

*Tidings of Comfort and Joy*

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Whitefish UMC

Second Sunday of Advent, December 7, 2008

- † The music of Advent and Christmas speaks volumes of the longing and poignancy of this season. Each of us has a favorite Christmas song for a reason that is unique to us and our story.
- † In the mid eighteenth century, the librettist Charles Jennens composed words for the Oratorio written by George Frederick Handel, “Messiah.” We heard the very first words of Messiah this morning, echoing our scripture reading from Isaiah:
- † “Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God.” Apparently these were words that spoke to Handel, the composer, who was an inviting target for critics and for satire.
- † For Handel was a foreigner, and an individual no one could help noticing. He had large hands, large feet, a large appetite, and he wore a huge white wig with curls rippling over his shoulders. He struggled with his weight, and spoke English rather loudly in a colorful blending of Italian, German, and French.
- † The critics mercilessly teased Handel, and his years of composing in London were as troubled and volatile as our stock market in the last month. As Romain Rolland has tried to explain it:
- † “He was surrounded by a crowd of bulldogs with terrible fangs, by unmusical men of letters who were likewise able to bite, by jealous colleagues, arrogant virtuosos, cannibalistic theatrical companies, fashionable cliques, feminine plots, and nationalistic leagues... Twice

- he was bankrupt, and once he was stricken by apoplexy amid the ruin of his company.”
- † The situation was so bleak in 1741 that just before he wrote Messiah, he had seriously considered going back to Germany. But when his librettist Jennens brought him the words to the Oratorio Messiah, instead of giving up, he threw himself into writing the music for what became his masterpiece.
  - † Handel composed Messiah in 24 days without once leaving his house. His servant brought him food, and when he returned, the meal was often uneaten. While writing the “Hallelujah Chorus,” the servant discovered him with tears in his eyes.
  - † Handel exclaimed: “I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself!” And although Messiah was well received in Ireland, where it was first performed, the English didn’t like it very much at all.
  - † Even his librettist was sorely critical. He commented: “Handel’s Messiah has disappointed me, being set in great haste, though he said he would be a year about it, and make it the best of all his Compositions. I shall put no more Sacred Works into his hands, thus to be abused.”
  - † Handel’s use of biblical words in a theatre was revolutionary, and those who opposed Handel went to great lengths to keep his oratorios from being successful. Some self-righteous women gave large parties or sponsored other theatrical performances at the same time to rob him of his audiences. Other critics hired boys to tear down the broadsheets advertising Messiah.

- † One opponent wrote to a newspaper asking “if the Playhouse is a fit Temple...or a Company of Players fit Ministers of God’s Word.” Interestingly, John Wesley, a contemporary of Handel’s, liked Messiah and urged his followers to attend its concerts.
- † Perhaps the words “Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God,” seemed appropriate for the times in which they were written. Remember that Handel and Wesley’s England was rife with economic woes, alcoholism, poverty, and alienation.
- † In several aspects, their times were not so different than our own. For we, too, in these times need to hear words of comfort, and yes, joy. I don’t know about you, but I’m almost afraid to read the newspaper or listen to the news each morning when I wake up.
- † As if we needed a reminder, one in ten mortgage holders is behind in their payments, unemployment figures are rising, and any sort of job is hard to come by.
- † Tidings of comfort and joy—yes, that’s what we need. The people of Israel needed them, too, and so the prophet Isaiah reminded them that their God was at heart a God of mercy and second chances.
- † They were called to “in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, in the desert make straight a highway for our God. For “every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken!”
- † Then hundreds of years later, John the Baptist echoed those same words as he called the people to repentance at the Jordan River—his

ministry a precursor of the promised Messiah. Prepare the way of the Lord!

- † Here we are, two thousand years later, still trying to prepare the way. If only we really knew how. Of course we're all busy preparing for Christmas in some way. Some of us a shopping til we drop. Others of us are worrying and lying awake nights wondering how we'll make it through Christmas.
- † And we hear these Christmas words: "Tidings of Comfort and Joy" and some of us want to scream. Kathleen Norris remembers seeing a slick full-page Christmas advertisement in a magazine. The ad, which was for a "beaded handbag costing thousands of dollars, featured a model with her eyes closed, looking beautiful but comatose, as the words 'Comfort and Joy' blazed across the page."
- † Would a several thousand dollar beaded bag bring us comfort and joy? I doubt it.
- † Of course the phrase "tidings of comfort and joy" comes from an old English Christmas carol, "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," author unknown. You know how it goes: "God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay. Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day, to save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray. O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy...."
- † Oh that it were that easy, right? I take comfort to the fact that this carol is referred to in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, in 1843. "...at the first sound of---'God bless you merry gentlemen! May nothing you dismay!'—Scrooge seized the ruler with such energy of action, that the singer fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to the fog and even more congenial frost."

