

Comfort

Sermon 189 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 9, 2023

Psalm 145

Close your eyes and think about your most comfortable places. What do they look like? Smell like? Sound like? Taste like? Feel like? For me, comfort is sitting in a well-worn lazy-boy recliner. Comfort is the warm, bread-y, broth-y smell of my mom's Thanksgiving dressing - or maybe it's her chicken soup. Comfort is my dad's voice on the other end of the line saying, "Ok, that's no big deal, we can figure that out, don't worry, we'll take care of it." Comfort is the pillow that supports my head after a long and taxing day. Comfort is knowing where my child is, that she is safe, that she is whole. Comfort is the feeling of being wrapped in my husband's arms after returning from a week on the road. Comfort is familiar, reliable, and yet somehow never the least bit boring.

Perhaps because comfort reminds us of the stories that hold us, nurture us, the stories in which we belong, the stories that remind us that we are loved... the stories that remind us that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves.

I used to think that comfort was something only for the young. Comfort was what newborns cried out for in the middle of the night. Comfort was like a bandaid for a skinned knee - there to soothe and distract from the fresh sting of pain or injury. But the older I get the more I see that comfort is something we all long for. Comfort is that illusive place of security when the shocking news comes, when the financial plan isn't working out, when loved ones die, when everything once certain seems to be coming undone.

Maybe in these uncertain times, comfort is the healing balm that we need, we want, we search for.

When we are younger - in many cases - comfort is right around the corner. Awakened by a nightmare, children call for a parent who comes rushing into their bedroom. But as we grow older we have to find other ways to tend to the fears that awaken us in the darkness of night.

There are plenty of things that claim to provide the comfort for which we are searching. Usually, something money can buy: a nicer car, a bigger house, more wiggle room in our budgets. But sometimes there are other things like popularity, social status, or professional achievement. If we could just buy this, have that, or earn our way into one group or another - surely the sting of our pain wouldn't hurt so bad. (At least that's what we tell ourselves).

Most of the time we don't even have to go looking for these creature comforts; they find us all on their own because we are immersed in the culture that they have created.

James K. A. Smith calls these our secular liturgies, the rhythms of life that engage us as we engage in them. These are the regular things like work and play, the usual interactions and transactions that fill up our days, and we have come to believe that if we do them well if we give it our best go - comfort is sure to follow. These things we do, Smith says, do something to us as well. These secular liturgies shape us, they teach us, they make us into the kinds of people we are and they train us to keep on coming back time and time again - ready to give a little bit of ourselves in exchange for the things that promise some sort of "the good life".

But here's the thing. These secular liturgies provide cultural comforts that are finite and their power is quickly exhausted as life marches on. If we ever want to free ourselves from their relentless pace, we will have to find another, more eternal source to ease our pain.

Lucky for us, there is another source.

For thousands of years, people have turned to God for help in times of distress. And God has been a source of comfort. All of scripture tells the story! (Remember all the many ways God is present with God's people?!)

And while we would all certainly love for God's comforting presence to be AS tangible and real to us as the burning bush through which God spoke to Moses as the pillar of cloud or fire that led the Hebrew people as the water Jesus gave to the woman at the Samaritan well or the wine he conjured up at the wedding in Cana, more often the presence of God comes in the seemingly-less-miraculous testimony of the psalms.

One of my professors used to say that if most of the Bible is made up of God's words to humankind, then the Psalms are humanity's words back to God. The Psalms are our words back to God. Through these words, these human words uttered to God in prayer, in song, and in praise, we find a timeless and inexhaustible source of comfort. Through these words, our voices join the ancient chorus of others who have been where we are - and their words can give us the words to pray when we cannot find the words ourselves.

Many of you know this already. In fact, you often remind me of this important truth. When we visit with one another during times of grief and loss, so often you quote the words of Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....
He leadeth me beside still waters,
He restores my soul...
Yay, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

Sometimes, when we feel lost and when we are beginning to wonder if God is still with us. We remember God's presence in our lives through the words of Psalm 139:

Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You discern my thoughts from far away.
...even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely...
You hem me in behind and before,
And lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is so high that I cannot attain it...
...
Where can I go from your spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend into heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

Embarrassing as it is to confess, even as your preacher, your pastor, someone who studies the words of scripture daily... sometimes I forget how much comfort there is in sharing these words with one another. And then I remember visiting with Alice Dickens, who, in the early months of the pandemic and in the immediate aftermath of her husband's death, told me that she was sad, but doing ok. (and I believed her!) She was OK because she was finding comfort in scripture and spending her days memorizing the Psalms.

She went on to quote line after line after line; and without even knowing it, she was comforting me as I worried if the church would ever have a place or a purpose in the post-COVID world. ...

It is the memory of her, the sound of her voice and her absolute assurance that the words of scripture would comfort her even in her darkest night... it was her faith-that comforted me in a time of great fear and worry.

Alice passed away early this year and as her family gathered for the funeral they told stories about her life. As the stories carried on, I began to notice that a common theme ran through them all: Alice's whole life was hemmed in by scripture. The reading, study, and memorization that she told me about after Mel died was not a new thing at all, it was not a quick fix or a distraction from a moment of crisis, rather, this was her daily liturgy, her rhythm of life, her chosen and intentional way of being and in it, she found her eternal source of comfort.

Alice had long ago traded the secular liturgies - those claiming to CALM all worry and fear - for an eternal source of wisdom, truth, and comfort. Through the reading and reciting of scripture, Alice joined her voice with a chorus of ancestors praising God in every situation:

Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name for ever and ever.

...

For the Lord is near to all who call on him...
he hears their cry... and watches over all who love him...
(Psalm 145)

And as she read, recited, and remembered these words, Alice found comfort in the storied poetry of the psalmist.

One generation shall laud your works to another, (also Psalm 145)

Alice did this for me. She reminded me that though the storms of life may rage, God is not silent, God is not distant, God is right here, still speaking comfort in the words of scripture.

So where do you find comfort? Your family? Your friends? Your job? Your social media feeds? Where do you go in your darkest nights when you are searching for love and affirmation? For assurance that everything is going to be ok? For a reminder that your life has meaning and purpose? For the promise that you are part of something bigger than yourself?

Maybe you have come here today looking for just these things...

Friends, I cannot calm the storms that rage in your lives... but God can. And I can add my voice to the generations of witnesses who have proclaimed God's goodness in every circumstance.

And I know - because of Alice and countless others who have comforted me in the same way - that if we are faithful and if we allow the words of scripture to echo through our lives on the good days and the bad - we will find comfort. And we might even comfort others around us.

So close your eyes, clear your mind of every distraction, and allow the words of the psalm to hold you like a well-worn lazy-boy recliner.

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

All your works shall give thanks to you, O lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,
...
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

The Lord is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds. (repeat)

The Lord upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down. (repeat)

The Lord is near to all who call on him...
he hears their cry,
and saves them.
...

My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,
...and bless his holy name for ever and ever.
Amen.