Sunday, December 6, 1987
COMFORT (No. 1 in a Series: Advent Verbs)
Isaiah 40:1-5; Mark 1:1-8

"If I had my ministry to live through again," said an older and wiser minister friend of mine, "I would strike the note of comfort far more frequently than I have done." I think I understand that feeling. We who are ministers are often advised that one of our roles is to "comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable," and that may be true, but we sometimes spend too much time afflicting the comfortable and forget that in certain ways, all people are afflicted. All people, no matter how comfortable they might seem, have their problems. Someone once handed me a card on which was printed, "BE KIND. EVERYONE YOU MEET IS CARRYING A HEAVY BURDEN."

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 from the churches are denunciations of the commercialization of Christmas, with the cliché, "Put Christ back into Christmas." There is a danger that with all of our warnings and suggestions of how to celebrate Christmas, we may crowd out the Good News of the Advent Season itself. There is a time for "afflicting the comfortable," but maybe not at this season of the year.

In fact, there is a sense in which the commercialization of the season has a good and almost sacramental side to it. 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 many people (not all by any means) a joyous festive delight, a delight which some of our church services have sometimes lacked.

If we believe that Jesus was born into the world — and he was — he was not born into the church alone, then he is sovereign of all the world, commercialization and all. Perhaps 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, this is not to say that we in the church are to simply bless all that goes on during this time of year. But it is to say that we need not spend all of our time in solemn denunciation. Rather, our stance can be to proclaim to the world and to individuals the good news which Advent prepares us for.

So last week, the first verb in this sermon series on Advent was "Watch." Watch for the good which God continually is bringing into the creation and into our lives. Today, the second Advent verb is "Comfort." "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God. This was the message of Isaiah. 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 other words of Jesus such as, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." Or, "God so loved the world that God gave the Son," or "Everything works together for good for those who love God," or these words from Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem."

I don’t say these things to be sentimental. There are undoubtedly people who accept 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 out of work for years. It is like the clasp of a friend’s hand in a time of need.

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.

“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 speaking 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 recaptured. 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 iniquity is pardoned.”

For us today, this comfort, this speaking tenderly, this crying that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned applies to the whole world. That is the message of the Christmas event. In it, 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 God and closer to one another. Sin and evil are being overcome. It does not always seem that way, and there are setbacks, but the overall victory is assured.

To put it another way, there is still much of the old sin hanging around, but God’s love is bearing the worst that sin can do, and this sacrificing love of God is not being overcome. Through all things, God’s care for the world and for all people remains unshaken. Though evil remains and continues in the world, its 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.

In the meantime, 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 subject to its own peculiar form of corruption. 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. God loves us and accepts us in spite of our imperfections. “I’m not O.K., you’re not O.K., but that’s O.K.”

Let me sum up the comfort of Advent in another way, and if you remember nothing else from this sermon this morning, I want you to remember this one statement. Memorize it, and say it over and over to yourself during this season and after this season. The comfort which Advent brings to our lives is the truth that in this world, THINGS DO NOT HAVE TO BE PERFECT TO BE GOOD. Things do not have to be without flaw to be meaningful. That realization is a sacrament of comfort. Life is not a spelling bee — one mistake and down you go. There are so many margins of mercy built into this existence of ours, so much toleration for the less-than-perfect. Have you ever thought of how much food you have eaten, and yet your body continued to function, or all the mistakes you have made, and yet you are still breathing? You are still being sustained by goodness and mercy that have followed you all the days of your life. This becomes a basis of comfort to me this morning, and I hope it can be the same for you.

Here are several more rather unsystematic statements that speak of the comfort that Advent brings.

You know the comfort of Advent when your confidence is in God’s presence and God’s future instead of your own past.

You are experiencing the comfort of Advent when you become convinced that you can repossess your life because God is always 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, or failed it.

You are experiencing the comfort of Advent when you know you are free to fail because you know it’s not the end of the world when you do.

Advent reminds us that 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 God 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 in a particular time and place. And that’s what Advent and Christmas are about — God entering our world in a new way in a particular time and place — in a manger near Bethlehem.

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” Amen.