

## Comfort, Comfort

December 10, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Isaiah 40: 1-11, Mark 1: 1-8*

*Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in*

—Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”

In a small, beige, dimly lit room in a back corner of a hospital emergency room, we find my mother propped up in bed, dressed in blue paper pajamas. She is calmer than she was last night – whatever they gave her has helped. My father almost cries with relief. He tells her his name, in case she's not sure, and takes her soft hands in his, looking into her eyes. They have been married for 65 years.

For the next 5 days, we wait for psych support that never comes. There are few providers for the elderly in the American mental health care system, and no beds to be found. Twice a day my father and I make the drive down Rt. 128 to sit with my mother in her dim beige room, bringing a home-made meal, or a muffin from the cafeteria of the residence my parents recently moved into. The immensity of the cross-country move was more than my mother's aging brain could process, and so, just a couple of weeks after the big change, we have landed in this strange in-between place, just waiting... keeping tender vigil in the wilderness. We are lost, we are sad, but we are together.

Before I say anything else, I want to reassure you all that things did get better! I'm not sharing this story in order to pass on the trauma, but because I've been thinking about the ways love comes into the world. About tenderness in the eyes of a 92-year-old man, who, if you were casually introduced to him, you would think was made mostly of intellect and strong opinions, but who now uses his very gentlest voice to speak to his dear beloved, endlessly patient as her dementia progresses.

I want to talk about how the light gets in.

The light we need to see each other by. The light we need to navigate the world, with its sharp corners and hard edges. The light we need to shine on the path as we walk it, to keep each other from falling. The light of God's boundless kindness and mercy.

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...*

I felt that kindness so viscerally, in those hard days of August. Love was there with us all the time, keeping vigil with my father and me, helping us hold the trauma and worry and sadness.

It found us in that hospital room. It found me at coffee hour on Sundays, when people in our community asked me how things were going and then listened with complete attention as I poured out all that I was experiencing and feeling. It was there the day we wheeled my mom outside into the sunlight and got her into the car to go home. And I know, I know it will be there when things get hard again, as of course they will.

*Comfort, comfort my people.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem—*

that city buffeted by empires, laid waste by invaders, its priests and leaders taken away into exile.

How can there be comfort for a people who have lost so much?

Yet it is often in those places of human sadness and desolation that God seems to find us, when we have reached the outer limits of our own powers.

Speak tenderly, God says, and say that I am making a way in the desert, just as I once made a way in the desert for Moses and my people Israel.

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom.*

There will be a new beginning, God says. But it won't come from kings or armies or politics or priests. The new beginning will come from tenderness

– that tiny flame God breathes to life in our flawed and vulnerable human hearts, through the cracks that open in our defenses when things fall apart.

At least, that's how it's been for me. It's been during the hardest times in my life that I've felt my heart soften, found my gaze turning outward to other hurting people as if seeing them for the first time, and found myself wanting to offer comfort and grace – because now I know what it's like! For me it's been in that impulse of mercy, flowing from the inside out, that healing has come.

How like God to find a way to transform inward hurt into compassion – to beat swords into plowshares.

The work of healing, the work of repair, the work of justice – they have to start somewhere. And I've come to believe that the starting place is tenderness. Without it, whatever we do is just going to inflict more harm.

I know that in my soul, and yet I have to admit that in these days when it feels as if the world has lost its collective balance and gone careening off the rails, I find myself wishing for something more forceful, more commanding – more top-down and not so much from the inside out. I am longing for thunder from on high!

But I haven't ever experienced God that way, and on some level, I think I know it's not what we need. Solutions won't save us. We need redemption. We need the light of God to find its way into our hearts and soften them.

And so, our tradition tells how in a small village at the edge of yet another empire, in a simple home, by the light of a flickering oil lamp, a baby slid into the calamitous world wet and wailing, into arms that reached to clasp him and swaddle him and rock him. In him, we Christians say, God has come to love the world face to face: has come in helplessness, needing to be held and fed and bathed and changed. The one who is mercy has placed himself at our mercy. She has come to heal the world from the inside out. From the inner womb of Mary, from the inner life of all of us who are drawn into her Child's tender circle, God reaches out to the world in love to offer grace and mercy and peace.

No retribution. No winners. No victory march. Just mercy.

That's how the light gets in. Through our flawed and human hearts.  
Through the cracks in our defenses.

Patiently, persistently, God comes knocking, humbly asking to come in and engage our energies and desires, our hopes and imagination, our yearning and our seeking –

human as we are, limited as we are. And not just in spite of our frailties and struggles, but actually by means of those weaknesses. "Forget your perfect offering." There's no such thing. There is only imperfect us, and the light that shines through us from God, out into the world.

*All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

I will always remember my father, that proud, often fierce man, sitting with my mother in her small dim hospital room, so humanly undefended. His Harvard medical degree, his 60 years as a respected hospital specialist, the bank account that had always been there to meet life's demands—none of it made any difference in that beige wilderness. For the ER personnel, my parents were just another elderly couple – and there's no cure for old age. They were mostly left alone.

But love stayed.

And in these days of war and division and carbon recklessness and political polarization and so much that feels calamitous and overwhelming, that gives me great comfort. I know that I too have love to give, and that by God's power and grace, that love will go on being shared. I trust God to know what to do with it.

And so, my prayer for you today, beloved friends, is that God may come to you in your humanness and need. May the gentleness of God find a place in your heart and give you peace. And may the light of God's love shine through you as you make your way. Amen.