

## Comfort

First Reading: 2 Corinthians 1:1-5

Second Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort. Every product marketed, from pajamas to brake pads to furnaces to IRAs to La-Z-boys to running shoes claims to deliver it, but does the product live up to the promise? Your Comfort Keepers air and heating unit will deliver a range of preferred temperatures at designated periods throughout your week, but that doesn't address the bigger problem of different family members having different definitions of what constitutes a comfortable temperature. It's hot. It's cold. It's a heat pump so everybody's cold.

And who decides what clothing you may find to be comfortable? Tight - loose - baggy - fleece - khaki - jeans - sweats - insulated - breathable - fresh and new - old and worn. What is your comfort kit? Recent years have seen a renaissance of polyester, the much lampooned fake fabric that died a glorious death in the 70's. Your parents killed it with the leisure suit. I think my aunt had a different colored one for every day of the week. *It must be Thursday, Aunt Dorothy is yellow.* Breathable - not so much. Cool - not on your life ... whether you are talking either Fahrenheit or fashion.

Comfortable? Fugedaboutit. I hated wearing that stuff. Sure, it stretched

more than the natural fabrics and didn't wrinkle easily, but it scratched like a Brillo pad. Take it off at the end of the day, you look like a lobster with all the chafing. The back of your knees, the inner thigh, under your arms, around your collar — your skins burns as if you'd worked it over with 24-grit sandpaper.

I truly thought Uncle Morris had murdered polyester when he showed up at the reunion wearing that Carolina blue number with the popped cuffs, half-unbuttoned floral print shirt, white patent leather loafers, gold chain, and the combover that started at his ear. I was convinced we had finally put the polyester to rest. But archaeologists must have unearthed a vast warehouse full of it, or else there the Department of the Interior mandated a thinning of the polyester herd, because it's back and it's everywhere — repackaged, renamed, re-marketed as athleisure wear or performance fashion or tech fabric — but you take a look at your golf shirt's family tree and you are going to wind up back at the wedding of polyester and rayon.

The rave reviews promise comfort, but is it actually all that comfortable? Not to me, but maybe, all these decades later, I'm suffering

from a form of PTPD (Post Traumatic Polyester Disorder). I'm itching up here just thinking about it.

I'm a cotton guy, not wool (itchy), not linen (itchy), not even the chemical that renders your shirt non-iron (itchy). Are we sensing a theme here? I'm a cotton guy.

What about you? When you are desperate for comfort, in what do you wrap yourself? For me, it's old jeans, a hoodie (i.e, a **cotton** hoodie), and a certain pair of running shoes with more cushion than a canyon of marshmallows. But comfort is about a lot more than the clothes, isn't it? When you need comfort, in what do you wrap yourself? A down comforter? A mug or a stein of hot coffee around which you can wrap your hands as the heavenly aroma wraps itself around you? Perhaps, for you, it's the soundtrack that takes you to a place called peace — *(A couple of days ago, someone mentioned Miles Davis' Blue in Green. For my mom it was Rachmaninoff's 2nd Symphony. When my dad's body and mind were failing, he was lifted up and transported to a happy place when my son Seth offered him a private mini-concert with a guitar and a couple of Johnny Cash tunes).*

When you need comfort, in what do you wrap yourself? The voice of a treasured friend or mentor? A pint of Jeni's ice cream? If I had to take a guess, I'd say that tomorrow, Zach is going to wrap himself in a big ol' comfortable blanket of silence. He hears one note of *Greensleeves* and he might just light a torch making his keyboard a flaming candle. *(Take that! Jeanette Isabella)*

In a world where sorrows and stresses and fears multiply like peppermint chocolate at Christmas or *Peeps* at Easter, we yearn for comfort, for warmth, for home, for some hint that somebody cares, that God has not gone dark. There is mourning in Israel. There is suffering in Gaza. The blood-stained trenches of Ukraine's perpetual battlefield; the calcified anger and cruelty of America's culture wars; the fragility of Democracy's foundations; the frost covered family relationships; the obsolescence of contentment; the rusting adornments of success; the exhaustion of the caregiver; the superficiality of our contact lists; the challenges of aging; the fear of declining health. Isaiah wasn't lying — *The grass withers; the flower fades; surely the people are grass.*

The prophet Jeremiah spoke to an audience similar to Isaiah's, and also for far too many people today confronted with the encroaching sludge of despair. On behalf of all exiled from hope, Jeremiah laments — *“How lonely sits the city that once was full of people ... She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks ... she has no one to comfort her ... her friends have dealt treacherously with her ... For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my courage...”*

Jeremiah, like the Isaiah of our text today, was writing to a people in exile. Jeremiah expresses their laments. Isaiah interrupts their grief with a message of hope. *“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.”*

Isaiah, taken as a whole, represents a unique blend of voices from different points and places during the gradual, yet at times, precipitous collapse of Israel's place among the nations. The context of 1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah, comprised of chapters 1-39, is late 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE in northern Israel at a time when Assyria, its powerful neighbor, has invaded Israel, rendering

them a devastating defeat. The theme of 1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah is largely the judgment Israel has brought upon itself as a result of its indifference to the Law of God, the iniquity of its leaders, and the willingness of the people to place their trust and hope in powerless idols.

