
Comfort, O Comfort, My People

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Advent 2 – Year B**

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” – Isaiah 40:1

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” Those were the words that the prophet Isaiah heard from the Lord, over 2500 years ago. Isaiah’s people, the people of Judah, had suffered much. They were anxious and hurt. They were in exile.

Isaiah heard the call to have pity, to console, his people.

And, here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, we hear those words from our God again. It’s the Second Sunday of Advent again. At the Cathedral of St. Philip, the Second Sunday of Advent is always the day of our annual parish meeting. Every year.

Every year, on this day, we try to review the year, we try to celebrate our identity and our community. But this year, of course, has been a year without equal.

We are trying to make it work, but it sure has been hard.

My sermon today is about this past year at the Cathedral; but it is also about how we, at the Cathedral, have been trying to comfort God’s people. Covid-19 and the coronavirus pandemic shut down our in-person services and gatherings, effective Sunday, March 15, almost nine months ago. This shutdown has caused us, has caused all of us, excruciating discomfort. And discomfort is too mild word, for some. People have become sick; people have died. People have lost jobs and income. People have realized social inequality. People have been forced to stay home, away from each other, away from community. People had turned frustrated and angry.

“Comfort, O comfort, my people,” says our God, in a season of DIS-comfort. In a way, those words have become mission words for the Cathedral Parish in this past year. We have been trying, over and over again, to comfort God’s people this year.

But it sure has been hard. Almost every week, we have faced a new challenge. Maybe it was another disappointment, another restriction, another illness. Maybe it was another occasion of social unrest or even violence. Maybe it was some national political anxiety. And, every day, it was some event in our own households, in our own lives, with people we love.

The year 2020, the year of the pandemic, has been an incredible discomfort. “Comfort, O comfort, my people,” says our God; and we have cried out in pain and desolation and mourning.

Here at the Cathedral, if anything has eased the pain and challenge of my ministry here, it has been you, so many of you faithful parishioners and members, you who have been joining in the comforting. Comforting God’s people is not the role of any one person of the Church; it is the role of all of us.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you for taking that comforting so seriously, thank for comforting generously. There is no way this morning that I can describe all the ways you have comforted each other, and me, during this pandemic season. But I sure want to try!

Here are some amazing examples of your generous comfort:

For instance, it is because you comfort generously, that, as a parish, we paid off critical medical debt of our neighbors in the middle of the pandemic! Yes, in the middle of this past summer, the Cathedral raised almost \$130,000 that went to pay off \$13 million of medical debt in the Peoplestown neighborhood of Atlanta.

For instance, you have remained committed to our music program, even when we cannot sing. That has certainly been one of the pandemic tragedies in our sacred community. Our beautiful Cathedral choir is working on community, and we cannot sing. It is a tragedy. I mourn. Each of us is singing individually, but we can't sing together. Yet, our choir has remained together, supporting and praying for each other. Thank you for being one of great "small groups" of the Cathedral.

For instance: Yes, our many, many small groups found new ways to meet, across the Cathedral. Bible studies, prayer groups, ministry groups, pastoral care groups, parish ministry committees, have continued to meet, via Zoom and video conference. Of course it isn't the same as in-person – we know that—but it is a way that some people in our parish remain together, and comfort each other. Generously. Thank you!

For instance, when we could not baptize new Christians in our Sunday services, we found a way to baptize in the cloister garden. We, as a parish, have baptized twenty new Christians since March!

For instance, we have continued weddings, and funerals, too, serving pastoral care in situations that are so incredibly awkward! People are still being married, and people are still dying in ways unrelated to Covid-19. Our pastoral care options have been limited and stressed, but we have made them work

For instance, in lieu of our daily Eucharists at the Cathedral, one of the clergy or lay leaders of the Cathedral offers a video midday meditation. We have been recording those every weekday since March. They have been excellent! Our staff has done Bible studies in all sorts of outdoor places, from Cathedral Towers to Canterbury Court, to the labyrinth, to the cloister garden.

For instance, we –you!—have adapted, adapted, adapted. "Comfort, comfort ye, my people."

For instance, at the Cathedral, when the pandemic struck, we were able, fortunately, to employ a fantastic staff and resources to develop Sunday online services. And those services have become beautiful and well-produced hallmarks across the country, ways for people to pray the Sunday Eucharist in community, to be edified as the Body of Christ. Thank you!

"Comfort, O comfort, my people." Sometimes when we speak the truth, in the service of comfort, that truth is hard. Here in the book of the prophet Isaiah, God says "Comfort my people," but look right afterwards. The prophet Isaiah asks, "What shall I say?" and God instructs Isaiah to say, "Tell them, all people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades."

Now, those words always surprise me. Because, Isaiah thought he was being asked to deliver comforting words! How could a reminder that all flesh is grass, be comforting?

"Be comforted! Everything is going to wither away!" Are those comfortable words?

Well, they should be seen as comfortable words, because they are true words, in the long run. Speaking comfort does not mean avoiding truth, even when it is hard. All of us, I imagine, would rather hear immediately comforting things. It's hard for any of us to think for the long term.

But that is the way God would have us think: All flesh is grass. Get it together! Look towards the future, look for the long term!

"Comfort, O comfort, my people." It is okay to acknowledge the truth, especially if it is painful. That is the way through pain and discomfort. This year has been painful, deeply disappointing, distressing, terribly discomfoting. Death and social anxiety are real. They can be devastating.

But Isaiah prophesies that the word of the Lord will stand forever. Christians, and this Cathedral of St. Philip, proclaim a word of grace and gospel that does stand forever.

What we offer here at the Cathedral, even in the midst of a pandemic, really has helped people; it really has helped the world. God feeds the flock, like a shepherd, through the amazing grace of you, the people of the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip. We are equipped only with what God provides: grace upon grace, and love upon love.

I realize that we have not always delivered those gospel values excellently in every circumstance. I apologize and am so sorry for these failures. The challenges and ordeals have sometimes defeated us – in the short term at least. But God’s word endures for the long term. God’s grace, God’s love, endures.

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem,... Lift it up, do not fear.” (Isaiah 40:9).

In our discomfort, in our anxiety, in our distress, our God will come. Our God is coming. We will call that God, “Emmanuel.” When Narnia was still under a curse, C.S. Lewis described it as a place where it is “Always winter, but never Christmas.” This pandemic has been like a cold winter for many of us. But in this cold winter, Christmas will come. Emmanuel. That name means “God with us.” Christmas will be here soon, God With Us.

Thank you, Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, for being with each other during this pandemic time. Thank you for being with the world, too. You –we!—are proclaiming comfort to each other and the world. You –we!—are proclaiming grace and love to each other and the world.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you, for comforting, o comforting, God’s people.

AMEN.