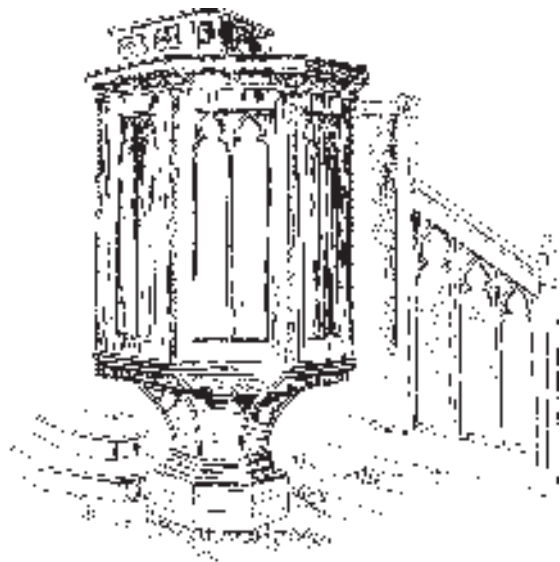


December 24, 2009
Christmas Eve

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Comfort Ye My People

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Two Sundays ago, Handel's Messiah was preformed in this room by the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus. I imagine it was performed hundreds of times throughout the world this month. It's enduring, this oratorio, and one reason for its deserved popularity is the biblical texts that Charles Jennens so brilliantly laid out for Handel. The very first of them sets the theme and the tone for the whole oratorio for Christmas and really for the whole life, death, and resurrection of the Lord. The words are from the prophet Isaiah, and they are sung by the tenor soloist. So simply, on three descending notes, he sings: "Comfort ye." Then the words are repeated with variations: "Comfort ye my people, saith your God." What solace there is in both the words and the music!

The text continues: "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned." But, even as Messiah was being sung both here and in other venues around the world, did warfare end in Iraq or Afghanistan or the Congo? Has warfare ended in Mexico and the border towns of America? The world is riddled with suffering. So how, in a world of warfare and

iniquity, can we take seriously and without sentimentality the prophet's words, "Comfort ye my people"?

The answer, I think, is: "It's simple, but not easy"—like singing the opening notes at the beginning of Handel's oratorio. If you stop to think of it, most things really worthwhile in this world are simple and very difficult—if by "simple" you mean the simplicity that lies on the far side of complexity.

Wasn't it Goethe who wrote that one can understand only what one loves? If you approach someone with aversion, there will be things you will never see. Love is not blind; love is visionary. Love not only heals wounds; love discovers them. Because of this relationship of love to knowledge, our most profound understanding is often associated with a mother's love. Picture any painting, any statue, of a Madonna and Child. Look at the one we hang here every Advent. Two things unite the mother and the child: the mother's arms and the mother's eyes. The understanding is there in Mary's eyes not because she has read Dr. Spock, but because she adores her child.

In like manner, God adores all God's children. God sees our wounds, feels our grief. God understands us so much better than we can ever understand ourselves, not because He has the whole world in His hands, but because Mary has the whole world in her arms. Or, if you prefer the image of the prophet, so tenderly put to music by Handel, "He shall gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom."

What comfort to know we are so understood because we are so loved! That is the message of Christmas. We are loved so much that God came to us as a vulnerable infant. My prayer for you this Christmas is that you would see in every tree and wreath, in every candle and decoration God's affirmation to you that you are loved.

Here again is what the prophet wrote, the excitement of which Handel understood so well: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, the government shall be on his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

The answer to the sufferings of the world is not to ask God to do away with them. The answer is to look to Jesus, in whom all the sufferings of the world converge. He hears the sobs of the lonely, the sighs of the prisoner; he knows the cares of little

children and the grisly hallucinations of the mentally ill. His heart is pierced by every knife drawn, every bullet fired, every evil word spoken. Like the world, Jesus is riddled with suffering. "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him." But, listen to the prophet's promise: "And with his stripes we are healed."

That's why I say we must look to Jesus to see our warfare accomplished and our iniquity pardoned. The answer, once again, is to go, as did the shepherds and wise men, "even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass." The answer is to look to Jesus who humbled himself that we might be exalted, who became poor that we might be enriched, who came to us that we might one day return home to God.

"Comfort ye my people, saith your God." May you all have a wonderful Christmas, and in the year ahead may you be comforted by the love of your God.