

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**

**“A Word of Comfort for the Afflicted” (Isaiah 51:3-4)**

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Many years ago in seminary our homiletics (preaching) professor stated, “A good preacher comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.” That sounds really wise, doesn’t it? I dutifully scribbled that down in my notebook, and actually tried to do just that for a few years until I learned something in both ministry and life in general...nobody is comfortable. Are you?

You can live in a comfortable house beautifully designed by an interior decorator, replete with luxuries and all the latest technological gadgets...and internally still be as uncomfortable as ever. You can drive an expensive car complete with turbo engine, temperature controlled seats, an amazing sound system, that can park itself...and you may still recall being much more comfortable back in the day in that old station wagon with the fake wood siding, an AM-only radio, and manual air conditioning (rolling down your windows). You can go on an extravagant vacation to an exotic location, stay at an exclusive resort abounding in amenities, even a spa... and still have the most uncomfortable vacation of your life.

More often than not, even those who appear to be living most comfortably are often not actually comfortable at all, certainly not as comfortable and on top of things as they appear to be in their social media posts. Many are afflicted with common human challenges like financial hardship, family dysfunction, anxiety, or stress. If none of this applies to you, if you are completely comfortable and not afflicted with anything at all, totally on top of your game, figure out a way to market it, maybe write a motivational book or record some podcasts—you could become very rich and famous, which will make you even more comfortable, right?

Think about 2020 so far...the combination of the ever spreading pandemic, the ever increasing political polarization, the ever increasing social unrest, the volatile economy, and a palpable level of societal anger and anxiety has all contributed to one of the most uncomfortable and discomfoting years in a very long time—leaving many feeling afflicted and anything but comfortable.

Afflicted people—perhaps even you—often try many things to comfort themselves. It may be overeating (especially lots of “comfort food”), or alcohol, or drugs, or binge watching television, or online shopping, or some other addictive behavior. Afflicted people need comfort, and if that comfort does not come from other people, they will do what it takes to comfort themselves.

This segues nicely to one of the best Pink Floyd songs ever, “Comfortably Numb” from their 1979 masterpiece double album *The Wall*. I know many of you were hoping I would cite some Pink Floyd lyrics in this sermon, so today is your lucky day. In fact, “Comfortably Numb” is the last song Pink Floyd ever played together live in concert in 2005—and ever will on this planet anyway as keyboardist Richard Wright died several years ago. As you probably guessed, it is a song about trying to find comfort in drugs. After the first epic guitar solo by David Gilmore, Roger Waters sings:

Okay, just a little pinprick  
There'll be no more, ah  
But you may feel a little sick  
Can you stand up?  
I do believe it's working, good  
That'll keep you going through the show  
Come on it's time to go

Then David Gilmour sings:

There is no pain you are receding  
A distant ship, smoke on the horizon  
You are only coming through in waves  
Your lips move but I can't hear what you're saying  
When I was a child  
I caught a fleeting glimpse  
Out of the corner of my eye  
I turned to look but it was gone  
I cannot put my finger on it now  
The child is grown  
The dream is gone  
I have become comfortably numb

And then David Gilmore plays another guitar solo even more epic than the first, one of the most famous of rock 'n roll history. It is not uncommon for afflicted people in an uncomfortable and discomfoting world to try whatever they can think of to comfort themselves, whatever it takes to become “comfortably numb.”

The problem is that becoming “comfortably numb” never lasts long. The numbness always wears off, and eventually you will find yourself hungering yet again for more comfort food, thirsting yet again for another shot of liquor, longing yet again for another drug, or searching yet again for another television series to binge watch. The numbness recedes and the reality of your afflictions, and your need for comfort due to these afflictions, becomes even more pronounced.

And yet, that is exactly where the good news of the gospel of God’s unconditional love in Jesus Christ for all us, connects with our lives. The gospel is always a word of comfort for the afflicted.

Today’s Old Testament passage is from the great prophet Isaiah, whose ministry in Israel lasted over fifty years and took place about seven centuries before Christ. One of the recurring themes in the Book of Isaiah is comfort from the Lord. In one of the best known passages, which are also the words of the first aria in Handel’s *Messiah*, Isaiah wrote, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned” (Isaiah 40:1, KJV). The very first words of Handel’s *Messiah* set the tone for the entire oratorio about the gospel of God’s unconditional love in Jesus Christ: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.” The gospel is always a word of comfort for the afflicted.

Later Isaiah similarly prophesied about the ministry of the forthcoming Messiah, Jesus Christ, as being in part “to comfort all who mourn” (Isaiah 61:2) and again later proclaimed from God’s perspective, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” (Isaiah 66:13). In today’s passage Isaiah also proclaimed a word of comfort for the afflicted:

The Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song (Isaiah 51:3).

The Lord will not only comfort you, but also all the “waste places” in your life, whatever those may be (you know what they are). That is a beautiful, life giving word of comfort from the Lord for the afflicted, including you. That is the gospel.

Lest you think this idea of the Lord comforting the afflicted is found only in the Old Testament, in the New Testament Jesus himself in the greatest sermon ever, his Sermon on the Mount, preached “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). And at the Last Supper, knowing all the ways his beloved disciples would be afflicted in their lives and their ministry, promised that his Heavenly Father would send the Holy Spirit, the Holy Comforter:

He shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever...the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you (John 14:16, 26, KJV).

And the very next day the same Jesus who preached about comforting those who mourn, the same Jesus who promised that our Heavenly Father would send the Holy Comforter, was afflicted beyond our imagination in his passion and death, nailed to a cross with much more than “just a little pinprick.” The same Isaiah who had proclaimed “the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places” had also prophesied that Jesus would himself be “afflicted” (Isaiah 53:4) in order to comfort to all the afflicted in our uncomfortable, discomfoting world.

In the very first English Prayer Book of 1549 Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) included the “comfortable words”, gospel verses that were to be read every single week after the confession and absolution. We include these “comfortable words” in “The Holy Eucharist: Rite I” in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979):

“Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you” (Matthew 11:28); “God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16); “This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (I Timothy 1:15); and “If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2) (*BCP* 332).

The gospel is a word of comfort for the afflicted—an invitation to rest for the weary, the hope of everlasting life, the assurance that yes Jesus Christ the Son of God “came into the world to save sinners” like you and me, that at this very moment that same Jesus is your Advocate who is on your side, and whose death on Good Friday remains always and forever “the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world”—including yours.

Moreover, scripture assures us that even now our Lord remains “the God of all comfort who comforteth us in all our tribulation” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4, KJV).

The gospel is always a word of comfort for the afflicted.

Where are you afflicted today? Where are the “waste places” in your life?

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Comforter, may “the God of all comfort” comfort both you personally, and all those “waste places” in your life—and replace your affliction with “joy and gladness”—for the sake of our Gracious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.