

Comfort My People
Isaiah 40:1-11 and II Peter 3:8-15
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
December 10, 2017
Rev. Glen Bell

The church is where we come to talk about Big Stuff, capital “B” and capital “S.” We know deep down in our bones that grace and hope and determination and love are most important. But we don’t always know how to talk about them.

Here’s what we do know: No easy depictions of mercy and patience and redemption and goodness are ever completely honest. The experience is always rich and textured, jumbled together in strange combinations. Anything worth celebrating comes in different layers, all mixed up with life.

Grace costs, you see. Hope is demanding. Love leaves us lost and then leads us home. Mercy and redemption are worth every ounce of energy, every single dollar in our pockets. Goodness comes, but not always on time.

So you and I struggle to talk about Big Stuff. Early in the morning or late at night, we struggle. That’s how it was for me a few nights ago, when I was up in the middle of the night. I found myself surfing the internet, stumbling upon Famous Last Words. Let me tell you, famous last words are fascinating. At our earthly end, we humans try to express a lot in just a few syllables.

Here’s what I learned. Some famous last words are downright mundane. Elvis Presley: I’m going to the bathroom to read. Some are profound. Bob Marley: Money can’t buy life. George Harrison: Love one another. Bessie Smith: I’m going, but I’m going in the name of the Lord!

Some are poignant. John Belushi: Just don’t leave me alone. And some are funny. Humphrey Bogart: I should *never* have switched from scotch to martinis.

Faith in Christ leads us to strange combinations. Trusting through the cancer. Giving thanks in the heart of our loss. Stepping up when the chips are down. Giving even when it hurts.

God shows up in the pull and tug of all these layers. In the very best of life, that’s what you and I find: all sorts of layers.

That’s how it was last Wednesday, when we gathered to celebrate the life of Dick Baum. Dick was gracious and engaging, dedicated and determined. He was a servant leader. But for the last many months, his body had quit on him. Dick was confined to a bed in the Smith Care Center. He couldn’t get up. But that didn’t stop him from being his same self – gracious and engaging, dedicated and determined. He kept asking about others. He kept pressing on. Even though his body was defeated, he didn’t allow *himself* to be defeated. He wrestled a blessing from his misfortune.

There it is, the experience of faith: blessing through misfortune, life rich and textured and jumbled, different layers all mixed in together.

We find these layers in Isaiah’s prophecy this morning. We hear good news. “Comfort my people. Tell them their debt is paid and their sins are covered. Tell them they have been blessed with twice as much grace as the sum of all their mistakes.”

But we hear this ringing promise *after* the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah, in which the prophet pronounces God’s judgment over and over again. “Your land will be desolate,” Isaiah proclaims. “The Lord will send everyone away.”

So the message is *not* cheap grace. But instead, grace after judgment, goodness in the midst of failings, destruction and restoration mixed together.

It all feels a little odd. All these jumbled together images of judgment and comfort feel like the pictures from the news stories in southern California, raging fires and blackened wasteland side-by-side with some of our nation’s most beautiful landscapes. They feel like the news from Aztec High School in New Mexico, a place of learning and growth and potential and discovery, but also the place of shooting and tragedy and death.

One student put their finger right on the layers of life and death, light and darkness, hope and despair. “We all started freaking out, she shared, “and then we said a prayer. And while we were praying, we heard three gunshots.”

God’s promises sound odd too. They are just as real, just as real life - complicated, multilayered, more complex than we first expected. God invites us to go out *into the wilderness* to prepare the way of the Lord. God directs us out to *the desert places* of our lives and world to make straight what is crooked.

Wow.

Maybe you are like me. Maybe you think that God’s appearing should take place somewhere beautiful, fine, well-prepared, perfect. But no, God says. Ready or not, God says, here I come. I appear where the uneven wilderness ground is leveled, when the rough desert ways are smoothed out.

Real life, true life is never as simple and flat and thin as a North Korean parade, with everyone united by a veneer of joy and adulation. No, that’s not our spiritual life. No. Life in Christ reveals the true through the hard, the depth through the stress and challenge, the gold in the dreary and dross.

