

## The Faith to Accept

Sterling UMC  
December 4, 2011  
Isaiah 40:1-11

Isaiah 40 begins, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." That's a great theme for the second Sunday in Advent. Comfort. For you see though some people sing, "It's the most wonderful time of the year! With the kids jingle belling, and everyone telling you, "be of good cheer," not everyone is full of cheer at Christmas. For some the holidays come along and bring with them pain, sadness, and unhappy memories. You have faced things that you could not have imagined or desired. You find it hard to celebrate. It is difficult to be happy as you struggle to accept the things you would rather not have to face.

Think about Joseph. What it must have been like for him long ago, the unmet expectations he had and the wilderness in which he found himself. Joseph had worked up enough courage to ask Mary to be his wife. He fumbled his way through the proposal and she said yes. They ran with smiles on their faces and joy in their hearts to tell their families, "We're going to be married!" Joy, happiness and celebration filled their souls.

Can you remember a time when such joy filled your soul? Maybe it was a marriage proposal, landing your dream job or finding out you are going to be parents for the first time. We shared last week that the wedding plans were going smoothly until something unexpected and strange happened. Mary is with child – pregnant, and not by Joseph. Her story is bizarre and borders on unbelievable. How could it be? Joseph perhaps considers walking away or ignoring Mary. Imagine Joseph's internal struggle.

And yet through it all Joseph turned his mind to God, opening himself up to increased faith during an almost unbelievable situation. Although what he faced was not what he had imagined or desired, Joseph accepted what he couldn't change and followed God's path for his life. He had the faith to accept what he could not change. And God was there to comfort him and to see him through. His faith was rewarded.

My friend, here is God's word for your life right now. If you are in pain this Advent season, God is here to comfort you. Perhaps you are in grief over the loss of a loved one. Perhaps this was not the kind of year financially you had expected. It could be the economy. We live in a prosperous country, but not everyone shares equally in it, and that can be particularly painful this time of year. It's tough not to be able to do for our children all the things we would like to do. Of course, some people can't even put food on the table. Or perhaps you received a bad medical prognosis for yourself or someone in your family. Perhaps your marriage is coming apart. What an awful season to deal with family problems. Maybe you too are struggling to accept what you cannot change. Whatever your heartbreak this day, God wants to offer you His comfort. He wants to give you the faith to accept whatever it is and to see you through it.

But it even goes beyond that. This good news of advent also affects the way we look at the world and the people around us. Even when we venture into uncharted territories, we are challenged to accept the things we cannot change and move forward as best we can.

We, too, have been faced with moments in life when we have choices to make: reject or accept. The easy way out is to reject – to set someone or something aside. Imagine these scenarios:

- We arrive at a family function and see the one relative who struggles with addiction. We know the story – we've heard it a million times. They walk toward us. Do we walk away?

- You are on your way to the company party, and you're running a bit late. You are in a hurry. You see the homeless couple in the cold with their sign; your eyes catch their eyes. You see more than a homeless couple – what do you do?

- A new family comes to church – but this time they are different. In broken English, they tell you they are hungry, homeless and new to the community. You have skepticism. Are they there with their hands out trying to beat the system? We offer reasons why we can't help, but feel an inner tugging as we walk away.

Joseph accepted his challenge as an opportunity to grow in faith and love. Accepting others provides an opportunity for us to grow.

So the point is this: The message and the promise of advent gives us the faith to accept people and situations for what they are. Why?

Because Advent says, first of all, that God cares about a broken world. Isaiah was speaking to a broken nation. Much of the nation of Israel had been carried away into exile. They longed to return to their home land. And Isaiah assures them that God has not forgotten them nor forsaken them. Their suffering is almost over. God will build a vast highway over which they can travel through the wilderness from Babylon back to their home, the Promised Land. In the New Testament John the Baptist cries that soon God will build an even more important highway linking humanity and God. The message is the same. God cares about a broken world. God cares about broken people.

That's why we call the story of Jesus "Good News." God cares about a broken world. God cares about broken people. That's what Advent and Christmas are all about. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."

Secondly, Jesus came into our world to identify with the world's suffering. That's the whole point of the Advent season. Advent comes from the Latin. It means "to come." Jesus came into our world that he might walk in our shoes.

Here is what is so majestic about the coming of Christ. God came to us as a tiny baby

not as a grown man or woman, but as a tiny babe. Other religions have gods that come to earth, but only the Christian faith speaks of a God who emptied Himself completely and went through the entire human experience. God knows the challenges we face. God knows the pain of being human. The highway that God constructed between heaven and earth was a two-way road. God came down to us so that we might go up to Him. This is so important.

God has walked in your shoes. God knows your pain. This is the Gospel. This is the Good News. God cares about a broken world. Jesus came into our world to identify with the world's suffering.

And this brings us to the last thing to be said: The manger of Bethlehem is as much a part of Christian faith as the cross of Calvary. I love the way Isaiah puts it in verse nine: "You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!'"

Here is your God, my friend, a helpless babe in the manger of Bethlehem.  
Here is your God, though the world was dark, God sent the light of life to shine.  
Though the lowly were imprisoned, Jesus set them free!  
Though the blind wandered aimlessly, Christ gave them eyes to see.  
Though the lame had been rejected, through the Holy One they were made to leap and dance.  
Though the deaf were confined to the silence, the song of life unstopped their ears.  
Though the sorrowful grieve, God wipes away our tears.  
Though we were alone, in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God is with us.  
Though the human race rejects God, the Almighty embraces us.  
Though the world crucified Christ, God would not allow that to be the last word, and gave us the sure hope of the resurrection.

I don't know about shouting, like Isaiah prescribes, but it reminds me of the little Gospel spiritual, "Amen," in which the preacher tells the story of Jesus while the congregation sings, "Amen, Amen." This is who God is. In the words of Isaiah, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." Here is our God.

Now I don't know, but maybe for you this year it is a Blue Christmas. I don't know. But what I do know is this; in the midst of your Blue Christmas, it really is the most wonderful time of the year, not because we have to be cheery and happy and merry.

But because we don't. We can have heavy spirits and shattered dreams. Broken hearts and deep wounds. We can struggle to have the faith to accept those things we cannot change. And still God comes to be with us:

To comfort us.  
To redeem us.

To save us.  
To restore us.  
To empower us.  
To strengthen us.  
To grant us peace.  
To be raised for us.  
To offer us eternal life.

For Christ is born, Love has come; God is with us. That's what these elements remind us of. So as we come forward to this altar with thankful hearts, let us remember that God cares about a broken world. Jesus came into the world to identify with our suffering. The manger of Bethlehem is just as important to our faith as the cross of Calvary. Look in the manger of Bethlehem whatever your need may be. Here is your God. May He give you the faith to accept.