Sunday, December 4, 1994
COMFORT (NO. 1 IN A SERIES: VERBS FOR ADVENT)
Isaiah 40:1-5; Luke 3:1-6

One of my favorite Biblical passages from the Old Testament is the one from Isaiah read earlier: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.”

Perhaps he was remembering this quotation when an older and wiser minister friend of mine said to me after he retired, “If I had my ministry to live through again, I would strike the note of comfort far more frequently than I have done.” I understand that comment.

We who are ministers are often advised in our seminary training and in professional journals 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. I often carry with me a supply of little cards which have printed on them, “BE KIND. EVERYONE YOU MEET IS CARRYING A HEAVY BURDEN.”

Especially during this 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 are too many 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 Advent and Christmas, we may crowd out the good news of the season itself. There is a time for “afflicting the comfortable,” but maybe not during this season of the year.

This may sound strange, but there is a sense in which the commercialization of the season has a good and almost sacramental side to it. There are the beautifully decorated homes and buildings. 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 and festive delight, a mood which some of our church worship services sometimes lack.

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. The Bible says, “God so loved the world, that God gave the only Son.” Perhaps our task is to proclaim to all the world over and over again why this is such a festive and wonderful season. We need to let people know the true reason for the celebration rather than merely denouncing it.

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 our time in solemn denunciation. Rather, our stance can be to proclaim to the world around us and to individuals the good news for which Advent is to prepare us.

So, the first verb of the Advent season is “comfort.” “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” This is one of the primary verbs of the Advent season.

Sometimes I think that if I had one last sermon to preach, one last message to deliver, the text would not be one of judgment such as, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked,” or anything of the kind, but rather something like this: “The eternal God is our refuge and strength, and underneath are the everlasting arms,” or the words of Jesus printed over the main front door of

this church, “Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Or other words of Jesus, “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 “All things work 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 or to offer what some theologians call “cheap grace.” There are undoubtedly people who accept the consolations of religion without ever facing the challenge, the call, the inconvenience, the sacrifice. There are people who believe it is more blessed to receive than to give. But rather than denounce them, it is better to say to them, “You are missing out on some of the greatest joys in life.”

The comfort of God, the comfort of which the Advent and Christmas season remind us, 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. It is like the warm embrace of a friend when you are in grief.

The comfort we are talking about here means to strengthen, to aid, to encourage, to refresh, to relieve, to help in distress. Jesus often spoke of the Holy Spirit as the “comforter,” and in so doing He is giving a promise that God will stand with a person in their time of need.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” For us who live since Christ has come into the world as an expression of God’s love, these words of Isaiah take on an even deeper meaning, for we see the Old Testament through the eyes of the New Testament.

A little historical background will be helpful here. Isaiah was speaking tenderly to Jerusalem. 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 spiritual center for the Hebrew people. “Comfort, comfort my people, speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.”

Since the coming of Jesus, this comfort, this speaking tenderly, this crying that her warfare is ended, applies to the whole world. That’s the message of the Christmas event. Through it, God brings comfort to all the people of the world. It is the song of the angels on Christmas Eve, “Peace on earth, goodwill among all people.”

Through God’s coming to us in Jesus, and God’s preparation for it from the beginning of time, the whole creation is being brought into harmony. God is working to bring 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 still active in the world and is bearing the worst that sin can do. This sacrificing love of God is not and cannot be 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 in 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 kind of corruption. It does not take a very extended look at the world or even at the daily newspaper to discover that the best of our intentions are often frustrated and that our solutions to the problems we face are themselves comprised 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.

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 again to yourself during this season and after. 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 flaws to be meaningful. That realization is a sacrament of comfort.

It's also a comfort and a blessing that we need to give each other. I was sitting with a friend one evening, and we were observing some young adults. He pointed out one young woman with whom I had only a casual acquaintance. He said, "She never got a blessing from her father." He went on to describe how gifted and talented she was. Yet she had to prove herself worthy at everything. She had been taught that failing was a bitter disappointment and that no achievement was ever good enough. Her father, in his meanness and smallness, had withheld his love and favor from her, then died. She never felt his blessing.

I do not want to be overly simplistic, but the longer I counsel with people in crisis or walk with them through their difficult times, I sense that most people are searching for a cup of blessing. They want someone significant in their life to say to them, "You're okay. Things do not have to be perfect to be good."

Life is not a spelling bee — one mistake and you're out. 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 junk 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 being sustained by goodness and mercy that continue to follow you. God's blessings are continually being showered upon us even when we are not aware of them.

The good news is that each one of us not only continually receives God's comfort in the form of blessings, but that we can pass those blessings on to others who are not aware of them. And what a change it can make.

A teacher decided to honor each one of her seniors in high school by telling them the difference they each made. She called each student to the front of the class, one at a time, and told each individual and the class how that student had made a difference to her and the class. Then she presented each one of them with a blue ribbon imprinted with gold letters which read, "Who I Am Makes a Difference."

She also gave each of the students three more ribbons and asked them to go out and make similar awards to others.

One of the boys in the class went to a junior executive in a nearby company and honored him for helping him with his career planning. He gave him a blue ribbon and put it on his shirt. Then he gave him two extra ribbons and said, “We’re doing a class project on recognition, and we’d like you to go out, find someone to honor, give that person a blue ribbon, and the extra one so that it can be passed on. If possible, please let me know what happens.”

Later that day, the junior executive went in to see his boss, who was known as kind of a grouchy person. He sat his boss down and told him that he deeply admired him and asked him if he would accept the gift of the blue ribbon. His surprised boss said he would be honored to accept the ribbon.

The junior executive took the blue ribbon and pinned it on his boss’s jacket and gave him the last extra blue ribbon and said, “Please do me a favor. Take this extra blue ribbon and pass it on by honoring someone else. The young man who first gave me the ribbons is doing a project in school, and we want to keep this recognition ceremony going and find out how it affects people.”

That night the boss came home to his 14-year-old son and sat him down. He said, “The most incredible thing happened to me today. I was in my office, and one of the junior executives came in and told me he admired me and gave me a blue ribbon for being a creative manager. Imagine, he thinks I’m creative. Then he put this blue ribbon on me and gave me an extra ribbon and asked me to honor someone else. As I was driving home tonight, I started thinking about whom I would honor with this ribbon, and I thought about you. I want to honor you and give you my blessing.”

“My days are hectic, and when I come home, I don’t pay much attention to you. Too often, I only find fault with you, but somehow tonight I wanted you to know that you do make a difference to me. In addition to your mother, you are the most important person in my life. You’re a wonderful young man, and I love you.”

The startled young man started to sob and sob, and he couldn’t stop crying. His whole body shook. He looked at his father and said through his tears, “I was planning on committing suicide tomorrow, Dad, because I didn’t think you loved me. Now I don’t need to.”

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” God blesses us continually. Pass those blessings on to others. Amen.