Rodger Nishioka spoke at the last gathering of our presbytery, the regional council of Presbyterians from Bradenton to Naples. He is the senior associate pastor at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas. I was deeply intrigued by the title of his talk, “Belonging *and* Believing: Welcoming Relationships *and* Nurturing Discipleship.” It may be easy for us to think of discipleship centered only on Bible study and prayer and scriptural reflection. It may be easy to imagine discipleship as individual and private.

But Rodger Nishioka exploded our expectations. Discipleship, he said, is enriched by one-on-one mentoring. Discipleship reaches its full depth only as we encourage others to talk about God at work in our lives. Belonging to one another, believing in one another is *absolutely essential* to faith formation, even when connection with each other is messy and hard. Genuine relationships are thorny and complicated. Community is always rich and textured, jumbled up in strange combinations.

This community, these relationships demand courage.

Jessica Tate is the director of NEXT Church. She was our Faith Focus Weekend speaker fourteen months ago. In an article in the last issue of the Presbyterian Outlook, she tackles head on the demands and the cost of living in faith and hope and love. She quotes four different leaders from across our national Presbyterian Church.

The first: “This congregation has been in slow and steady decline since 1964. I don’t know if we have a future.”

The second: “I want the elementary school kids in the church to know Jesus. And I can’t figure out how to compete with soccer and travel and everything else.”

The third: “The neighborhood around the church has changed so much. We don’t even know the people who have moved in around us.”

The fourth: “I don’t know what to say in my sermons because everything is heard as partisan. It seems like the gospel is polarizing more than bringing us together.”

Because of the hard work of Presbyterians involved in NEXT Church – and because of the hard work of Presbyterians like you, welcoming newcomers, hosting young pastors, offering your best to others, right there, right then, right now, we are experiencing change. As Jessica writes, “Leaders are finding themselves more hopeful, more focused, more equipped to shape and serve the church. And together, we dream of a church that is working with joy to promote God’s transformation of our communities for the common good.”

Consider these more recent comments *from these exact same Presbyterian leaders*:

The first: “We’re in collaborative conversations about a radically new future that we could not have imagined five years ago.”

The second: “I’m sharing ideas with leaders in other congregations and we’re trying new models of Christian formation, grounded in our passion for sharing Christ’s love with the children and their parents.”

The third: “Through the disciplines of community organizing and consistent theological reflection of what it means to be a neighbor, we’re learning to see immigrants in our community as ‘us’ and not ‘them.’”

The fourth: “I’m tending to relationships with people different from me. I’m learning to set down my assumptions and listen deeply. I’m coming to understand different ways of seeing the world. It’s helping me to find ways to teach and preach that share the truth and grace of the gospel in ways that honor other people and perspectives.”

This work is often messy and hard and slow. But it is filled with grace and goodness, as we follow Jesus. This is worth our lives. This is our life’s work.

The scripture from II Peter echoes this truth. Our experience of God is not simple or easy or thin. It is multilayered, sometimes confusing, sometimes transformative. But in God’s mercy, it is strong and firm enough to be our foundation.

“The Lord is not slow,” the writer proclaims, but it may feel that way to us.

So: How do we wait? What do we do as we wait? We strive. We strive to lead lives of holiness and godliness. We strive even after we have failed, when we have fallen short. In Christ’s name, we strive for the transformation of our neighbors, our community, ourselves.

How do we wait? My friend Beth Merrill Neel puts it this way: “We hope. Hope that brutality will not last forever. Hope that things will get better. Hope that God is moving in the midst of all that seems turbulent and immoral and wrong.”

This takes a lot of courage. This demands great determination. It means we reject easy, simplistic depictions of mercy and redemption. We accept that goodness and maturity and discipleship come through loss and grief and failure. They come only as we find the strength to welcome and embrace our neighbors, even though they are as much of a jumbled-up mess as we are.

Grace costs, you see. Hope is demanding. Love leaves us lost and then leads us home. Mercy and redemption are worth every ounce of energy, every single dollar in our pockets. Goodness comes, but not always on time.

Together, even though it will be messy and hard and slow, wrestle a blessing from your misfortune. Rediscover grace and hope and determination and love.