

Sunday, December 4, 2011, First Presbyterian Church Morgantown

Isaiah 40: 1 – 11

40 Comfort, comfort my people! says your God.

2 Speak compassionately to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her that her
compulsory service has ended,
that her penalty has been paid,
that she has received
from the LORD 's hand
double for all her sins!

3 A voice is crying out:

" Clear the LORD 's way in the desert!
Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!

4 Every valley will be raised up,
and every mountain and hill will be flattened.
Uneven ground will become level,
and rough terrain a valley plain.

5 The LORD 's glory will appear,
and all humanity will see it together;
the LORD 's mouth has commanded it. "

6 A voice was saying:

" Call out! "

And another said,

" What should I call out? "

All flesh is grass; all its loyalty is
like the flowers of the field.

7 The grass dries up

and the flower withers
when the LORD 's breath blows on it.
Surely the people are grass.

8 The grass dries up;
the flower withers,
but our God's word will exist forever.

9 Go up on a high mountain, messenger Zion!
Raise your voice and shout, messenger Jerusalem!
Raise it; don't be afraid; say to the cities of Judah,
" Here is your God! "

10 Here is the LORD God,
coming with strength, with a triumphant arm,
bringing his reward with him and his payment before him.

11 Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock;
God will gather lambs in his arms
and lift them onto his lap.
God will gently guide the nursing ewes

Start with: Video clip from 60 minutes:

<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7389750n&tag=contentBody;storyMediaBox>

(Starting right after break until walking through high school)

Of course, now the pre-commercial is T-Rowe Price. . . rather than Chase, although Chase plays at second break.

It may have appeared as a mistake and/or sloppy preparation that I left that Chase commercial in the video clip. Those of you who frequently watch internet video know you can make the commercials go away just by watching the video in its entirety and keeping that window open so that

the next time around the commercial is gone. Its not accident you saw the Chase commercial. We will get back to that.

I stumbled upon this video this week when I saw a facebook post from a friend of the family about the Ohio State Football's Coach's salary relative to the growing epidemic of childhood homelessness – the title of the article was [Homeless Children and Millionaire Coaches](#).

The article compares the outlandish salary Urban Meyer will get with the two children we just saw eating cold food out of cans and showering in a bathroom stall.

In the article was a link to the 60 minutes video which I clicked on and watched the entire video a couple of times through. I will have the link up on the PSF website if anyone wants to watch it in its entirety. It is a sermon in and of itself this Advent season about for what do we hope and where do we find comfort.

As I watched the video--What struck me in watching was the glaring opposites housed in how the video is packaged for viewing on the internet.

To start the video one must endure a 30 second Chase commercial, to get to the segment I wanted to show, one must endure another Chase commercial.

Many of the chase videos provided images of luxurious travel, plentiful food, and well fed, intact and growing families. I am sure if you watched this when it originally aired Thanksgiving week the same glaring tension would have arisen when this video was book ended and crowded by black Friday commercials.

On one hand, It was hard not to be struck by the excess of the commercials and the lack of material excess in the story of the children.

And on another hand, it was hard not to be struck by the depth of the persons interviewed relative to the shallow happiness promised in the commercials.

I intentionally left the commercial in because it visually highlights the tension of the Advent season. Or the tension the intent of the season raises against the intent of the culture for the holidays.

We know good and well the message of comfort God is providing and calling forth from us, we know good and well the reality of pain and suffering in the world and yet everyday we are beset on all sides by the stories of other gods that promise comfort, love, and satisfaction from things that will wither and fade. It has hard not to feel uneasy during this season of consolation and consumption.

It left me with the uncomfortable feeling of trying to answer. . . who is the author speaking words of comfort to in this passage.

As I preach this passage today . . . I live in that tension of consumption and consolation. I seek God's embrace of comfort, yet realize as I receive that comfort God is disrupting my view of the world and calling me to live differently.

So when I answer the question of comfort for whom—my answer is that I believe the prophet is speaking words of Comfort

- to those of us caught in the narrative Chase and consuming,
- to those of us who are hungry, homeless, grieved, lonely, anxious
- to those of us feeling the tension and attempting to have a different narrative dominate this season

The story pointed out that we are over 1000 days into the recession of 2007.

If the recession has taught us anything it should be that the narrative of buying more does not have staying power and does not bring comfort.

Since 2007, many of us have seen and felt firsthand the cost of ever increasing credit limits, buying houses on empty credit, and spending beyond our means. . .we feel the tension that those things do not comfort and burn away

And yet we enter a Christmas consumer season where we are told to buy more and spend more. Our government at one or two times in this recession has doled out cash credits to spend.

