

"COMFORT MY PEOPLE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 8, 1996

"COMFORT MY PEOPLE"

INTRODUCTION

It helps to have a sense of humor and to be able to see the humorous side of things. People can be so funny...perhaps you've noticed. And really, it makes no difference what time of the year it may be.

It was about this time last year that a young Romeo in France was trying to woo his girl friend Santa Claus fashion. He knew that her parents were going to be away and so he attempted a surprise visit and climbed down the chimney of his girl friend's home. But on his way down, he became trapped in the narrow flue and had to call for help. Fireman, alerted by his girl friend, had to destroy the chimney to free the young man. Her parents were rather upset on their return to see the mess he had created. Out of compassion, the papers did not publish the young man's name. People are funny and they do all sorts of funny things. Don't try to climb down a chimney unless your name is Santa Claus.

On the other hand, people are also very sad. Think back for a few moments to the past year or two and reflect on some of the tragedies we have witnessed. Every time we think that we have ascended the mountain and that humanity is capable of building a paradise on earth, we come across a story or a headline that breaks our hearts. Every time we begin to think highly of ourselves and that we live in a civilized world, there comes along a massacre or a murder, or bombing of a building in Oklahoma City, or a jetliner going down or an act of terrorism at the Olympics.

After reading headline after headline about humanity's inhumanity, we begin to feel like the old Jew in the Soviet Union who wanted to emigrate just before the collapse of communism. He asked the border guard for a globe to see where to go. And then after studying it, he returned it to the border guard and asked him if he had another globe.

At times many of us feel that way. Is there any hope for us, any sign of peace, of comfort. And a lifting word comes to us from the prophet, Isaiah, the words of which we heard sung so movingly in last Sunday's service.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sins have been paid for...." (Isaiah 40, 1 and 2)

DEVELOPMENT

You and I can always use a word of comfort and of reassurance no matter what the season may be. It doesn't always have to be in the Season of Advent.

Polls are showing that even though we are the envy of the world, people in this land are nevertheless troubled. They're worried and for good reason. The rate of change we've been experiencing in our society is disconcerting. Will we have or do we have the skills to survive in an economic order that is growing more and more competitive? Will we be able to retire and enjoy the golden years as our parents and grandparents were able. Will we or someone we love be a victim of an increasingly hostile and violent society. People are worried about lay-offs and downsizing and health problems and problems of aging and much more. What word of comfort is there for us on this Second Sunday of Advent that will ease our troubled minds? Is there a "good word" to take away from here this morning?

FORGIVENESS

Of course there is and the first word I want to offer you is the word "forgiveness". "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem... and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sins have been paid for." We need to hear that word from time to time...to be reminded that our sins have been paid for. "Forgiven. Forgotten. Forever" was what he wrote in a note to a person who had hurt him and who knew was seeking the word of "forgiveness". "Forgiven. Forgotten. Forever". I like that.

His name was Joshua Martinez and he lived in Little Rock. Joshua made the news because he shaved his blond hair in solidarity with his mother, who lost her hair from chemotherapy. Joshua paid the price at school for his display of non-comfort. He was beaten up by some students who thought he was a skinhead.

"I had people hollering out across the hall, saying 'skin-head' or 'KKK'...." said Joshua, age 14, as he accompanied his mother, Tracey Jernigan, to a chemotherapy session for her breast cancer. "Her hair was her life" said Joshua. "Her looks were everything to her....and I thought that if I shaved my head....it might be more comfortable for her."

Well, the fight started after a student, spurned by Martinez and some of his friends, told another group of students that Martinez was a skinhead. The group approached Joshua at the end of lunch outside the gym when he was all alone.

"They walked up behind me....they were cussing. I could hear them coming and see them. They were accusing me of being in the KKK and the skinheads."

He said that one student hit him in the back of the head. Joshua elbowed him and the brawl was underway. About five other kids jumped in and got in a few blows and then ran off according to the School Principal, Kent Raymick. Joshua ended up with a black eye and several cuts and scrapes. After returning to school other students continued to taunt Joshua about his hair which had grown out about a quarter of an inch at the time of the story. Joshua had told only his very close friends as to why he had shaved his head.

"It was out of love and compassion for me" said his mother....who now wears a blonde wig. "It's tragic that someone would have to take a beating for a hair-cut...."