In contrast, the setting for 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah is the latter half of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE in southern Israel, i.e, Judah, and across the border in Babylon. Just as the northern kingdom earlier fell to Assyria, the southern kingdom has fallen to Nebuchadnezzar and Jerusalem lies in ruins, its people scattered, with many sent into a decades long exile in Babylon. Shock has turned to grief has turned to depression has turned to hopelessness, emotions summed up perfectly in the Psalmist's lament — "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept as we remembered Zion."

It is to this community that 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah is commissioned to bring a word of consolation and hope. I find the Revised Standard Version helpful here — *"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem ... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned ... 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. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

Disasters, catastrophes, and life-altering trauma make people numb, afraid, and hopeless. Suffering challenges a faith in religious structures and national promises and cultural traditions and institutions that had falsely advertised an orderly and secure world. It is as true today as it was in ancient Palestine. And so, the Lord commissions Isaiah to herald a trustworthy hope of restoration, rebuilding, reconciliation, and healing. Isaiah invites a fearful people to gather on a firm foundation, a foundation not dependent on a grand temple, a great army, a charismatic leader, a national identity, or a growth based portfolio, but a foundation built upon a Sovereign God and this God’s unfailing word. *“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.”* I could swear I’ve heard that someplace before.

People are flawed and fungible. Promises are capricious. Institutions tend toward sclerosis. Ideologies are evanescent. Religions prioritize survival

over faithfulness and service. Politics, even in the best of times, are a train wreck. *“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.”*

The exiles have long experienced the futility of human striving. Cynicism, pessimism, and nihilism have never hesitated to fill in the cracks and fissures of our ordered worlds. What is left to challenge our fatalism? Even ice cream melts, treasured comforters wear out, and performance fabrics wear thin, but they still itch. Where is our comfort amidst the ruins of so much we have trusted? *“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.”*

That’s all well and good, the cynic asserts, but how is a word going to get me from today to tomorrow? *“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”* A Declaration of Faith states, “Jesus was what we should be. He served his Father with complete trust and unwavering obedience. He loved all kinds of people and accepted their love. In constant dependence upon the Holy Spirit, Jesus allowed no temptation or threat to keep him



from loving God with his whole being and his neighbor as himself. We recognize in Jesus what God created us to be.” (*A Declaration of Faith*, PCUS)

That is how we get from today to tomorrow, and certainly not through our effort alone. Again, from *A Declaration of Faith*, “We are certain that Jesus lives. He lives as God with us, touching all of human life with the presence of God. He lives as one of us with God. Because he shares our humanity and has bound us to himself in love, we have an advocate in the innermost life of God.”

Isaiah points the exiles and us to this same truth — *“He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”*

God is not an idea. God is God, revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ, desirous of relationship, a true companion and guide for our journey. As Jesus would say, *“If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?”* That is our God. As the Apostle Paul put it, *“the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation*

*with which we ourselves are consoled by God.*” That is our hope, even amidst the ruins of a tumbledown world. As CS Lewis so eloquently portrayed it, “Everything you are was making my heart into a bridge by which I might get back from exile.” (CS Lewis, *As the Ruin Falls*)

This week I received a text from a dear childhood friend with whom I’ve seldom done a good job of keeping up. It was a simple random message. It said, “Hi Matt. Do you remember seeing the movie *Jeremiah Johnson* at the theater in Louisiana? Starred Robert Redford. I’m watching it now.” I responded: “Absolutely. Lots of snow as I remember.” My friend typed back: “Definitely lots of snow. It’s on some antenna tv channel. Rang a bell with me that we had seen it. I don’t think I’ve ever seen it since the theater.”

The exchange really was not about the movie. With apologies to Redford and the movie’s fans, it didn’t make much of an impression on me apart from the cold and the snow. The exchange was certainly not about the dilapidated theater in our little town, where many of the seats were broken and the sticky floor threatened to keep your shoes when you left. The exchange was about a friendship, about being remembered. And there is such comfort in that. To know that we are known.

In a similar way, many of the delightful Advent devotionals you have written through the years hinge on the comfort food of the holidays — remembrances of baking bread with a parent or grandparent, decorating cookies, feasting on a favored side dish. However, the point is not the bread, the cookies, or the Mac and cheese. No, the point is the relationships those treats bring to mind. A parent or grandparent’s attention to the details of how to make a day special or memorable for you. The memory brings to mind a time when you knew you were a part of something, included, connected and loved. And oh what comfort that offers.

*“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God ... He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” Amen.*