Book 2 Sunday December 10, 1972

"A TIME OF COMFORT" Isaiah 60:1-3, 40:1-5

"If I had my ministry to live through again," said an older minister friend of mine, "I would strike the note of comfort far oftener than I have done." I think I can understand his feeling. Particularly during the Advent Season and at Christmas time, the note of comfort needs to be heard.

So often during this season of the year, what we hear most of all from the church are denunciations of the commercialization of Christmas, with the cliche, "put Christ back into Christmas."

The danger is that with all of our warnings of how not to celebrate Christmas, we may crowd out the Good News of the whole Christmas event itself.

In fact there is a sense in which the so-called commercialization of the season has a good and almost a sacramental side. For it brings beautifully decorated stores; whole towns take on a festive mood; we hear joyous music and there is in the atmosphere and in people, a joyous festive delight, a delight which some of our church services have often lacked.

If we believe that Christ was born into the world and he was--he was not born into the church alone, then he is Lord of all the world, commercialization and all. Maybe our job as Christians is to proclaim to the world over and over again why this is such a festive and wonderful holiday. We need to let people know why they are celebrating, and not merely denounce the celebration.

Now all of this is not to say that we in the church can always condone all that goes on during this season. But it is to say that we need not spend all of time in solemn denunciation. Rather our stance can be to proclaim to the world and to individuals the GOOD NEWS which Christmas is.

Thus our text for today comes back to us--"Comfort, comfort my people says your God." Sometimes I think that if I had one last sermon to preach, one last message to deliver, I think the text would not be--"Be not deceived, God is not mocked," or anything of the kind, but rather something

like this: "The eternal God is our refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms," or the words of Jesus, "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." Or those words from the Gospel of John, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son," or the words from the prophet Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."

I don't say this to be sentimental. There is undoubtedly a type of person who accepts the consolations of religion without ever facing the challenge, the call, the inconvenience, the sacrifice. That is sentimental. Someone has said that "sentimentalism is enjoyment without obligation."

But the comfort of Christ, the comfort of the Advent and Christmas season, the comfort of the Christian faith is a strong, bracing, reinforcing comfort. It is the comfort, the good news of knowing that we are trusted and cared for by God. It is like the gift of a job to a person who has been for years out of work. It is like the clasp of a friend's hand in a time of need.

You see, the comfort we are talking about here means to strengthen, to aid, to encourage, to refresh, to relieve, to help in distress. Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, and in so doing he is giving a promise that God will stand by a person in the time of his or her need. This does not mean that God does it for a person.

"Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." For us who live since Christ has come in the flesh, these words of Isaiah take on an even deeper meaning, for we see the Old Testament through the eyes of the New Testament.

Isaiah was to speak tenderly to Jerusalem. And Jerusalem as much or more than our world today needed comfort. That city had been captured, torn down, plundered, destroyed, rebuilt and re-captured. It had been a strife-torn city for centuries and yet was still considered the center for the Hebrew people. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended. that her inquity is pardoned."

For us today, this comfort, this speaking tenderly, this crying that her warfare is ended,that her inquity is pardoned, applies to the whole world. The message of

is that in the Christmas event, God spoke comfort to the whole world. It is the song of the angels on Christmas Eve--"Peace on earth, goodwill among people." The message of comfort in Advent is that nearly two-thousand years ago, God visited this small planet of ours in a special way.

Because of this visit, and God's preparation for it from the beginning of time and in particular through the Hebrew people, peace is being made. Persons are being reconciled to God. God is working in bringing people to him and closer to one another. Sin is being overcome.

To be sure, there is still much of the old sin hanging around, but God's love is bearing the worst that sin can do and is not being overcome. Through all things, God's care for the world and for persons remains unshaken. Though evil remains and continues in the world, it's final power is always being broken.

This is the basis for all Christian comfort and hope. Christian hope, Christian comfort is a faith in the meaningfulness of existence and the future which is able to defy the chaos of any moment or time.

