

## **“The Spirit of Comfort”**

**Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor of Church of the Covenant, 5/24/20**

*John 14:25-27; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5*

As we explore the second part of a three part series on the Holy Spirit this morning, let us come with open hearts and minds. Last week we looked at “The Spirit of New Life.” Today’s topic is “The Spirit of Comfort.”

Growing up mostly with a single mother and very little means, our Christmases were often bare. My sister and I were lucky to have one good present each when Christmas rolled around. But one year our mother had outdone herself. She was so happy to have pulled off the miracle of miracles, and could hardly contain her excitement as we opened these larger, bulky gifts one Christmas morning at the beginning of our adolescent years. And her smile mixed with a bit of nervous excitement as we tore into the soft, plushy, awkward wrapping paper only confirmed that she had truly outdone herself. Her squirreling away money over many weeks, money she did not have, truly paid off by the surprise on our faces as the presents became clear to us. She had bought us bedspreads. And normally this wouldn’t excite a young person. But these were trendy, new and in fashion at the time. They were called, “comforters.” Mine was two shades of blue, royal navy offset with a soft sky tone; both had a sheen of elegance on them. I could hardly believe it was mine. I don’t think I’d had anything so nice before. My sister’s was equally stunning with a tope earth tone and then a lighter shade that had a tinge of pink in it. Both with a glittering shine. To touch them to your face or wrap your body in them made us feel like we were wrapped in what we imagined actual clouds to feel like, and mom’s grin ear to ear mirrored our own personal excitement at the great surprise. These comforters lived up to their name, night after night. We felt like a million bucks!

Though I had my physical “comforter” then, the spiritual *comforter* is on our minds today. The Holy Spirit personified as “comforter” is nothing new to the world, right? If there is anything about God that seems to transcend all traditions and hark from the deepest, most ancient recesses of human history, it’s that in our deepest, darkest hours of life, when we are brought to our knees with tragedy or desperation, we unabashedly cry out to God, our Creator, for help. As the psalmist so eloquently put it in Psalm 121:

*“I lift up my eyes to the mountains—  
where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.”*

Our need for God’s comfort is as ancient as humans themselves. Last week we discussed the importance of seeing God as spirit and then to worship or connect with God on the same level, a “spirit”-ual level. God wants us to connect with our Creator in spirit because God is spirit. And God is spirit right? We read in the opening passage of the creation story that God is spirit, so there is little doubt about this being God’s original, raw form. It is within this framework that we can begin exploring spirit as comforter. We read these words in John 14 when Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit:

*“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Paraklete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave*

*with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

The Greek word *Paraklete* literally means "to come alongside" so as to comfort another, to give them aide or help. That's why some translators replace *Paraklete* with "Helper," or "Counselor" or "Comforter." Then some have put the word "Advocate" in its place, wanting to illustrate the spirit more as a representative working on your behalf. But my focus will be on what I believe is the original intention of the passage, that of God's spirit comforting us, as seems to be clearly implied in the passage itself where Jesus is attempting to comfort his disciples, telling them to not "be troubled," and to instead be filled with "peace." Paul illustrates this well later in his second letter to the Corinthian church when he calls God the "God of comfort." There is little room for doubt that God desires to see us comforted. God desires mercy and grace, not chaos and upheaval. Right?

Jesus' titles as messiah included Emmanuel (God with us) and it also included "Prince of Peace." There is something aggressive about Jesus' peace, though. Not this passive peace that many of us describe simply drifting in and out of our consciousness only after meditation and prayer, but Jesus talked of ushering in the "kingdom of heaven." There is something about Jesus' peace that seems to reflect more than mere serenity. It reflects a power that comes from the Source, the Creator. Using more regal terminology, this would imply a "reign of peace" (Revelation 20:4). Can you imagine a life without turmoil, no more suffering, no more war? It is difficult to imagine, but not impossible to strive for, and perhaps comforting to rest the hope that in Christ's reign, in God's kingdom, it is necessary.

I am reading a wonderful book by the Quaker author Thomas Kelly called "*A Testament of Devotion*," where in his opening words he draws the reader into an internal journey of self-discovery while basking in God's presence. He says, "*Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself. Yielding to these persuasions, gladly committing ourselves in body and soul, utterly and completely, to the Light Within, is the beginning of true life. It is the dynamic center, a creative Life that presses to birth within us.*" This idea of God's kingdom (or presence) as our home is a relief to many of us. We want peace eternal, no more strife, no more unrest. And there are moments along life's journey where we are able to calm our hearts long enough to enjoy that peace, the silence within. These momentary interludes of tranquility are like glimpses of God's kingdom in action, but often inside of us, rather than outside of us, at least those are the terms we often use. But Kelly pushes us outward when he adds to his initial comment, "*It is Light Within which illuminates the face of God and casts new shadows and new glories upon the face of men. It is a seed stirring to life if we do not choke it. It is the Shekinah of the soul, the Presence in the midst. Here is the Slumbering Christ, stirring to be awakened, to become the soul we clothe in earthly form and action. And He is within us all.*" I love it when pacifistic Quakers become so action-oriented; they often seem best suited to credibly describe the Light within activating the heart of Christ which then must be lived out in society itself. The Apostle Paul in the earlier passage describing God as the God of comfort, also pivots from an inward focus to an outward focus when he says, "that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." In this way, God's spirit of comfort bringing us peace prompts us to do the same to others. Dare I say, we then become God's spirit of comfort active in the world around us? Remember Jesus' words: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." Let us actively bring peace and comfort to all of those around us! Though we cannot hug, we can be present—emotionally, spiritually, and engagingly. Be the new shiny comforters that people so desperately need in their lives. Such comfort can begin with us. Shalom