders of God, for whom nothing is impossible.”

Gabriel’s words to Mary are part of an intimate, personal encounter, which mirrors the type of community we can and should expect to find within the Body of Christ. Are there people you know who have announced good news to you? Have you been one to announce good news to others with words of encouragement or comfort or mercy?

Notice that in our text today that Gabriel’s last word to Mary was a nudge toward fellowship with another mom-to-be, her cousin Elizabeth. How has the Lord nudged you toward more community? It is often easy during times of difficulty or affliction to want to withdraw, but perhaps more than at any other time we need to move toward community and its mercies when we are in places of deep need. Ask God to guide you this week to discerning how you can both offer and receive comfort and mercy within the context of Christian community.

Wednesday, December 19, 2018

Reading for today: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Our eyes are now turning forward to the second Advent and the return of Christ to earth. One of the most grievous things anyone can face is the loss of a loved one. The Christmas season can be especially difficult in this regard, as these weeks are often a time of deep affliction for those who are grieving. Today's text is a reminder of the hope we can have even in the face of even the most final-seeming separation.

The passage opens with words of encouragement and mercy. Paul's motivation is to comfort those who receive this letter: "We don't want you to be uninformed, brothers... that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (verse 13). He is reaching out in mercy to members of a community he has ties to – new believers in Thessalonica where he had ministered (See Acts 17). Paul, unable to be present with this young community, nevertheless shepherds them, offering the comfort and love of His Lord. He also urges them to do the same: "Therefore, encourage one another with these words" (verse 18). As you read this text, take note of the kinds of things we can encourage each other with, especially the hope we have in Christ for eternal life with Him.

Note also the fact that Paul is participating in community life even though he was not physically present. His letters are his means of being present in his absence. We, too, have this opportunity to comfort and show mercy, even we cannot physically be present with others. Could a kind word through a text, a phone call, or a Christmas card be a means of God's mercy and comfort to someone you know today? Could you encourage someone with a reminder to look ahead to the hope we have in Christ's return, in the knowledge that we will "always be with the Lord" as Paul reminds us in verse 17?

Thursday, December 20, 2018

Reading for today: Philippians 2:1-8

Now we turn our eyes to the present – the Advent of Christ into our life each and every day. Today’s text is yet another Biblical picture of community as an agent of God’s comfort when we are experiencing hard things. Paul is writing to the church at Philippi, reminding them of the benefits of unity within community, and that there is more to this life than individualism and self-interest. He could have been writing to 21st century Americans! We are reminded here that the way of Jesus is servanthood, humility, mercifulness, even suffering affliction on our behalf.

What are the sources of encouragement and comfort Paul lists in verse 1? How have you experienced these things? What are we instructed to do in the imperatives of verses 2-5? Spend some time thinking about places where you have seen this sort of humility and servanthood in action. How have you been able to look to the interests of others? How have others served you by looking to your interests? Consider how these times are expressions of comfort and mercy from the Lord.

Finally, notice the way that Paul describes Christ’s coming to earth in verses 6-7. What are the characteristics of Christ’s experience of earthly life? Was it with fanfare, standing on His power and position? How do you see Christ coming to you presently? What are the quiet, humble, servant-like ways that Jesus has come to you this week? Where have you seen Him? Where are you still looking for Him? Talk with the Lord about these things.

Friday, December 21, 2018

Reading for today: Matthew 20:29-34

The miracles of Jesus are not often a part of the Advent focus, but today's text gives us a great picture of the themes of this week – comfort in affliction and God's mercy shown to us against the backdrop of community. Jesus healing blind men amid a noisy crowd gives us insight into God's design for life in the Body of Christ. As you read today, notice Jesus' response to a cry for mercy from "outsiders" to the crowd. Then contrast it with the crowd's response to these who "don't fit" with the identity or goals of the crowd, which was heading to Jerusalem to install Jesus as King of the Jews. Jesus, as usual, acts in ways that are surprising and often at odds with what others think. The crowd (or community) missed the opportunity to administer mercy to someone outside the fold. Notice, too the response of these "outsiders" once their cries for mercy have been met. What can we learn about comfort, mercy or community here?

Quiet yourself before the Lord today. When you are ready, work leisurely through the four "movements" of Lectio Divina outlined below using today's text.

Lectio: Read the passage aloud slowly; listen for those "words for today." What is God saying to you right now?

Meditatio: Take note of words or phrases the Lord highlights for you. Meditate on them. Why are they for you? How do they point to the ideas of mercy, comfort, or community life? Repeat the words or phrases several times.

Oratio: Speak to God the words or phrases you have meditated on as a prayer. Perhaps it is a prayer of confession, or thanksgiving, or your own cry to the Lord for mercy. Pay attention to the emotions that this text and your prayer evoke in you. Bring them all to Jesus.

Contemplatio: Rest quietly with the Lord. Don't rush this time. Practice listening for His release for you to end your reflections.

Saturday, December 22, 2018

This week will be a reflection on our relationships, taking stock of where we may need to experience the mercy of God.

