

# WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/AUGUST 9, 2009

## COMFORT/2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-11

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### I. THE TEXT

There are certain words in Scripture that seem ordinary until we take a closer look, exploring them from a biblical/theological perspective in hope of discovering their meaning and significance for how we live as faithful Christians in times both different and not-so-different from the biblical context. A few weeks ago we examined the word weakness – and pondered the seemingly odd reality that weakness might not be as bad a thing as our culture so frequently portrays it.

This morning's word is comfort. It is a word used numbers of times in scripture but one we rarely give much thought to – probably because its meaning... well, it just seems so obvious. "Thy rod and thy staff they **comfort** me," we just sang from Psalm 23. The opening recitative of Handel's Messiah begins "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," as the tenor soloist sings his way through the first 4 verses of Isaiah 40. And then we come to this morning's text from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. While the NRSV uses the word consolation, I prefer the RSV's "comfort" because the word it translates – *paraklesis* – contains the not only the meaning of consolation, but also the more active word, encouragement. Paul uses the word comfort ten times in the few short verses we are about to read. Generally, Paul chooses his words very carefully, so if he seems to go a bit overboard with a word, perhaps we ought to stop and make sure we understand what he's getting at. Hear the word of God from 2 Corinthians...

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother. To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Acha'ia:*

<sup>2</sup>*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

<sup>3</sup>*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup>who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. <sup>5</sup>For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. <sup>6</sup>If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.*

<sup>7</sup>*Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. <sup>8</sup>For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup>Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; <sup>10</sup>he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. <sup>11</sup>You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers.*

**II. PRAYER:** Lord, we come today believing that the Word written long ago in a faraway place has the power to speak to us still today. And so we open our hearts and minds to you to receive from you a word of grace, a word of challenge, a word of hope. Amen.

### III. UNCERTAIN TIMES

Perhaps some weeks the concerns outnumber the celebrations on your prayer list, too. On mine this past week? The family who sent a teenage daughter off on an errand – an errand from which she did not return. An e-mail from my New Orleans friend Rev. Duplessis, reporting on the state of the church in the Lower 9th Ward that my former congregation in Flossmoor has been supporting. Swept away by Hurricane Katrina, the foundation sits gaping, still awaiting funding and everyone’s return – they are at once discouraged and hopeful. On my list? Embangweni Hospital, a Presbyterian mission in the heart of affliction in Malawi that struggles to keep alive a population ravaged by AIDS and the cruel illnesses to which poverty opens the doors. On my list? The out of work, the uninsured, those without homes. And, as I get to know my new family of faith, and hear your stories, I am learning the private agonies and burdens you carry. And, of course, for so many within these walls there remains the sorrow of saying farewell to a pastor whom you’ve loved for decades.

As I prayed through these concerns for our hurting world and for our church; and as I read Scripture, I was reminded that while difficulty is real, so is – as simple as it seems – God, the God who enters into these moments with what the Apostle Paul refers to as “comfort.”

### IV. COMFORTED OR COMFORTABLE?

Let’s talk about comfort... what images does the word conjure up in your mind? We speak of comfort foods – meatloaf and mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese – foods that somehow remind us of mom’s kitchen and simpler times, and appear on the menus of both local diners and trendy restaurants. Ice cream – food that momentarily erases the pressures and stresses of the day and makes us feel better, until we step on the scale the next morning. Comfort mattresses – designed to alleviate pressure points and make us more comfortable as we sleep. Creature comforts – La-Z-Boy recliners; 600, 800, 1,000 thread-count sheets; leather interiors for our cars, sipping a good glass of wine after a long day at the office. Comfort has come to mean anything that helps us feel better; more relaxed; warm and fuzzy things; things that help us escape distress and discomfort, if only for a moment. In our day, the word comfort has pretty much become synonymous with the word comfortable – to comfort is to make comfortable, comfy.

But let’s try a bit of an experiment here – let’s change out the word comfort and replace it with the word comfortable/comfy in verses 3 & 4 of today’s text and see if it works... if it could possibly convey what Paul had in mind. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God who makes us **comfy**... who makes us **comfortable** in all our affliction, so that we may be able to make **comfy** those who are in any affliction, making them **comfortable** in the same way we have been made **comfy** by God.”*

I don’t think that’s quite what the Apostle Paul had in mind. Paul nuances the word a bit differently. God does not set out to make us comfortable, but rather to comfort us. The English word “comfort” derives from the Latin *“com-fortis”* ... meaning “with strength.” To comfort means to “come alongside with strength.” In a sermon at the Chautauqua Institute, Scottish Minister Alistair Symington, said this about Paul’s notion of comfort – “Paul is not talking about an easy, bland, platitudinous comfort but rather strong comfort, deep comfort, grown-up comfort.”<sup>1</sup> To be comforted has nothing to do with “there-there everything will be okay” reassurances, nor does comfort mean escaping life’s jagged edges. It is not a soft, warm

and fuzzy, 800 thread-count word. Rather, to be comforted means to have strength poured in by someone who is standing with us, so that we can face the challenges head on. We are comforted when we settle into the truth that God's strong presence assures us we have all that is necessary either to make it through or to do what we must.

## V. PAUL AND COMFORT

If ever anyone knew uncertainty and struggle, it was the Apostle Paul – he knew affliction well. He suffered shipwreck, betrayal, several times he was beaten within an inch of his life, years spent in prison – he says in verse 8, “we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.” Now, my afflictions have generally consisted of a testy church member or a sleepless night from time to time – hardy in the Pauline category. Some of us have known – and experience even now – great distress. Great or small, Paul speaks to the all-too-common human condition – to us – telling us again to open ourselves to the comforting love of God, as John Calvin puts it, the “fatherly love, the fountain from which everything else flows.”

