

Comfort

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith
September 18, 2022

Readings

Psalm 23 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

- 1 A psalm of David.
Jehovah is my Shepherd;
I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me to lie down in pastures of tender herb;
He guides me by waters of rest.
- 3 He restores my soul;
He leads me in paths of justice for the sake of His name.
- 4 Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You arrange a table before me
In the presence of my adversaries;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
And I shall dwell in the house of Jehovah for length of days.

John 14:15-18, 25-27 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

¹⁵ [Jesus said,] "If you love Me, keep My commandments. ¹⁶ And I will plead with the Father, and He will give you another Comforter, that it may remain with you into eternity: ¹⁷ the spirit of Truth, which the world cannot receive, because it neither sees it nor knows it; but you know it, because it remains with you, and shall be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you orphans; I come to you.

²⁵ "These things have I spoken to you, remaining with you. ²⁶ And the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, which the Father will send in My name, this will teach you all things, and will remind you of all things which I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be disturbed, neither let it be afraid."

Apocalypse Explained §727:2

“To walk in the valley of the shadow of death” signifies in the spiritual sense an obscure understanding that does not see truths from light. “Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me” signifies that spiritual Divine truth together with natural Divine truth will protect, for these have power....

Secrets of Heaven §6578

“[C]omforting” has reference to the understanding, and “speaking to the heart” to the will. “[H]e comforted them” means hope, since it is an attribute of the understanding received through truth, while “he spoke to their heart” means trust, since it is an attribute of the will received through good. Genuine trust cannot be imparted to anyone except for those with whom the good of charity exists, and genuine hope cannot be imparted to anyone except for those with whom the good of faith is present.

Introduction

- Last week Derek spoke about gathering the scattered flock.
 - How the evil spirits work to scatter and separate us and how the Lord works to gather us and bring us back to Him and back together with other people.
- As an extension of that theme, today we are going to reflect on one of the many benefits of being gathered together in community – comfort in hardship.
 - Life is tragically hard sometimes and having a community of people who reach out to us and care for us in those times can make a huge difference.
- But offering comfort and receiving comfort is also challenging.
 - It seems like it should be simpler than it is but, as a person trying to offer comfort, we might not know what to say or to do or not do.
 - And, as someone in need of comfort, it can be hard when what people are offering us is just not what we need right now or when we know what we need and nobody seems able or willing to offer it.
- In these times there is a lot of opportunity for help and healing and also a lot of opportunity for hurt.
- Let's reflect on some of what the Lord has to say about this topic in His Word and see if we can be reminded of how to be a bit better at offering and at receiving comfort.
 - Today, to limit this large topic a bit, we're going to focus mostly on the role of truth in comforting.

The Role of Truth in Comforting

- That might sound strange – the role of truth in comforting – because we don't tend to think of comforting as something involving truth.
- And, if you're someone who is skilled at counseling and helping people in difficult circumstances, you might be getting a little bit nervous right about now.
 - This could go very wrong.
 - What people need is love and care.
 - "Please don't tell people that what suffering people need is a good dose of truth or that they need things explained to them or to be told to just look on the bright side!"
 - No. We don't want to do those things.
 - It is not our role to try to explain away or talk someone out of their pain.
- But there is still a really important role for truth in comforting and being comforted; we just need to understand how it fits in and what it looks like in this context.

Comfort and Speak to the Heart

- One of the first scriptures that comes to mind about comfort is Isaiah 40, the text of that piece from Handel's *Messiah*.
 - In the Old King James translation the text says, "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...."
 - In that translation it just sounds like the command to comfort is repeated – Comfort my people and speak comfortably to Jerusalem.
 - The teachings of the New Church point out that these repeated phrases are throughout the Old and New Testaments and that, when these happen, one phrase relates to truth and one relates to good.
 - In Isaiah 40 it is easier to see which phrase relates to which in a more literal translation; it says, "Comfort... My people" and "Speak... to the heart of Jerusalem".
 - As we read in our lesson, "Comfort" is the phrase relating to the understanding or truth and "speak to the heart" is the phrase relating to the will or goodness.
- We need a marriage of truth and goodness or wisdom and love if we're going to receive or offer real comfort.

