

**Love Came Down:
COMFORT THE PEOPLE**

Isaiah 40:1-11

The Baby brings love, hope, and healing.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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Sometimes good ideas just don't catch on. Sometimes it's because they are not really good ideas. Like the amphibious bicycle that will travel in water. Like the reading glasses with mirrors attached so you can read in bed. Like the plexiglass face shields designed to keep snow off your face (though they might work for COVID shields). These inventions just never seemed to catch on.¹

One of the ideas for the holidays that never caught on was the inverted Christmas tree. Though historians trace the idea back to St. Boniface, who seemed to have a thing about trees, this idea surfaced in our consumer culture ten or fifteen years ago. You can still find inverted Christmas trees on the internet, but I doubt many of you have one in your home.

The idea was that traditional Christmas trees take up too much floor space. If you invert them, the ornaments are more visible, because they hang away from the branches. And of course, there is more room around the base for presents, which, as we all know, is the point of Christmas. Why waste precious square footage with branches when you can pile it high with packages? I think the tree isn't all that's upside-down about that idea.²

The holidays are topsy-turvy enough, even in normal times, aren't they? In many ways, it's the most wonderful time of year, with all the decorations—right side up, mind you—and Christmas carols and church functions and parties and shopping. It's a great time of year, normally.

But even in the best of times, the holidays are a very tough season. The stress of the season weighs heavy on many people. Sometimes this is caused by the busy schedule and multiple demands of the holidays. But sometimes the stress comes because we have all these sugarplum-fairy-Norman-Rockwell images of the holidays, and our reality never quite measures up. The holidays intensify our family dysfunctions, our grief, our depression. Suicide and substance abuse go up during December every year. The soldiers are still deployed overseas; the poor are still poor; the homeless have no homes.

And this year, we have a raging pandemic that changes everything. The church functions and parties and gatherings with family that we normally enjoy will not be happening this year. The hospitals are full, and the

medical personnel and other front-line workers—police, EMT’s, firefighters, school teachers—are stretched thin and burnt out.

It’s a holiday season like we have never experienced before. But it’s the reality we are living in right now. Like never before, we need healing, comfort, and strength during this holiday season.

The Bible is no stranger to the harsh realities of life. The people who heard this word from the prophet Isaiah had endured the destruction of their nation and their Temple. They had been exiled in a foreign land for decades. They longed for a Savior to come and heal their land. But when the Savior came, he came as a helpless baby to an unmarried couple in the poverty of a stable in the middle of an occupied country. Don’t tell me the Bible doesn’t understand our struggles!

So what is the message we hear from the prophet in the midst of our trouble today? Situated where it is in the book of Isaiah, it breaks the spell of despair that surrounded the Exile. It’s a word of comfort, encouragement, healing, and hope: *“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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

The people were looking for a Savior, someone to redeem their situation, and Isaiah proclaimed that God was coming like a road construction crew across the desert to rescue them: *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.”*⁴

When the Savior comes, he is going to pick up his people like a shepherd picks up a wounded lamb and comforts it: *“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.”*⁵

To a people in exile, battered and bruised by conquest and displacement, guilt and despair, this was good news. The bad times would soon be over. God was on his way!

To those of us today who are battered and bruised by life, road-weary and wrung-out by the journey, living in fear and despair, dealing with sickness and death, God says the same word of comfort and consolation and encouragement. God wants to build a highway to your heart. God wants to hold you like a shepherd folds a lamb into his bosom. God wants you to see the glory of his healing love. That's why he sent the Savior. That's why Love came down. That's why the Baby was born.

This is the Good News of Advent: **The Baby comes to bring us God's love.** This birth is the sure and certain sign of God's regard for us. He became flesh like us in the body of his Son Jesus Christ. The First Letter of John says, "*God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*"⁶ When God sends his Son, he speaks the word of love to us.

Steve Henning of Huntley, Illinois, was two years old when he contracted spinal meningitis. It was the winter of 1943, and because of World War II, doctors had a shortage of penicillin and could not provide Steve the treatment he needed. He lost his hearing that winter.

For 57 years, Steve could not hear music, laughter, or human speech. Even though he lived a full life, he still longed to hear the voices of those he loved. In 2001, he learned of a surgical procedure called cochlear implants that would allow sound waves to bypass the non-functioning part of his ear and travel directly to the auditory nerve. He had the operation and waited expectantly for the swelling to go down so the device could be activated. For six weeks he wondered if the operation would be successful. Finally, the audiologist programmed the device. He invited Steve's wife to say something. Pat Henning leaned toward her husband and gently said, "I love you." For the first time in six decades, Steve could hear. His face broke into a smile. He had been healed, and the first words he heard were words of love.⁷ The message of love is the word the speechless Baby says to us today.

