

## Sermon – December 10, 2023

### “The Comforting God”

**Text: Isaiah 40: 1-11**

**Prayer:** The Spirit listened as I uttered my mind. The Spirit said not a word as I pleaded and pined. And then the Spirit spoke in the language of conviction Saying, "Comfort isn't comfort in the absence of affliction." Amen.

Today marks the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations on December 10, 1948. In its preamble and in Article 1, the Declaration proclaims the inherent rights of all human beings. It declares that "disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of humankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people... All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." The document was created by human hearts and minds with human hopes and true intent that a just world is possible. It recognizes the inherent value, worth and dignity of all people that comes with it accountability and responsibility. We have the right to express our voice responsibly – the right to a vote, the right of conscience, the right to exercise our religious or non-religious freedom and most of all, the right to live. The declaration of human rights demands that none of the religions be destructive to others. In the hands of any extremist, religious fanaticism can be a deadly and dangerous weapon.

A preacher once said that the Declaration of Human Rights...*creates the possibility of a global common -- where we can be enriched by our diversity and still have a common law that prevents any belief from being destructive of life and freedom. It is our greatest insurance against nightmares like the Holocaust or even the terrible violence and war in Ukraine, or Russia, or Gaza, or Israel, or countless other places. Where once we had no language to address the cruelties of the world, we now have a document to guide us. Imperfect. Yes. And, more than anything, just as it required the hard work of dedicated people to draft it -- it will take generation after generation of dedicated requires to make it live into the future.*

The violation of human rights is very present in the Bible, including the book of Isaiah. Chapter 40 captures the atrocities and human rights violations perpetrated by foreign invaders

when the Israelites were exiled in Babylon. The defeated people were taken as prisoners and slaves, most of them from affluent families, the intellectuals and the nobles, and they carried them off to a foreign land. Their homeland has been taken over by the colonizers and their temple has been destroyed. Isaiah 40 begins with these powerful words: “Comfort, O comfort my people”. To comfort means “to soothe, console, or reassure.” The Hebrew verb *nachamu* is translated as “comfort”, which literally means, “to cause to breathe easy again – a sigh of relief.” In other words, the writer portrays God speaking to the exiled people who were about to come home with these words of assurance: “You can breathe easy again.”

Perhaps some of you feels like you are in exile right now and what you need most of all is... comfort. A little girl came home from a neighbor's house where her best friend had died. "Why did you go?" questioned her father. "To comfort her mother," said the child. "What did you do to comfort her?" "I climbed into her lap, gave her a big hug and cried with her." The mother, I'm sure, breathe easy again by the little girl's gesture of comfort.

The reality is that when people suffer and need comfort but receive none, they often begin to feel a deep sense of isolation and abandonment, and then resort to other things that may harm them instead of comforting them. Like the ancient Hebrew people, from time to time, we long to hear words of comfort. We want someone to console us, embrace us, heal us, and take us home. Imagine the darkest places of your life; the fear, the anger, the pain, the hurt. Wondering when, or whether, it will end. You carry guilt and regret like a worn-out suitcase wherever you go. The days are filled with “should haves” and the nights with “if only.” Over and over, you see your life replayed to the point that you can see no future - only moments of exile, of alienation, of wilderness.

At the lectionary group this past Tuesday, I asked, what does comfort look like to you? Several answers were shared: a hug, being present to the other, comfort food, a warm blanket and a home where you can find rest and comfort at the end of the day. Homelessness certainly is an issue of concern not only here in Ottawa but in many parts of Canada and in the world. The idea of being homeless never crosses our minds, until we see that person living in a cardboard box, or that family living in a trailer, or those who sleep under an overpass or outside a building. In a report posted by the Ottawa Mission, Ottawa City Council declared a homelessness emergency in 2020. While the number of people living in shelters declined in

2020 and 2021, it rose again in 2022 and remains higher than it was 10 years ago - certainly a public health emergency. The economic recession makes it impossible for many to afford to pay monthly rent. Some resorted to living in their own vehicles, under the bridge or in makeshift tents. If you drive through the low-income areas of our community, the lack of affordable housing becomes apparent.

What can we do as a faith community to help and offer comfort to the homeless? At the April 19, 2023, meeting, with a recommendation put forward by Bob Ferguson, the Church Board was asked to consider the possibility of using the church property for affordable housing and related uses. A congregational survey took place in late spring which garnered a positive result in establishing a team to study the feasibility of BCUC lands for affordable housing. In order to raise awareness about affordable housing, the study team, with the support of BCUC Men's Club, invited Ward Councillor Laine Johnson in September, who came to speak on the topic. The study team continues to meet on Zoom and hopefully will come forward with a more concrete recommendation next year. I know too well that homelessness is a big issue, and we cannot solve it alone. We need partners – faith communities, civic groups, corporations, governments, and individuals. But I also know too well that many of us here at BCUC are big supporters of programs that respond to the issue of homelessness - programs like the Multi-Faith Housing Initiative, the Veterans' House, women's shelters, the Mission, Shepherds of Good Hope, Operation Go Home and Habitat for Humanity, to name a few. The possibilities for help are endless.

*“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God”.* These words need to be heard not only by those who are homeless but also by those who face death and life-threatening illnesses. Or those who suffer because of broken relationships; those who lost their jobs, those who face economic poverty, or those who experienced great financial loss. These words must address those who lost everything as a result of war or the greed of political leaders. These words need to be heard by children and teenagers who are intimidated, bullied, or rejected by their peers, those who have been discriminated against or, those abandoned by family. The victims of abuse badly need to hear these words. Women and children who suffer behind closed doors because of physical, sexual and emotional abuse! You need to hear these words of comfort if you carry the heavy burden of self-blame or guilt. If you are pressed down by stress, hopelessness, sadness,

loneliness and heartache, you need to be comforted. But these words of comfort mean nothing unless they are turned into action. Only when we do acts of comfort that true peace is attained.

Advent is an intentional time during which we prepare the way for a different, radical reality to take hold in our lives. The prophet Isaiah declares, prepare the way! Prepare the way for a new life to come into your life. Make way for something new by letting go of irrelevant matters. Make way for new hopes by letting go of old disappointments. Make way for new joys by letting go of old fears. When you are able to name the places of exile and wilderness in your life, you will also name the opportunities for peace and comfort. Peace happens when respect for human rights and words of comfort meet. Advent is a perfect time to live in this calling - a time for giving voice to the possibilities opening in the here and now. And we continue to work to offer comfort and peace as we wait. Amen.

**Sources:**

BCUC lectionary Group, [rickmorley.com](http://rickmorley.com), Bruce Epperley, [patheos.org](http://patheos.org), Michael K. Marsh, [interruptingthesilence.com](http://interruptingthesilence.com), Tim Suttle, [patheos.com](http://patheos.com).