As in so many places in Scripture, there is no attempt to explain or explain away, our pain. Rather there is simply encouragement in the very real face of it. Remarkably, Paul makes a bold assertion that in every last one of his struggles and afflictions God had comforted him – God didn't make him feel comfortable or remove the problem, rather Paul felt the strong hand of a comforting God granting him strength that allowed him to endure... real comfort that helped him stand and deal with the difficulty of the moment... true comfort that fortified him for doing the right thing even at his own peril. Just how counter-cultural this message is is seen when we compare these few verses with the words of the advertisers. Considering two of the most-often-promised messages in the marketplace, I googled the phrase “comfort and control.” On the web I found these precise things, “comfort and control” promised by everything from undergarments to garden tractors, from mice for computers to automobiles to bowling balls. Certainly not what we find in today's letter to the Corinthian church.

Let's try verses 3 & 4 again, this time using a more Pauline understanding of comfort. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God who **comes alongside us with strength...** who **comes alongside us with strength** in all our affliction, so that we may be able to **come alongside with strength** those who are in any affliction, **strengthening** them the same way we have been **strengthened** by God.”*

In losing the biblical notion of comfort, have we deprived ourselves of its power? Could it be that we've come to imagine that what God wants for us is a comfortable life – when what God wants is to comfort us? Not to coddle or whisper soothing clichés in our ear – but to come alongside us with strength – strength that allows us to endure... comfort that helps us stand on our own two feet and deal with the difficulty of the moment... true comfort that fortifies us for doing the right thing even at our own peril.

If comfort rather than comfortableness was our life's desire we would likely do some things differently. Mother Theresa and MLK Jr. come to mind – two modern saints who focused more on living in God's comfort than in convenience or in their own comfortableness. God's comfort is the power to speak the truth even if it costs, the power to stand against evil in all of its many forms. It is the strength to keep a promise we've made to

a spouse or friend, the power to live more simply so that others may simply live, to extend grace rather than judgment, to stand in the storm and know that in the end all will be well.

## VI. TWO THINGS ABOUT COMFORT

Let me say two things about the comfort, the strength that God gives. First, it is strength – however small, however great – a comfort that comes from knowing that God is with us in whatever it is we are facing. Strength from trusting God’s promise never to leave or forsake us, that we are loved and that nothing we face will ever be able to separate us from that love... Jesus is the proof of that.

Rev. Henry Lyte was a Methodist pastor in England who had suffered from asthma for decades. But at the age of 54 in 1847, it was tuberculosis that was about to take his life. Lyte was also a poet and as he prepared for his own dying he wrote a hymn – a hymn that has become one of the best-loved hymns in the English language.<sup>2</sup> It is in our hymnal, #543 – if you would reach for the hymnal in front of you...

**1. Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;  
the darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide:  
when other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
help of the helpless, O abide with me.**

**3. I need Thy presence every passing hour;  
what but Thy grace can foil the tempter’s power?  
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?  
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.**

In this hymn Lyte means real comfort, Paul’s version of comfort – the strength that comes from knowing that God is there and that that is enough for whatever we face. It is the comfort that comes when we pay attention for the real presence of God when the chips are down, when the way feels difficult. The comfort that comes from knowing we are never alone in what we face.

Second, comfort is meant to be given. “God comforts us in our affliction,” says Paul, “so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” We offer God’s comfort when we come alongside not with empty, meaningless words, but with strength. It happens when we are willing to sit where there are tears, when we speak what is real and true rather than what is pretend or wishful thinking. We come alongside with comfort when we refuse to offer unwarranted cheeriness. Comfort happens when we say to the broken-hearted that we cannot always understand the ways of God, when we say to the grieving that anger is okay; when we remind the reluctant that doing what is right is always best, when we remind the frightened they are not alone.

It was during World War I that British nurse Edith Cavell helped hundreds of soldiers from the Allied forces escape occupied Belgium to the neutral Netherlands in violation of military law. In 1915 she was arrested and court-martialed by the Germans for her crimes. It was the night before her execution that the Anglican chaplain, Rev. Gahan was summoned for a final farewell. Gahan did not try to cheer her up or give her false hope. He did not go to her side to make her comfortable, rather he went to offer her comfort, strength to face what

the morning would bring. Together in her cell, nurse Cavell and Rev. Gahan repeated, very softly and slowly, the verses of Henry Lyte's hymn, *Abide With Me*. (follow along...)

**4. I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;  
ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.  
Where is death's sting? where, grave, Thy victory?  
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.**

**5. Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;  
shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;  
heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;  
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.**

When it came time for Rev. Gahan to leave that night, nurse Cavell took the pastor's hand and said with a lovely smile: "We shall meet again – *heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee!*" Then she turned away, murmuring to herself under her breath—*'in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!*'<sup>3</sup>

We, the comforted, become the comforters, the ones through whom God comforts others.

## **VII. ABIDE WITH ME**

Comfort – a sacred word for difficult times – strong comfort, deep comfort, grown-up comfort. If we are honest, looking back over our lives, there has rarely been even a week in which there wasn't a challenge or two, a difficulty or three, a sorrow, a stress and a frustration thrown in for good measure – uncertain times **are** our normal. But we face them with the comfort, the strength of God who walked with us in Jesus Christ, who has come alongside us in the Holy Spirit, (the *Paraclete*), who has given us one another... a God whose abiding presence... is comfort enough.

Amen and amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Alistair Symington, *Grown Up Comfort*, Chautauqua Institute Worship Service, July 9, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,887697,00.html>

<sup>3</sup> F. W. Borcham, 'Abide With Me!' *A Late Lark Singing* (London: The Epworth Press, 1945), 195-200.