It is tragic when someone is beaten because he shaved his head in sympathy with his mother. But do you see a deeper meaning here...in this? Someone else was beaten because of His deep identification with another's life. Jesus was identified with us and how was He treated? You know....like Joshua, He, too was beaten, bruised and wounded. Why? So that we could know the forgiveness of God. As the bible reminds us, "He took our transgressions upon Himself". And what is the result? Now we know just how much God loves us.

"Comfort, comfort my people....says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sins have been paid for, for she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

PRESENCE

The first word is forgiveness and the second word is presence. Stay with Isaiah a moment or two longer for he goes on to say,

"In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God!"

God has come into our world, says the Prophet. God has come to enter our human story, the arena where we play life's greater game, come to offer us hope!

A World War II Army Chaplain made it back to the States in time for Christmas Eve. The year was 1945. Overseas for close to three years, he hadn't seen his family in all that time. Upon arriving here in the city, he called his wife and told her he was back on American soil and if all worked out, he would be home for Christmas...perhaps on Christmas Eve...but not to tell the children in case he couldn't make it. His wife and mother of his three children was thrilled.

Christmas morning came. The children were all gathered around the tree to open their presents and suddenly a white sheet on which all the presents had been placed began to stir. And then from among the many packages arose the children's father....like a Christmas presence come to life! Needless to say, the children went crazy with excitement. We can imagine the joy which that family experienced that Christmas. The children had gathered around the tree, expecting presents, but they found their father instead. Their father gave himself to them for Christmas and it was a Christmas they would always remember, down to this day!

Herein is the meaning of Advent. God has come to us and He continues to come to us and bears our pain. Our God does not stand far off from us when we are in distress. He is there, standing beside us and in our moments of need, we are richly blessed by God's presence, by His "amazing grace".

He was only fifteen years old when he went off to work in order to earn more money for a college education and to find resources for his family. Fifteen year old Alexander McClaren's father walked him to work the first day and they had to pass through a deep ravine in the Scottish highlands where, according to legend, some evil spirits were lurking. When young Alex got to his job, he realized that at the end of the week, he would have to pass through that treacherous and frightening ravine in order to get back home.

He worried all week long....from Monday through Saturday. As he started home late Saturday afternoon, he came to the edge of the ravine and stopped. He was afraid and he could not bring himself to do it. Then suddenly he heard a voice shouting out to him,

"Alex...it's your dad, and I've come to walk through the ravine with you. Alex, do you hear me? It's your dad."

I believe that that is what God says to each of us as we face a treacherous path, an uncertain future, as we confront problems in our home or with our health, and yes, even as we come to life's final moments. Listen for that voice. You'll hear it.

"I've come to walk through the ravine with you."

Word number one: forgiveness. And word number two: presence. God's presence.

They say that Beethoven was not known for his "social graces". Because of his deafness, he found conversation difficult and humiliating. There was the time he heard of the death of a friend's son. He hurried to the house, overcome with grief and had no words of comfort to offer, but seeing a piano in the room, he went over to it and for the next half hour he played the piano, pouring out his emotions, his feeling in the most moving and eloquent way. When he finished, he quietly left. His friend was to remark later on that no other visit had meant so much to him as Beethoven's :

Let me put a thought into your minds or ask a question of you. Which means the most in our lives - PRESENTS as in gifts, or PRESENCE as in someone being there for us...for you? When we are children, we think it is in the gifts that make Christmas, but as we grow up and become adults and live a bit longer and experience more of life, we come to see that having someone there who loves us and whom we can love is far more important. PRESENCE. God comes to us and comfort us in times of need. This is what Advent is about.

LOVE And this brings us to our third word - and the word is love. This magnificent prophecy of Isaiah ends with these words,

"He tends His flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart, and He gently leads those that have young....."

A beautiful representation of the love of God. As we are so fond of saying, "This is the reason for the season". Forgiveness. Presence. Love. And this is why so many non-Christians around the world have come to love Christmas for after all, who can resist the outpouring of love that this Season inspires and elicits.

On December 21st, 1993, Fort Wayne, Indiana celebrated Amy Hagadorn Day. Amy, a third grader, has cerebral palsy....which affects her muscle control. She has difficulty walking and her speech is slurred. She walks with a limp and can't use her right hand. She wasn't asking Santa Claus for a doll-stroller for Christmas that year or for a new tea set or a fancy new toy. She was asking Santa for what most children take for granted: acceptance by her schoolmates. She got her wish when Fort Wayne declared December 21st as Amy Hagadorn Day.

The wish apparently began as a letter to a local radio station that was giving prizes to children for their Christmas "WISH LIST". Most were cute and many of them quite long. Amy's note, scribbled in pencil, in fat and awkward print, was different. "Dear Santa" it said...