The Baby also comes to bring us hope. Normally, when we experience the rough places of life, we prefer instant gratification and immediate

healing. But real life doesn't always work that way. A nation may be in exile for seventy years. A deaf man may not hear for 57 years. You may have to be patient in your affliction. But do not despair. What we see lying in the manger of Bethlehem is a sure and certain sign of God's ultimate victory.

It's not always easy to live in hope. Our troubles seem so big. It feels like we will never get out of the valley of the shadow of death. We get tired of the suffering, the pain, and the heartache. But then we look at Jesus. The people of God had waited on his arrival for centuries. He was born a human being who took the usual amount of time to grow up. The key event of God's plan of salvation—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—took something like 30 years to achieve. If it took God that long, maybe we can hold out a little longer.

Oddly enough, with the cases, hospitalizations, and deaths surging around us due to COVID-19, this has been a week filled with hope. Two and maybe three vaccines will be approved in a matter of days. Before the end of the month, front-line workers and vulnerable people in care facilities will be getting vaccinated. Within two or three months, the general population will be getting vaccinated, and by next summer, the pandemic will be on the retreat.⁸ This is amazing news! This thing is going to end; we can see it coming finally. We can have hope.

Our task now is to endure. We cannot let up. We have to wear the masks, wash our hands, keep our distance for a little while longer. We've done it for nine months; we need to do it for a few months more. But we can do this, because we are people of hope. We can do this, because we have a Baby, whose name is Emmanuel—God With Us. He is our hope, however long it takes.

The Baby comes to bring us love, hope, and healing. Whatever your affliction might be today—physical, emotional, spiritual, relational—this is where you find comfort: in the coming of the Savior, in the love of God, in the quiet glory of a humble birth. This is the right-side-up celebration of Christmas. It's a celebration of life!

Randy and Darla Maness had one of the toughest families I have ever known. They lived in Saline County. While I was their pastor their home

was destroyed by a tornado. They had twin grandchildren in neo-natal intensive care for months, who survived but continued to have special needs. Her mother died, and their son Nathan did a tour of duty in Iraq.

They also had a grown son named Steven who battled brain cancer for about three years. Steven lived in Franklin, TN, just outside Nashville, with his wife Sandy. Over the course of his disease, I got to know Steven, mostly by long distance or through his parents. Though he was a young man, he was far beyond his years in faith. He never lost hope in God, but he was quite aware that the healing God had in store for him might be his entry into heaven. Just a few weeks before he died, he told me on the phone, "I've got the easy part. I'm 99.9% sure of how I'm going to die, and you don't have a clue. And I get to go where we all want to go."

In the spring of 2005, Steven got a new reason to live. Sandy became pregnant, and when they found out it was going to be a boy, they chose a name for their first-born son that belonged to Steven's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. As they prepared for the birth, they also prepared for a funeral, and it became a race against time. If Steven could only make it to see his son born, what a blessing that would be. But on a Sunday afternoon in November, with six weeks to go until the due date, Steven lost the battle with cancer and won the war of life as he passed away in his home with his family gathered around.

Two days later, at the funeral home making Steven's final arrangements, Sandy went into labor. They rushed her to the hospital and tried to stop the contractions, but the force of new life was too strong, and on Wednesday morning, Whitten Randal Maness was born—six weeks early, but over 6 pounds of healthy baby boy.

After he was born, Sandy told her in-laws, "Steven wanted his funeral to be a celebration of life. How much better could it be?" Randy, Steven's dad, said they were all in the valley of the shadow when Steven passed, but that new grandbaby had put them all on the mountaintop again. The baby came, and he brought healing. That's real comfort. That's real life. That's what the real celebration of the Baby Jesus is all about.

If you find yourself in the valley of the shadow today, or if your holidays have been turned upside-down by sickness or grief or loneliness or fear or

fatigue, I want to invite you to experience Communion with God. In the Lord's Supper, we see how far God's love will go. We feel the healing grace of God. We claim the hope of the coming Kingdom. On this second Sunday in Advent, we know the Baby is coming. We know that the Baby has come. He brings with him love and hope and healing. It's a celebration of life! And it is good. It is very good.

¹ <https://www.pinterest.com/mississippipics/inventions-that-didnt-work-out/>.

² Andrew Hard, "Christmas on the Flip Side," FoxNews.com, November 9, 2005. Or google "upside-down Christmas tree."

³ Isaiah 40:1-2.

⁴ Isaiah 40:3-5.

⁵ Isaiah 40:11.

⁶I John 4:9-10.

⁷ Greg Asimakoupoulos, from *The Daily Herald*, September 29, 2001, *PreachingToday.com*.

⁸ David Leonhart, "The Morning," *NY Times*, December 2, 2020.