

**Bethlehem Lutheran Church**  
*A Reconciling Works Congregation of the ELCA welcoming the LGBTQ community*  
- A multicultural, all-inclusive ecumenical ministry

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**The Rev. Dr. David O. Guss, Fr., Ph.D.**

**December 10, 2017 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent**  
**“The God Who Comforts”**

A story came across my desk recently about a man who worked for the Post Office. This man’s job was to process all the mail that had illegible addresses. One day, a letter came to his desk addressed in shaky handwriting to God. He thought he should open it to see what it was about. He opened it and read these words: “Dear God, I am a 93-year-old widow, living on a very small pension. Yesterday, someone stole my purse. It had \$100 in it, which was all the money I had until my next pension check. Next Sunday is Christmas, and I had invited 2 of my friends over for dinner. Without that money, I have nothing to buy food with. I have no family to turn to, and you are my only hope. Can you please help me? Sincerely, Edna.” The postal worker was touched. He showed the letter to his fellow workers. Each of them dug into their wallets and came up with a few dollars. By the time he made the rounds, he had collected \$96, which he put into an envelope and sent to the woman. The rest of the day, all of the workers felt a warm glow for the kind thing they had done. Christmas came and went. A few days later another letter came from the old lady addressed to God. All of the workers gathered around while the letter was opened. It read: “Dear God, how can I ever thank you enough for what you did for me? Because of your gift of love, I was able to fix a glorious dinner for my friends. We had a very nice day and I told my friends of your wonderful gift. By the way, there was \$4 missing. I think it must have been those thieves at the Post Office. Sincerely, Edna.”

Well, the folks at the Post Office tried to help. Helping people is what life is all about, isn’t it? Which brings us to one of the most beautiful passages in the Scriptures. From our 1st lesson this morning, let’s read together the first 5 verses: “1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Later in the same passage, Isaiah writes (let read verse 9 till the end): “9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;[a] lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,[b] lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” 10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. What wonderful words for this 2nd Sunday in Advent. “Comfort, O comfort my people.” What was the occasion of Isaiah’s letter of comfort to the Israelites? In 587 BC, the city of Jerusalem, the temple, and the Jewish armies had all been destroyed by the Babylonian Army under Nebuchadnezzar. Ten thousand of Israel’s best citizens were marched off to Babylon in what is now modern day Iraq. In the course of time, the exiles to Babylon married, built homes, had children, and settled into their new land. They might as well accept Babylon as their new home. The prophet Jeremiah told them they would be there for 70 years. So, they did the best they could in their new surroundings. Still, they were away from home and from the temple - away from everything that gave them their sense of identity. These were years of longing and mourning for what had been. To make it even worse, the prophets made it unmistakably clear to the people that the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon were not due to Babylonian strength. They were, instead, a well-deserved punishment from God for the wickedness of the Hebrew people. It is in that context that Isaiah comes on the scene with this much-welcomed message, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid...”

Undoubtedly many of you will be exposed in the next few weeks in one form or another to the music of Messiah. Perhaps you know the history of this splendid piece of music. In the summer of 1741, over the course of only 24 days, George Frederic Handel composed the music for Messiah. The lyrics, however, a combination of scripture texts from the King James Version of the Bible and The Book of Common Prayer, were compiled by Charles Jennens. Here’s what’s important to us. The first words sung in Messiah are taken directly from this passage of Scripture. The tenor soloist sets the mood. He sings: “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...”

That was good news for the Jewish people who, at this point in time, were feeling God-forsaken. But, God has not forsaken them at all, Isaiah says to them.” God has forgiven their sins and has reclaimed them as his own people. What good news that was for them and what good news for all those who seek to be God’s people today. Of course, this joyous message is not only for the people of Israel. It is for all who have fallen short of the glory of God. That means it is a joyous message for all of us.

Pr. Leith Anderson tells about a memorable experience from his teenage years. It was a Sunday afternoon. His father had purchased a magnificent new red Chevrolet convertible. Leith himself had a humble little Volkswagen Beetle. One day his Dad let Leith drive his new red Chevrolet convertible to a friend's house. Leith took a back way down a twisting rock-lined mountain road. The speed limit was 45 mph on this road, but a friend told Leith that it was impossible to go that fast on that road. Leith thought he knew otherwise, so he kept going 45 mph. And, he soon found out that he was wrong. His friend was right. Going around a curve he crossed the line just when another car was coming up the mountain. Leith took out the side of that car from headlight to taillight. Just as bad, he smashed up the front of his father's car so bad that it couldn't be driven.

The police came. Leith called home. His father came immediately in the VW. He told Leith to go on to his friend's house in the Volkswagen and he would deal with the police and the car. Now get ready for the punch line. Leith Anderson says his father never mentioned the accident to him again. Years later Leith found out that his father's insurance rates doubled for the next three years because of this accident, but his father never asked for the money. He never told him the cost. Leith was grateful. In fact, he says to this day, he is still grateful.) This event had an enormous impact on Leith Anderson. We've all been there, haven't we? Maybe we haven't wrecked our Dad's new car, but all of us have sinned. All of us have needed forgiveness. And, guess what - there's someone in this room today for whom the greatest comfort I could give you is to utter these three words, "You are forgiven." These are God's words to you this morning regardless of your past: "You are forgiven."

But, please note this: God didn't forgive Israel because they deserved to be forgiven, or because he regarded their offenses lightly. God forgave them simply because he loved them. The same thing could be said about Leith Anderson's dad. He was probably quite attached to his red convertible. There was probably a part of him that wanted to give his son the thrashing of his life. But what would be gained? He knew his son felt bad enough as it was. At that moment he knew his son's greatest need was to be reassured of his father's love. When a parent gives love like that they are reflecting the nature of God. And, of course, that is the meaning of Christmas. Love is the meaning of Christmas. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son..."

Christ came to us not because we deserve it, nor because he approves of everything we are or have done. He came because of his Father's great love for us. Take a few moment this Christmas to listen again to the opening lines of Handel's Messiah. Listen as the tenor sets the mood: "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." Then, continue to listen as the tenor sings, "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness; prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Then, listen as moves into a brief aria: "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain." Then you will hear the entire choir break into that glorious refrain: "And, the glory of the Lord shall be, revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." What good news to all those who have ever needed to be forgiven. Sisters and brothers, this is the good news for you and me today, now, and forever more. Amen.

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