"My name is Amy and I'm 9 years old. I have a problem at school. Can you help me, Santa? Kids laugh at me because of the way I walk and run and talk. I have cerebral palsy. I just want one day where no one laughs at me or makes fun of me." And it was signed, "Love, Amy".

Thousands of people were touched by Amy's letter...some of them as far away as Australia and England. Even the residents of a Kansas City Home for people with cerebral palsy asked to be her "pen pal". And even Rich Kotite, then coach of the Philadelphia Eagles and now Head Coach of the Jets, sent her a football signed by all the players. Eric Grimm, a ten year old of Stayton, Oregon, who also has cerebral palsy, sent Amy a book and wrote and told her how hard it was for him to be accepted. He said,

"I know what she feels like. I got teased all the time and what she asked for was what I had wanted and finally got."

His book, Walk With Me, has been published by the United Cerebral Palsy Foundation. I thought, too, of little five year old Sam Hirsh who also has cerebral palsy and how he found such a beautiful home in our Day School here for the last two years, coming in each day with a smile on his face. But back to Amy Hagadorn. On her special day, Amy got her chance when she read the note on Radio Station WJLT in a segment that included a speech from the Mayor of Fort Wayne and an appearance by Santa Claus who gave her a 3-foot Barbie. Afterward, the often-shy Amy said, "I think I had my Christmas today".

This is what Advent and Christmas are all about. As the winds of faith once again brush across the world and our city and caress the hearts of believers with the good news of God's coming to us, we think of Isaiah's word, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God". That word of comfort reminds us that,

God has forgiven us of our sins.
God has come to us in the person of
Jesus.
And love has entered our world.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence, O God, as we make our way through this holy season of Advent. Wrestle with us in the dark, shadowy corners of our restless hearts where fear and anxiety, guilt and selfishness may be lurking. Let the message of this season remind us that You have come to us...long ago...and continue to come to each of us even today. Confirm within us the feelings, the intentions, the decisions and the resolutions of this hour...of these days of Advent leading us to the manger of Bethlehem. In the spirit of the Christ Child, we pray. Amen.

"COMFORT MY PEOPLE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 8, 1996

"COMFORT MY PEOPLE"

INTRODUCTION

It helps to have a sense of humor and to be able to see the humorous side of things. People can be so funny...perhaps you've noticed. And really, it makes no difference what time of the year it may be

It was about this time last year that a young Romeo in France was trying to woo his girl friend Santa Claus fashion. He knew that her parents were going to be away and so he attempted a surprise visit and climbed down the chimney of his girl friend's home. But on his way down, he became trapped in the narrow flue and had to call for help. Fireman, alerted by his girl friend, had to destroy the chimney to free the young man. Her parents were rather upset on their return to see the mess he had created. Out of compassion, the papers did not publish the young man's name. People are funny and they do all sorts of funny things. Don't try to climb down a chimney unless your name is Santa Claus. Be careful.

On the other hand, people are also very sad. Think back for a few moments to the past year or two and reflect on some of the tragedies we have witnessed. Every time we think that we have ascended the mountain and that humanity is capable of building a paradise on earth, we come across a story or a headline that breaks our hearts. Every time we begin to think highly of ourselves and that we live in a civilized world, there comes along a massacre or a murder, or bombing of a building in Oklahoma City, or a jetliner going down or an act of terrorism at the Olympics.

After reading headline after headline about humanity's inhumanity, we begin to feel like the old Jew in the Soviet Union who wanted to emigrate just before the collapse of communism. He asked the border guard for a globe to see where to go. And then after studying it, he returned it to the border guard and asked him if he had another globe.

At times many of us feel that way. Is there any hope for us, any sign of peace, of comfort. And a lifting word comes to us from the prophet, Isaiah, the words of which we heard sung so movingly in last Sunday's service.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard services has been completed, that her sins have been paid for...." (Isaiah 40, 1 and 2)

DEVELOPMENT

You and I can always use a word of comfort and of reassurance no matter what the season may be. It doesn't always have to be in the Season of Advent. ...in the month of December.

Polls are showing that even though we are the envy of the world, people in this land are nevertheless troubled. They're worried and for good reason. The rate of change we've been experiencing in our society is disconcerting. Will we have or do we have the skills to survive in an economic order that is growing more and more competitive? Will we be able to retire and enjoy the golden years as our parents and grandparents were able. Will we or someone we love be a victim of an increasingly hostile and violent society. People are worried about lay-offs and downsizing and health problems and problems of aging and much more. What word of comfort is there for us on this Second Sunday of Advent that will ease our troubled minds? Is there a "good word" to take away from here this morning?