To put it another way, there always seems to be a gap between what is and what should be. Something always seems to be going wrong in the world. Every form of human goodness and progress is suject to its own peculiar form of corruptions. It does not take a very extended look at the world or even at the daily newspaper to see the fact that the best of our intentions are often frustrated and that our answers to the problems we face are compounded of good and evil.

Into this kind of world, comes the good news that God continues to care for the world and to work for its redemption. This is the comfort of which we speak to the world in this time of Advent.

Advent says we are in the hands of a power that made us and everything else. We live in a world that did not come into being by itself or by some kind of accident or coincidence. Our destiny remains ultimately in the hands of our creator and he continues to work in the world and among people.

What only God could do, God has done and continues to do.

Nothing is really ever done unless it is done at a particular time and place. Battles are not won in general or in theory outside of time and place. Lands are not discovered in general. Kingdoms are not established or overthrown except at particular times and places. You cannot love people in general unless you also are able to love particular persons in specific ways.

If a thing is to be done in this world so that we are aware of it, it must have a time and place. The general must become specific.

In the field of religion then, the spirit also requires embodiment in order to become real and effective in the world of persons. Thus we speak of the coming of Jesus at a particular time and place and this speaks to us of God's coming to people not only at that particular time and place, but in other times and places as well.

Our fathers and mothers in the faith did not arrive at their faith in God by conjuring up or inventing a god. Life came to them, as it does to us, as event, as happening, as change. In all the vicissitudes of life, they came to realize that the gift of a saving possibility was always present. And that is comfort!

To put it another way, God's comforting news to us in the events of the Hebrews in the Old Testament, in the birth of the baby Jesus, in his life, in his teachings, in his death and resurrection and in his continuining presence among us is that even the most impossible situation contains the seeds of a saving possibility.

I am thinking, for example of a man who at one time was an alcoholic. Over a period of time in his work with A.A., he became one of the greatest assets to other alcoholics in his community. He began to use his past as an instrument of service for his fellowmen. He discovered in his almost impossible situation, a saving possibility.

Or I think of that friend of mine who was born without any arms at all, and who later in life became one of the most useful helpers to others who had lost arms or legs.

Or I think of Anton Boisen, who wrote the book, OUT OF THE DEPTHS. It was a pioneer study on the frontier of

religion and psychology and helped pave the way for a new kind of training in many seminaries. He wrote his book after experiencing the depths of severe psychosis and a long struggle back to health. He began to use the trauma and sorrow and tragedy of his past as a building block to the future. His worst experience became his instructor rather than his incapacitator. When we do that, we are becoming successes in our failures and we are appropiating the Saving Possibility offered to us.

That's a part of the comforting news which comes to us in the events of Advent and Christmas.

Listen then to some rather unsystematic statements about what God's comfort can mean in this Advent and Christmas season.

- You know the meaning of Advent and Christmas when YOUR CONFIDENCE IS IN GOD'S FUTURE INSTEAD OF YOUR OWN PAST!

- Christmas is when YOU BECOME CONVINCED THAT YOU CAN REPOSSESS YOUR LIFE BECAUSE GOD IS ALWYAS GIVING YOUR LIFE BACK TO YOU AS A BRAND NEW GIFT NO MATTER HOW YOU MAY HAVE

  LOST IT
  FOULED IT UP
  WOUNDED IT
  MISUSED IT
  FAILED IT

- Celebration is when YOU ARE FREE TO FAIL BECAUSE YOU KNOW IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD WHEN YOU DO. What does it mean to trust the Gospel? It means that no failure is ultimate; it means tomorrow is not dependent on what happened yesterday; it means the future comes as God's invitation to become.

- Christmas is when we celebrate again and again a mystery call Grace that keeps interrupting the tragedy and despair of our lives with epiphanies of joy and meaning.

- You understand the meaning of Christmas when you realize that the greatest possible wish which a human being could wish has already been given and fulfilled!

Christmas is when WONDER INVADES YOUR BEING AND MAKES YOU A CHILD AGAIN!