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Preaching God's Unfathomable Comfort

God comforts your hearers through your sermons.

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Filters: Free

Topics: Challenges; Comfort; Lament; Pastoral concerns; Relevance; Suffering; Tough topics

We mostly preach sermons of comfort at funerals, dabbing at the tears with the Scripture's promises of heaven for the believer and help for the sorrowing. We preach Comfort (capital C) after great distress in our country or community. But other than that we preachers do not usually set out to preach comfort to our people. It seldom seems to be the need of the hour.

Yet shepherds know, when we think about it, that our people often live with undercurrents of fear, shame, or sorrow. Among our flock on any given Sunday are those worried about their unworthiness or waywardness. And there is in all believers a restless homesickness whether they think about it or not. In your flock there is one whose aching body has left her soul weary. There is a couple whose children walk a dreadful path. A brother whose anger is a dark, cancerous secret. And there, one whose depression seems to isolate him even from God. Ah yes, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

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We may preach comfort more than we realize because, properly preached, there is comfort in every Scripture text we deliver to God's people. Grace is always comforting. Even God's heavy hand is a comfort when we remember that "the Lord disciplines those he loves." Comfort from the Bible has several voices and themes.

The Big Book of comfort

The Bible has a "Book of Comfort"—of Consolation—embedded in Isaiah 40-66. It begins, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for ... " (40:1-2). God offers no greater comfort than forgiven sin. For 26 chapters Isaiah lays out the riches of God's comfort to a beleaguered, guilty, and exiled people. God promises them that the wicked will be held accountable. He gives four hope-full Songs of his coming Servant. He tells them the wonders of the year of the Lord's favor when the poor will hear good news and prisoners will be released, and when God's frail people will be called "oaks of righteousness."

I sat with a young woman who had been coming to our church, Jewish as it happens. She had such thoughtful questions, especially puzzling over the claims of Jesus' deity. In the course of our conversation I took her to Isaiah 53. She was moved—*comforted*—by God's promise of the Messiah who takes up our iniquities so that we might be saved.

We often preach texts rich in salvation truths because our redemption is indeed a many-splendored thing. But preachers—expositors especially—are prone to getting caught up explaining words and details, forgetting that these passages are, first and foremost, words of *comfort*. The rich theology of Romans or Ephesians or Hebrews is meant to fortify the saints behind the bulwarks of our salvation and to arm them with weapons divinely suited for the unseen battles.

Preachers need to preach the treasures of salvation with a songwriter's sensibilities: "Before the throne of God above I have a strong and perfect plea ...", "Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, 'Come home.'" "And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Savior's blood?" Sermons that explore salvation should sing with the blood-washed comfort of Christ.

A mother's touch

The word *comfort* surely brings to mind a mother wiping away tears and whispering, "There, there, it'll be alright." So also, God invites his beloved sons and daughters to the comfort of his motherly care for them. In his "Book of Comfort" he tells his people that a mother could sooner forget the baby at her breast than God could forget them (49:15). God says, "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you" (66:3).

The New Testament's most common word for comfort carries the idea of God's company—*parakaleo*, "called to the side of." God's comfort arises from his tender-hearted company, his fellowship, with us through his Spirit, the Comforter, whom Jesus promised. Christ's Great Commission promises that we are never alone; that Jesus is "with you always."

More than 120 times the Bible tells someone in God's care not to be afraid. "There, there," the preacher echoes, "there's nothing to fear. God is with us." But I think that if we're to be convincing, our sermons need to articulate what our fears feel like so God's people know he means *their* fears, *their* night terrors.

Christians can cuddle up safe and secure in preaching that invites them to rest in God's nearness.

Sharing in Christ's suffering

God's comfort comes in fellowship of another sort. In 2 Corinthians Paul recalls several of the crushing burdens in his ministry. He was "hard pressed on every side ... perplexed ... persecuted ... struck down." "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus," he said. He tells of the thorn God would not remove and how at one point he had despaired even of life. All that follows his opening words, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort." Then he opens our eyes to the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings.

Paul uses the word *comfort*, in one form or another nine times in five verses, all by way of introduction to this account of his toughest ministry season. The comfort is the unique companionship with Jesus that believers have when we bear suffering by trusting obedience, just as Jesus himself did. His words, whether written or spoken, came with special comforting force because of his fellowship with Jesus in suffering.