FORGIVENESS

Of course there is and the first word I want to offer you is the word "forgiveness". "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem... and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sins have been paid for." We need to hear that word from time to time...to be reminded that our sins have been paid for. "Forgiven. Forgotten. Forever" was what he wrote in a note to a person who had hurt him and who now was seeking the word of "forgiveness". "Forgiven. Forgotten. Forever". I like that.

His name was Joshua Martinez and he lived in Little Rock. Joshua made the news because he shaved his blond hair in solidarity with his mother, who lost her hair from chemotherapy. Joshua paid the price at school for his display of non-comforty. He was beaten up by some students who thought he was a skinhead.

"I had people hollering out across the hall, saying 'skin-head' or 'KKK'...." said Joshua, age 14, as he accompanied his mother, Tracey Jernigan, to a chemotherapy session for her breast cancer. "Her hair was her life" said Joshua. "Her looks were everything to her....and I thought that if I shaved my head....it might be more comfortable for her."

Well, the fight started after a student, spurned by Martinez and some of his friends, told another group of students that Martinez was a skinhead. The group approached Joshua at the end of lunch outside the gym when he was all alone.

"They walked up behind me....they were cussing. I could hear them coming and see them. They were accusing me of being in the KKK and the skinheads."

He said that one student hit him in the back of the head. Joshua elbowed him and the brawl was underway. About five other kids jumped in and got in a few blows and then ran off according to the School Principal, Kent Raymick. Joshua ended up with a black eye and several cuts and scrapes. After returning to school, other students continued to taunt Joshua about his hair which had grown out about a quarter of an inch at the time of the story. Joshua had told only his very close friends as to why he had shaved his head.

"It was out of love and compassion for me" said his mother....who now wears a blonde wig. "It's tragic that someone would have to take a beating for a hair-cut...."

It is tragic when someone is beaten because he shaved his head in sympathy with his mother. But do you see a deeper meaning here...in this? Someone else was beaten because of His deep identification with another's life. Jesus was identified with us and how was He treated? You know....like Joshua, He, too was beaten, bruised and wounded. Why? So that we could know the forgiveness of God. As the Bible reminds us, "He took our transgressions upon Himself". And what is the result? Now we know just how much God loves us.

"Comfort, comfort my people....says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sins have been paid for, for she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

PRESENCE

The first word is forgiveness and the second word is presence. Stay with Isaiah a moment or two longer for he goes on to say,

"In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God!"

God has come into our world, says the Prophet. God has come to enter our human story, the arena where we play life's greater game, come to offer us hope!

A World War II Army Chaplain made it back to the States in time for Christmas Eve. The year was 1945. Overseas for close to three years, he hadn't seen his family in all that time. Upon arriving here in the city, he called his wife and told her he was back on American soil and if all worked out, he would be home for Christmas...perhaps on Christmas Eve...but not to tell the children in case he couldn't make it. His wife and mother of his three children was thrilled.

Christmas morning came. The children were all gathered around the tree to open their presents and suddenly a white sheet on which all the presents had been placed began to stir. And then from among the many packages arose the children's father....like a Christmas present come to life! Needless to say, the children went crazy with excitement. We can imagine the joy which that family experienced that Christmas. The children had gathered around the tree, expecting presents, but they found their father instead. Their father gave himself to them for Christmas and it was a Christmas they would always remember, down to this day!

Herein is the meaning of Advent. God has come to us and He continues to come to us and bears our pain. Our God does not stand far off from us when we are in distress. He is there, standing beside us and in our moments of need, we are richly blessed by God's presence, by His "amazing grace".

He was only fifteen years old when he went off to work in order to earn more money for a college education and to find resources for his family. Fifteen year old Alexander McClaren's father walked him to work the first day and they had to pass through a deep ravine in the Scottish highlands where, according to legend, some evil spirits were lurking. When young Alex got to his job, he realized that at the end of the week, he would have to pass through that treacherous and frightening ravine in order to get back home. It troubled him all week long.

He worried all week long....from Monday through Saturday. As he started home late Saturday afternoon, he came to the edge of the ravine and stopped. He was afraid and he could not bring himself to do it. Then suddenly he heard a voice shouting out to him,

"Alex...it's your dad, and I've come to walk through the ravine with you. Alex, do you hear me? It's your dad."