And yet we watch all around as that narrative fails for countless nameless individuals and for our family and friends

The advent season is a time of tension – we are longing for a world made right. We are longing not to hear in one ear BUY, BUY, BUY and hear in another the number of homeless children in this country is close to 25%. These things are not right.

And if we care, if we halfway listen to God's word, then we will not feel 100% comfortable this season. And we might often feel like there is nothing we can do right by our families or those crying out.

That is why I believe these words of comfort are for us too....

We are seeking words of comfort this season

That these words of failure will not be the last word

- Our failures to be content with what we have
- Our country's failure to live within its means

We want to know God is crying out as the loving shepherd, Comfort, O Comfort

We are not the first generation of people to seek comfort in anxious time. People to seek comfort while living in the tension of God's vision pitted against the world's vision.

As early as the writings of the growing Christian church, we see Paul reminding the people that God is the source of comfort and solace. Paul reminds the church in Corinth of God's consoling power in 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 1

God's the one who comforts us in all our trouble so that we can comfort other people who are in every kind of trouble. We offer the same comfort that we ourselves received from God. 5 That is because we receive so much comfort through Christ in the same way that we share so many of Christ's sufferings. 6 So if we have trouble, it is to bring you comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is to bring you comfort from the experience of endurance while you go through the same sufferings that we also suffer. 7 Our hope for you is certain, because we know that as you are partners in suffering so also you are partners in comfort.

Into the Reformation and after, we see the writers of the Heidelberg Catechism reiterating that our only comfort in life and death comes from God

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. . . . He also watches over me in such a way

We can rest in these promises.

Yet all of these sources from our tradition point us outside ourselves. And it would not be an advent sermon from me if I did not tell you to live into the tension.

Isaiah calls us to shout the glad tidings

Paul reminds us we have been comforted and consoled in order to share that same comfort with the world

Heidelberg reminds us that our response to this comfort is gratitude and service

Q. What must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?

A. Three things: first, how great my sin and misery are; second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.⁴

We acknowledge that God embraces us in comfort and by doing so disrupts our lives and the status quo

Accepting the embrace of comfort also means being disrupted by God to see the world differently.

That we are called to consider our financial priorities this season. . .we can not turn a blind eye and deaf ear to the cries of those around us seeking consolation while we spend \$1000 trying to comfort our kids.

If you need God's comfort – be ready for it to change how you view the world. . .be ready for it to make you uncomfortable with the narrative that says all life is a commodity.

Be ready to speak, act, and live differently out of gratitude.

Let us pray

Christmas . . . the very next Day, Walter Brueggemann

*Had we the chance, we would have rushed to Bethlehem
to see thing thing that had come to pass.*

*Had we been a day later,
we would have found the manger empty and the family departed.*

*We would have learned that the fled to Egypt,
warned that the baby was endangered,
sought by the establishment of the day
that understood how his very life
threatened the way things are.*

*We would have paused at the empty stall
and pondered how this baby from the very beginning was under threat.*

*The powers understood that his grace threatened all our coercions;
they understood that his truth challenged all our lies;
they understood that his power to heal
nullified our many pathologies;
they understood that his power to forgive
vetoed the power of guilt and the drama of debt among us.*

*From day one they pursued him,
and schemed and conspired until finally . . . on a gray Friday. . . they got
him!
No wonder the family fled, in order to give him time for his life.*

*We could still pause at the empty barn--
and ponder that all our babies are under threat, all the vulnerable who
stand at risk
before predators,
our babies who face the slow erosion of consumerism,
our babies who face the reach of sexual exploitation,
our babies who face the call of war,
placed as we say, "in harm's way,"
our babies, elsewhere in the world,
who know of cold steel against soft arms
and distended bellies from lack of food;*

our babies everywhere who are caught in the fearful display of ruthless adult power.

*We ponder how peculiar this baby at Bethlehem is,
summoned to save the world, and yet
we know, how like every child, this one also was at risk.
The manger is empty a day later . . .
the father warned in a dream.*

*Our world is so at risk, and yet we seek after and wait for this child named
"Emmanuel."
Come be with us, you who are called "God with us."*

Prayer from: Brueggemann's Prayers for a Privileged People pages 73 – 74
Commentary Used in sermon: Westminster Bible Companion, Isaiah 40 – 66, Brueggemann author
Scripture citations from NRSV and Common English Bible

Find books at:

[Prayers for a Privileged People](#)

[Westminster Bible Companion \(Vol 2\), Isaiah 40 -66](#)

Online Scriptures

[NRSV](#)

[Common English Bible](#)