- † For the truth is that for many people this year, the most appropriate Christmas song would be Elvis Presley’s “Blue Christmas.” You remember it—“I’ll have a blue, blue, blue blue Christmas without you.” You probably know that Christmas is the hardest time of year for many people.
- † First of all it’s really dark outside. And in Whitefish, at least, it’s also cold and gloomy. And if we don’t get more snow soon, at least for the skiers and resort workers and owners, it will be really blue.
- † Even worse, perhaps you are in grief over the loss of a loved one. Maybe your portfolio isn’t looking so good. We live in a prosperous area, but not every one shares in it equally, and that’s particularly hard this time of year. Maybe you feel especially alone this year, wondering what lies ahead.
- † Whatever it is that breaks your heart, though, God longs to offer you comfort, and yes joy. Because Advent says that God cares about a broken world. Isaiah was speaking to a broken nation. Remember that much of Israel had been carried off into exile.
- † They longed to return to their homeland. Isaiah assures them that God has not forgotten them nor forsaken them. Their suffering is almost over, for God will build a vast highway toward home. And John the Baptist, in the New Testament lesson, cries that soon God will build an even more significant highway linking humanity and God.
- † The message is the same. God cares about a broken world. God cares about broken people.
- † Brian Abel Ragan’s father used to tell him a story every Christmas when he was growing up. It was about a little boy who was very poor and whose widowed mother struggled to make ends meet. The little

- boy had only one toy—a sad little matchbox car in awful condition. It had only one window and two wheels. But the boy loved the little car.
- † As Christmas approached, the boy knew there would be no presents. But he was excited anyway, because it was the first year he'd be allowed to go to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. He couldn't wait. He knew that, before mass began, people brought gifts to the Christ child.
- † He had been told that the gifts were magnificent jeweled chalices for the altar, new clothes for poor children like himself, and envelopes full of money. But the little boy wanted to give the Christ child a gift himself. And so he set out to earn enough money before Christmas to do just that.
- † On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, he sat at the kitchen table counting out what he had earned. He had enough money to buy a fine present for the Christ child. But before he could put the money back into his pocket, his mother returned, and seeing the money said, "Son, what a good boy you are—now we can have a real Christmas dinner!"
- † The little boy was heartbroken. What would he do now? You've guessed, I know. He took his broken toy car, the only thing he had to give. So he put it in his pocket and set off for mass.
- † When he arrived, the church was already filling up. He walked to the manger scene where gifts were piled high for the Christ child. The little boy laid his broken toy car amid all the splendid gifts and squeezed into a pew close by just as the organ began playing the prelude.
- † About this time one of the ushers took a last look at the manger scene and saw the broken car. "Who would leave a piece of trash like this at

Our Lord's crib?" he said loudly enough for the boy to hear. And the usher picked up the toy car and flung it across the church.

- † Then suddenly everything came to a dead stop. To everyone's amazement, the baby in the manger scene came to life and crawled across the stone floor. He crawled until he reached the broken car. Then carefully he tucked it under his arm and crawled back to the manger.
- † By this time the people had fallen to their knees. At this point the priest rose and approached the manger. There, just as before, was a plaster child with a halo, but now he smiled and his arms were folded tight around a broken toy car.
- † Brian Abel Ragan remembers hearing his father tell this story, and he always resented it. He didn't like his father. His father had problems with alcohol. The song, "Please Daddy Don't Get Drunk This Christmas" could have been written for him.
- † When his father wasn't passed out, he was a foul-mouthed terror. Ragan had a hard time forgiving his father. He felt his father was trying to manipulate him with the story of the broken car at Christmas into being a more obedient son.
- † Years later, though, Ragan put this Christmas story into perspective. "As I think of my father's Christmas story now, I realize I cast him in the wrong role. My father was not the good little boy who gave his last plaything to the Lord.
- † My father was the smashed car. He was a wreck. But despite or because of all this, he clearly longed to be cradled in his Savior's arms, to have Christ still seek him after he had been rejected by everyone else."

- † Mark’s gospel for today opens with these words: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Why do we call the story of Jesus good news? Because God cares about a broken world. God cares about broken people. That’s what Advent and Christmas are about. “Comfort, o comfort my people says your God.”
- † Remember the soaring words to the beginning of Handel’s Messiah? Remember that Handel considered giving up his music and returning, broken, to Germany? Instead he turned more strongly to God. That’s what this repentance business is all about—not self-flagellation.
- † Heaven knows we don’t need more of that. What we do need is to make way in us for those tidings of comfort and joy of this season and every time: the good news of Jesus Christ.
- † We find it in the music of Christmas and of our lives, and we seek it now, as we remember...on the night he gave himself up for us....Amen.

Sources:

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King Duncan, “Blue Christmas,” [www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com)