I believe that that is what God says to each of us as we face a treacherous path, an uncertain future, as we confront problems in our home or with our health, and yes, even as we come to life's final moments. Listen for that voice. You'll hear it.

"I've come to walk through the ravine with you."

Word number one: forgiveness. And word number two: presence. God's presence.

They say that Beethoven was not known for his "social graces". Because of his deafness, he found conversation difficult and humiliating. There was the time he heard of the death of a friend's son. He hurried to the house, overcome with grief and had no words of comfort to offer, but seeing a piano in the room, he went over to it and for the next half hour he played the piano, pouring out his emotions, his feeling in the most moving and eloquent way. When he finished, he quietly left. His friend was to remark later on that no other visit had meant so much to him as Beethoven's presence that day.

Let me put a thought into your minds or ask a question of you. Which means the most in our lives - PRESENTS as in gifts, or PRESENCE as in someone being there for us...for you? When we are children, we think it is in the gifts that make Christmas, but as we grow up and become adults and live a bit longer and experience more of life, we come to see that having someone there who loves us and whom we can love is far more important. PRESENCE. God comes to us and comfort us in times of need. This is what Advent is about.

LOVE

And this brings us to our third word - and the word is love. This magnificent prophecy of Isaiah ends with these words,

"He tends His flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart, and He gently leads those that have young....."

A beautiful representation of the love of God. As we are so fond of saying, "This is the reason for the season". Forgiveness. Presence. Love. And this is why so many non-Christians around the world have come to love Christmas for after all, who can resist the outpouring of love that this Season inspires and elicits.

On December 21st, 1993, Fort Wayne, Indiana celebrated Amy Hagadorn Day. Amy, a third grader, has cerebral palsy...which affects her muscle control. She has difficulty walking and her speech is slurred. She walks with a limp and can't use her right hand. She wasn't asking Santa Claus for a doll-stroller for Christmas that year or for a new tea set or a fancy new toy. She was asking Santa for what most children take for granted: acceptance by her schoolmates. She got her wish when Fort Wayne declared December 21st as Amy Hagadorn Day.

The wish apparently began as a letter to a local radio station that was giving prizes to children for their Christmas "WISH LIST". Most were cute and many of them quite long. Amy's note, scribbled in pencil, in fat and awkward print, was different. "Dear Santa" it said...

"My name is Amy and I'm 9 years old. I have a problem at school. Can you help me, Santa? Kids laugh at me because of the way I walk and run and talk. I have cerebral palsy. I just want one day where no one laughs at me or makes fun of me." And it was signed, "Love, Amy".

Thousands of people were touched by Amy's letter...some of them as far away as Australia and England. Even the residents of a Kansas City Home for people with cerebral palsy asked to be her "pen pal". And even Rich Kotite, then coach of the Philadelphia Eagles and now Head Coach of the Jets, sent her a football signed by all the players. Eric Grimm, a ten year old of Stayton, Oregon, who also has cerebral palsy, sent Amy a book and wrote and told her how hard it was for him to be accepted. He said,

"I know what she feels like. I got teased all the time and what she asked for was what I had wanted and finally got."

His book, Walk With Me, has been published by the United Cerebral Palsy Foundation. I thought, too, of little five year old Sam Hirsh who also has cerebral palsy and how he found such a beautiful home in our Day School here for the last two years, coming in each day with a smile on his face. But back to Amy Hagadorn. On her special day, Amy got her chance when she read the note on Radio Station WJLT in a segment that included a speech from the Mayor of Fort Wayne and an appearance by Santa Claus who gave her a 3-foot Barbie. Afterward, the often-shy Amy said, "I think I had my Christmas today".

This is what Advent and Christmas are all about. As the winds of faith once again brush across the world and our city and caress the hearts of believers with the good news of God's coming to us, we think of Isaiah's word, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God". That word of comfort reminds us that,

God has forgiven us of our sins.
God has come to us in the person of
Jesus.
And love has entered our world.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence, O God, as we make our way through this holy season of Advent. Wrestle with us in the dark, shadowy corners of our restless hearts where fear and anxiety, guilt and selfishness may be lurking. Let the message of this season remind us that You have come to us...long ago...and continue to come to each of us even today. Confirm within us the feelings, the intentions, the decisions and the resolutions of this hour...of these days of Advent leading us to the manger of Bethlehem. In the spirit of the Christ Child, we pray. Amen.