

**“Comfort Ye, My People”**

**Isaiah 40.1–11 & Mark 1.1–8**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 4 December 2005**

This can be a literally funky time of year for some people. It’s a season when we are **supposed to** be happy, when we **should** be joyful. And it’s a time that can bring up all kinds of unpleasant family memories. *Christmas is supposed to be all about families, right?* I don’t know if this is true in your family of origin or not, but when my siblings and I get together (especially at the holidays) we tend to fall back into the roles we played in childhood, including all of the old animosities. In other words, we bring out the worst in each other.

*Christmas is supposed to be all about families, right?* Another dynamic in the lead-up to Christmas is that for those of us who have lost someone close to us – by divorce, death, miscarriage, or physical separation – it’s a time when our grief can seem the most raw. And nobody seems to want to hear about our griefs and our losses at this “festive time of year.” But, I’d like to give you permission to feel all of your feelings fully: whether they are joyful or doleful, exuberant or reclusive.

It’s a bit odd that most Protestant churches don’t have a service on Christmas Day, after all, it is one of the two major feast days of the Christian calendar. I don’t know if you’ve noticed yet, but Christmas falls on a Sunday this year, which brings up a quandary for some of us. *Christmas is supposed to be all about families, right?* Ready or not, we will be having a service that morning, since it is, after all “Christ Mass,” and I hope that you’ll join us to sing carols, celebrate communion, and be together as a family of faith.



Some churches have been at the forefront of acknowledging that Christmas can be a really tough holiday for people, and they’ve instituted what they call a “Blue Christmas” service that is directed toward those of us who find the “holiday season” too much to handle. While we don’t have plans for such a service at Plymouth, it’s important that we acknowledge that this can be a difficult time for quite a few of us.

That’s why I’m so thankful for Advent, which is in some ways a cure for the way our culture at large celebrates Christmas. Advent is **not** about: perfect trees and ornaments, deliciously guilt-inducing Christmas cookies, jolly old elves, nerves that are frayed by long shopping lines, obligatory holiday parties, overdrawn checking accounts, utter chaos, and universal excess. Not to mention, pressure from demanding parents (“I never get to be with the grandchildren at Christmas.”), from entitled kids (“What do you mean you aren’t getting me an iPod?”), and from excess-ridden peers (“Wait ’til my wife sees the new diamond ring I bought her. . . it cost a fortune.”) On further examination, maybe our Puritan forbears were right in avoiding all the baggage that Christmas celebrations entailed.

As one writer puts it, “If Martha Stewart has you believing you can achieve nirvana if you turn enough toilet paper tubes into festive tree ornaments, you may be setting yourself up for disappointment.”<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever noticed that the all the stuff that we stress out about has *absolutely nothing* to do with the religious observation of Christmas? Think about it: the only stressful stuff is secular (unless you’re a clergyperson or a church musician!).

With apologies to Marcus Borg, Advent for me is about “getting ready to meet Christmas again for the first time.” I get caught up in the expectation, wondering about the mystery of the incarnation, feeling that God *really* is with us in Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> John D. Spalding on beliefnet.com

Sorry, Martha, Advent is not about perfection. Advent is a human story in all its pain and its glory. Advent *is* about comfort: not luxury, not perfect stability, but comfort in knowing that we are not alone. There is comfort in the fulfillment of God promise of Emmanuel: *God with us*.



The passage from Isaiah was written by a poet in exile – when the people of Israel had been moved forcibly from their homes to Babylon (in what we call Iraq). “Comfort, O comfort my people,” says God through Isaiah. The exiles’ comfort is not in being back home yet, but in the *promise* that they would, in fact, get there. Some of the exiles had settled in and assimilated into the new culture. But there were some who kept longing for Jerusalem. Do you remember Dorothy’s refrain in the Wizard of Oz – the one the wizard asked her to keep repeating after she clicked the heels of the ruby slippers? “There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home.” For most of us, our longing isn’t for more stuff, but rather to come home, to come home to God’s family. That’s the comfort we can anticipate.



I have to share something. Friday night, we sat down with our boys to watch the Charlie Brown Christmas special. (Remember when you have to wait for the night it was shown, rather than popping in a DVD?) And as I watched, and heard Charlie Brown talking about the prospects for disappointment at Christmas, I remembered why this was always my favorite Christmas show. He shows such deep pathos in caring for that wonderfully spare, little Christmas tree, and is berated by his peers for showing up with a less-than-perfect tree. And then dear, old Linus reminds him that what Christmas is all about isn’t the perfection of Snoopy’s Christmas light display or the perfection of the Christmas play, or even the perfect tree Lucy had anticipated. Linus whips his blanket around his head, shepherd-style, and begins to recite those beautiful lines from the second chapter of Luke’s gospel: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2.8–10, KJV)

And I thought, “Gee, I could just have shown *A Charlie Brown Christmas* instead of preaching this sermon.”



“Advent reminds us that we, too, are exiles,” writes Barry Vaughn, an Episcopal priest. “Advent points us toward a future when we will be given a new song to sing, not a song of exile but a song of triumphant redemption.”<sup>2</sup> What song do you need to sing? What new tune does God *need you* to sing? Is it time to let go of some old songs and learn a new refrain?

Madison Avenue would have you believe that you not only can *have it all*, but that you deserve it. Life isn’t perfect. We can’t have whatever we want. And our family lives aren’t as tranquil as the Brady Bunch.

But, there is comfort. Comfort in making a difference in the world. Comfort in community. Comfort in God’s abundance. Comfort in our family of faith... imperfect though it is. Comfort in our relationship with God, who is the source of all life.

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<sup>2</sup> on [episcopalchurch.org](http://episcopalchurch.org)

So, feel God's comfort, which does not wither like grass or fade like flowers. Feel God's comfort, which isn't about wealth or perfection, but shalom. Feel God's comfort in the bread and the wine of the meal we will share. Feel God's comfort and you will find rest. "Comfort ye, my people." Amen.