

“CHRISTMAS GIFTS (#2):THE GIFT OF COMFORT”

(Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Isaiah 40:1-5)

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[Prop Needed: Surprise Wrapped Christmas Gift Representing Comfort]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-7-08]

–I–

1. Advent Wreath Reading: Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
[Traditional Services:] Read Text: Isaiah 40:1-5 and Pray.
2. Today we’re continuing a sermon series called Christmas Gifts in which we’re talking about some of the great “gifts” that God our heavenly Father desires to give to each of us.

A–And we’re introducing each of these by me opening a surprise package containing something representative of that gift.

B–This week we’re talking about God’s gift of **COMFORT** for the rough times of our lives, so let’s see what’s inside... **[OPEN GIFT & briefly talk about how it relates to comfort...]**

C–Well, I don’t know about you, but when I think of “comfort,” I don’t usually think of the Christmas holidays, because it’s so stress-filled.

3. To help with this, back in 1963, Eddie Pola and George Wyle wrote a Christmas song which became so popular that we usually hear it at one point or another every holiday season.

A–The words go like this...

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year.

With the jingle bells belling and everyone telling us ‘be of good cheer!’

It’s the most wonderful time of the year.

It’s the hap- happiest season of all.

With those holiday greetings and warm, happy meetings when friends come to call. It’s the hap- happiest season of all.

There’ll be parties for hosting, marshmallows for toasting & caroling out in the snow.

There’ll be long, funny stories and tales of the glories of Christmases long, long ago.

It’s the most wonderful time of the year.

There’ll be much mistle-toeing and hearts will be glowing when loved ones are near. It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”

B–Beautiful words, aren’t they? And we find this same nostalgic, holiday sentiment mirrored in many of our cultural Christmas preparations. ¹

4. But are these words actually *true*? Is Christmas truly “*the most wonderful time of the year*”? Well, not to be a Scrooge, but I would argue that many times, it’s NOT!

A—For example, it’s hard to “be of good cheer” when you’ve just lost your job, or your marriage through divorce, or your spouse to death, or your money from a stock market crash, or perhaps because you’ve just lost hope itself.

1—Christmas is not always the “hap-happiest season of all” – in fact, the high stress causes more cases of depression and suicide than at any other time of year.

2—There’s not always “parties for toasting” and “long, funny stories” of Christmases “long, long ago” – because some our stories are so painful that we’d rather *forget*.

3—And not all of us have “glowing” hearts, because *our* closest “loved ones [are no longer] near.”

B—My point is that, far from being “the most *wonderful* time of the year,” Christmas often can be “the most *painful and difficult* time of the year”...

C—...Because in life, when we’re wrestling with loss of any kind (a death, a divorce, a job, a relationship, loss of health, our home, innocence, kids going to college, even a pet) – life is anything but happy and jolly and merry.

–II–

5. Well, the people of today’s scripture knew precisely what difficulty and loss were all about.

A—The time was the late 6th century BC, at a time shortly after a large part of the population of Judah and Jerusalem had been carted away in chains by the Babylonians to their home city of Babylon.

B—As a result, the Hebrew people had been stripped of their homes (in fact, of their very *homeland*), of their possessions, of their dignity, and many even of their very *lives*.

6. But right in the midst of this intense national and personal loss and despair, the prophet Isaiah offers incredible words of hope in Verses 1-5 of Chapter 40:

A— [NRSV] “*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term.... A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.*”

[MSG] “‘*Comfort, oh comfort my people’ says your God. Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem, but also make it very clear that she has served her sentence... Thunder in the desert! ‘Prepare for God’s arrival! Make the road straight and smooth, a highway fit for our God. Fill in the valleys, level off the hills, smooth out the ruts, clear out the rocks. Then God’s bright glory will shine, and everyone will see it.*”

B–In other words, he’s saying that in the midst of their current difficulty and hardship, to take comfort because a better day is coming – ...

- 1–...that God will make a way for the exiles to return home out of their captivity;
- 2–...that the currently rough, bumpy parts of life will be made smooth again, and that one day *everyone* will know that God is in control.

C–Now, in Hebrew, the word we translate as “comfort” (*naham*) has little to do with actually *removing* someone from hardship or difficulty, but instead merely refers to the receiving of strength to carry on *in the midst* of those.

–II–

7. And that’s really what the comfort of God at Christmas offers US, as well.

A–Very much like Isaiah’s promise of comfort to the Hebrew people in the midst of *their* captivity and loss in Babylon, on that first Christmas Jesus came both as promise and fulfillment, to give comfort to us through the difficult days/seasons of *our* lives, as well.

B–He came to remind us of the words of the old Jewish proverb... that “*God is closest to those whose hearts are broken.*”²

C–He came to show that even in the midst of the pain and hurt caused by different kinds of loss, with God there can come...

- ...hope from despair;
- ...consolation from affliction;
- ...peace from conflict;
- ...light from darkness;
- ...and God’s companionship and presence from our loneliness and sense of isolation.

8. So in our Advent worship, we’re *not* trying to “sugar-coat” the holidays with a superficial happiness to somehow make it all more palatable.

A–We’re not here to put on a mask and pretend that it’s “*the most wonderful time of the year*” when we know perfectly good and well that for many of us, it is *not*!

B–But we *are* here to be reminded that the message of Christmas is about the comfort which is available to anyone who walks with God – that even in the midst of difficulty and loss, we can experience the “Christmas Gift” of *Comfort* in our own lives.

9. For us to do this, I want to end our time together in a kind of unique way: ...

A–...As the music plays softly in the background, I invite you to come forward to the tables here – as individuals or as families – and take a taper & light a candle(s) in remembrance and in promise of the comfort and hope that offers you this day God for the loss(es) and burdens that you brought to this place here today.

1–Stay as long as you like in prayer and meditation, either here at the tables or back in your seats.

2–If you’d like to talk to someone who’ll be there to either listen and/or pray for you, then please step to the front left row of chairs, where someone from our church’s Prayer Ministry will be there for you.

3–There will be no closing hymn or benediction – when you are done you can exit the sanctuary in silence.

B–But when you leave, remember that you don’t leave alone – God walks with you to give you his “*Christmas Gift*” of *Comfort*, even in the midst of whatever losses and difficulties you face in life.

10. [PRAY]

11. [FAMILIES COME FORWARD TO LIGHT CANDLES as pianist plays SOFT, NON-FESTIVE CHRISTMAS MUSIC (minor keys)]

12. [CLOSING SONG]

ENDNOTES:

1. For example, we’re told that we’re supposed to “*deck the halls with boughs of holly...*” for “*tis the season to be jolly... fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!*” And retailers tells that it’s a season to be happy and joyful, to celebrate by shopping and *buying* Christmas presents for everyone in the world! After all, “*it’s the most wonderful time of the year.*”

2. Jewish Proverb, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry#1505.