“...the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.” Isaiah 49:13b

- Take some time to quiet yourself for a time of reflection upon the past week. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts.
- Spend a few minutes giving thanks for the blessings of this past week – big, small, or in between. Take time to cultivate a thankful heart.
- Reflect on your relationship with God. Do you feel close or distant from God this week? Do you get a sense that God is close to you when you call on Him? What do you feel when you consider this relationship? Ask God to reveal His perspective of your relationship. Does He have a more merciful assessment of the relationship than you do?
- Think of your relationship with others this week, and especially where you have connected with the Body of Christ. How would you characterize these relationships? Have you been a willing or unwilling participant in community this week? Have you experienced mercy or comfort within relationships with others? Ask God to reveal what He wants to about these things.
- Speak with God about your relationship with yourself this week. Have you been hard on yourself? How much do you like yourself these days? Are you tender and merciful with yourself? Self-condemning? Invite God to speak with you about how you see yourself and about how He sees you.

(continued on next page)

the God
of all Comfort



Week 5

Comfort in Endurance

We are anchored in gifts of grace which bring us face to face with **God's presence.**

*Holy Patience,
that deep, calm resistance
against the riptide of the season's hurry,
while swell upon swell of Christmas
laps at every edge of our lives,
you call us to an Advent way of living;
deep calling to deep,
love bearing love,
Word becoming flesh.
Slow, labored, beloved Patience
come, teach us to trust in Advent's buoyancy;
suspend us, outstretched, for the coming of Christ.
Amen.*

(Prayer by Pamela C. Hawkins, 2007)

We come at last to the end of our Advent season. We stand at the edge of celebrating the birth of Christ Jesus – God with us, Immanuel. Sometimes waiting on the Lord seems like a marathon of faith – it calls for endurance. The comfort of His presence fuels this endurance, whether it is waiting for the arrival of Christmas, or the answers to our prayers, or for more in our broken world to receive the grace of Christ. We have practiced the waiting and watching of Advent for many weeks. But in this waiting, exercising endurance, we have discovered His gifts abundant. May we celebrate Him mightily this Christmas week.

Christmas Eve

Reading for today: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

Before you read today's passage, invite the Lord to guide your time in His Word, bringing your attention to His specific encouragement to you today. Read through the passage, allowing your mind to think back over the different points and questions raised by the sermon yesterday. Take note of anything the Lord points out to you.

As you read slowly through the passage a second time, notice the gifts of grace that are listed here: sanctification by the Spirit, the promise of glory, eternal comfort, good hope, grace... to list some found in the ESV translation. Pause with each one, think of what it means to you, and give thanks to God. Then re-read verses 16-17, allowing the beautiful blessing contained there to soak in.

Tonight, we will be gathering as a congregation for a Christmas Eve celebration. Part of what we will do this evening is listen to the words of the Christmas story found in Luke 2. It's a way of putting into practice Paul's instruction to "hold to the traditions that you were taught..." (2 Thes. 2:15). Hearing the Christmas story is not only a looking back to the first coming of Christ. It is an opportunity to reflect on the richness of the Gospel, and the reality of Christ's daily presence with us. The Incarnation of Christ is really a mind-boggling thought: God. With. Us.

Christmas Day

“So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied” (Acts 9:31).

We have come to the day of arrival. The celebration of the birth of Christ. We are looking back, considering the gift that was delivered that day. These are days of peace. But they are also days of beginning. We are called to move ahead, to “walk forward in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit” as the early believers did. The comfort we have explored this Advent season can be multiplied in us. In the early days of the Christian church, the joyous anticipation of the return of the resurrected Christ to earth was a sustaining and real source of comfort. We, too, can look forward to His return.

As we close this season of Advent and move forward into the season of Christmastide and its celebration, here are some questions for you to consider and pray through. They reflect on the themes we have explored over Advent. You may only want to sit with one at a time, maybe even consider using one a day over the coming week.

- How does your relationship with Christ give you hope? What are some specific ways you experience this?
- How have you received comfort through God’s Word? Is there a relationship between how much time you spend in God’s Word and the level of peace that you experience in daily life?
- How often do you think about your salvation? Do you experience the joy of your salvation? Is the practice of praise a regular part of your life? How often do you proclaim the salvation of Jesus to others?

(continued on next page)

- Where have you experienced comfort in affliction? What is your relationship to the Body of Christ? Are you deeply engaged in Christian community? How has the Body of Christ been an avenue of God’s mercy to you? What mercy do you need?
- How have you experienced the presence of God so that you can endure? What gifts of grace, hope, and comfort have you experienced? What gifts of grace, hope, or comfort are you longing for?

May you experience the God of all comfort this Christmas day and into the year to come.





God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen



God rest ye mer-ry, gen-tle-men, let no-thing you dis-may, Re-
From God out Hea-v'nly Fa-ther a- bles-sed An-gel came, And
"Fear not then," said the An-gel, "Let no-thing you a-fright, This
Now to the Lord sing pra-ises, all you with-in this place, And

5

mem-ber, Christ our Sa-vior was born on Christ-mas day. To
un-to cer-tain Shep-herds brought ti-dings of the same: How
day is born a Sa-vior a- bles-sed ho-ly sight, To
with true love and bro-ther-hood each o-ther now em-brace; This

9

save us all from Sa-tan's pow'r when we were gone a-stray, O—
that in Beth-le-hem was born the Son of God by Name,
free all those who trust in Him from Sa-tan's pow'r and might."
Ho-ly Child of Christ-mas shall fill our hearts with grace:

13

ti-dings of com-fort and joy, Com-fort and joy O— ti-dings of com-fort and joy.

PEACE HOPE believe
love joy MERRY
Manger SILENT
ANGELS NOEL NIGHT
JOY to the WORLD MIGHTY WONDERFUL
G O D O holy Night
INN Star KING
OF KINGS BETHLEHEM
EMMANUEL Messiah