Preachers have no greater challenge in speaking to God's people than helping them trust and obey God in their troubles. It is one of the great themes of Scripture. Recently I preached through Hebrews and there it was: do not forsake the Lord when you suffer because the reward is worth the hardship. It is there in the life of Abraham and all who follow after him. It is the urgent plea of the prophets. It is the point of Revelation. Persevere. God is with you in this. Your faith is not in vain. When Christians persevere in their faith, trusting and obeying the Lord, they experience the comfort of Christ's presence. Preachers tell them it is so, again and again.

Take the long view

No catalog of Christian comfort is complete without hope. Abraham's life really began when God said, "Go from your country ... to the land I will show you," and there is not a soul whom God has saved to whom he has not said the same thing. When life becomes a wilderness there is no comfort quite like knowing about "the land I will show you." And that is why people need preachers with a long view.

Our certain hope that Jesus is coming again, that he will set all things right, and that we will live forever with him is life-saving comfort. I may be wrong about this, but my sense is that younger preachers in younger congregations seldom talk about heaven. I asked some seminary students what they thought about heaven. One replied candidly, "I don't think much about heaven. I don't think much about mortality." Meaning, I guess, that unless mortality starts to take your breath away, thoughts of heaven can wait like the defibrillator we have stored in a church cabinet.

The hope of heaven, of course, is not just comfort for the elderly. It is the reason Christians persevere. Christians

who don't think about our home easily fall by the wayside.

Many passages of Scripture have signposts pointing toward heaven. I do my level best to take every opportunity Scripture gives me to make God's people homesick. When the going gets rough they must know the comfort of our hope of heaven. They must know that "it will be worth it all when we see Jesus." Like Paul said, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." There is, therefore, something pitiful about a church whose pastor seldom preaches on our hope of eternal life.

Reframed by the Word

My hobby is matting and framing pictures. I've learned that the way a picture is framed changes dramatically what you see. Can you imagine one of those famous Ansel Adams black-and-white prints from Yosemite National Park? You almost always see those matted in white with a thin black frame so that your eye is drawn to the picture. But imagine it was matted in black. How different, how uninviting that picture would be.

Preaching reframes life so Christians see it in light of God's truth.

Remember when Elijah asked God to open his servant's eyes and the servant saw, not the army threatening them but the "hills full of horses and chariots of fire"? Now *that* is reframing! Joseph reframed his brothers' evil intentions so that they might see God's good intentions. Jesus reframed a man's years of blindness with the glory of God's well-timed healing. The terrible suffering of God's people is reframed in the promise of resurrection and vindication. The arrogant reign of Satan is reframed when we read of the day coming when "the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of the Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever."

Preachers have the delight of reframing life with the Word of God. And that is comfort preaching. Life reframed by the Word is the special artistic privilege of the preacher.

The wonder of preaching comfort

One of the wonders of preaching is that you never really know all the ways God comforts people through your sermons. Whenever the Bible is preached and God's grace is extolled in any of its manifold forms God comes alongside people and draws them near. You're up there, preaching your heart out, and unbeknownst to you fears are quieted. Shame is washed white. Roiled emotions are calmed. Worldliness is offset with a longing to be home with the Lord. And you just never know how God will do it.

In May I preached on Psalm 87. I had been stirred by the phrase, applied even to people from among Israel's enemies, "This one was born in Zion." It was a sermon remembering our true home. When it was over I sang a benediction, as I often do. I sang Michael Card's words from the heart of God, "In this fearful, fallen world, I will be your home," and "From this fearful, fallen world I will *bring* you home."

I did not know that Susan and Wayne were worried about their kids' home, far away in Fort McMurray, Alberta. A fiery inferno sweeping across the land had jumped the wide river there and started burning the city. Their son's little family was, providentially, away from the city that weekend. Relatives had retrieved a few things from their home and fled the city, flames on both sides of their car as they fled with thousands of others.

Susan wrote me, "Sunday, May 8, I came to Village Church, my heart heavy, thinking of my kids. No evacuees knew if they had a house to go back to, or, even if they had a house, whether it would be inhabitable. So much water and flame retardant had been dumped on the neighborhoods that had been burning, that houses possibly had flooding or other water damage. Nathan and Angela knew they could not return to Ft Mac for quite a while, but did not know where they would end up or for how long. That is when you preached and sang Michael Card's song about God being our home. It was a tremendous reminder that God was there taking care of my kids, and that ultimately they would be home with him. In spite of the insecurities of life here, my kids could be secure with God whether they had a roof over their heads or not. WOW! What a gift to my heart!" (A few days later they learned their house was spared, the flames having come within a few hundred feet.)

See what I mean about sermons (and songs) carrying comfort we cannot imagine? I think God does that every single time a sermon from Scripture is preached to the people of God.

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