Joseph Comforting and Speaking to the Heart of His Brothers

- To see a good example of this, let's look at the story of Joseph comforting his brothers.
- You might remember that Joseph's brothers who were jealous of him had sold him into slavery and told their father Jacob that Joseph had been killed by some wild animal.
- And then, years later, they had met again when Joseph was in charge of all of Egypt.
 - And they had reconciled and Joseph had invited them all to live in Egypt so that they would have enough food.
 - But then their father died and Joseph's brothers worried that now Joseph was going to get his revenge and pay them back for all that they did to him.
 - So they said to Joseph, "Before our father died he begged that you not take revenge on us."
 - And it says that Joseph wept when they spoke to him (Genesis 50:17).
 - Then they fall down before him and say to him, "See, we are your servants."
- Genesis 50:19-21 (NKJV, modified)
 - ¹⁹ Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. ²¹ Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke to their heart.
- Notice that again there is that pairing of comforting and speaking to the heart.
 - And in what Joseph says there is plenty of love and mercy and caring but there also is truth and wisdom and telling it like it is.
 - He doesn't explain away what they did to him or say that it was OK: he says, "You meant evil against me."
 - That's the truth.

- He acknowledges it and then he moves on and says another truth – that God brought lots of good out of the evil thing that his brothers did to him.
 - Both of those things are true.
- It seems like because he acknowledged the evil things it meant they could believe him and be comforted by him when he said that he would look after them and their little ones.

The Need for Looking Squarely at the Hard Things

- We can see the same need for truth in memorial services for people who have caused a lot of hurt in their lives.
 - There is a tendency to want to gloss over all of the hurt and just focus on the good.
 - But when we can acknowledge the hurt that someone caused and also talk about their good intentions and the good things that they did do, then there can be more of that marriage of goodness and truth.
 - And the things we might say about the Lord’s mercy and forgiveness are believable because they’re tempered by the acknowledgement of the hard stuff.
- And we can see the same kind of dynamic also playing out when we’re in a hard place and someone is trying to comfort us.
 - If the person jumps too quickly to trying to help us feel better, it doesn’t work at all.
 - We need them to see us first – to really see how hard, how scary, how much of a gut punch our current situation is.
 - Once we know that they really get it, then they might be able to offer us something else.

“Your rod and Your staff they comfort me.”

- Another scripture that comes to mind about comfort is from the 23rd Psalm – “Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”
 - That’s familiar but it’s also sort of surprising when you think about it.
 - A big stick is comforting?
 - We might expect it to say something like “Your embrace and Your care they comfort me.”
- But no, we need the Lord’s rod and staff to comfort us, particularly when we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death.
 - This makes sense on a literal level.
 - If you were walking through a dark forest at night and were worried about wolves attacking you, would you be more comforted by someone offering you a hug or by someone who knows what they’re doing offering to defend you with some big sticks?
- As we heard in the lessons, the teachings of the New Church tell us that the Lord’s rod and staff mean “spiritual Divine truth together with natural Divine truth” that will protect us.
- When we are going through a tragedy or some kind of spiritual crisis or temptation, we really need the protection of the Lord’s truth.
 - In those times it feels like the ground has fallen out from under us and everything is up for grabs and all sorts of weird and false ideas can occur to us.

- A few examples:
 - "Because this has happened, nothing matters anymore."
 - "Life has always been terrible and always will be terrible."
 - "God must not care about me anymore or maybe He doesn't even exist."
- One way that the Lord's rod and staff comfort us in those times is how we can sometimes dismiss some of those thoughts and feelings pretty easily – "No... I know that that's not true. It *feels* true but I know it's not..."
- Sometimes the spiritual or natural truth we need is to know that we're not all alone in what we're experiencing.

Elijah Felt All Alone

- The prophet Elijah was once ready to give up because he had worked really hard to turn people back to the Lord but he felt totally alone and so he prayed that the Lord would take His life.
 - And he said to the Lord, "I alone am left; and they seek to take my life" (1 Kings 19:10).
- The Lord tells him a couple of different things to do but He also reveals to Elijah that he's not alone – there is Elisha who will take up his mantle after him and there are still seven thousand people in Israel who have not worshipped false gods (1 Kings 19:18).
 - It can be so powerful and comforting to find even just a few like-minded people or to be part of a community of people who share the same love of the Lord and commitment to trying to follow Him.
 - And it can be so powerful to know that you're not alone in going through what you're going through.
- Isn't it interesting that part of what Elijah needed was to see that the way he was seeing the world was not a true understanding of the situation.
 - Sometimes, when we are going through something hard, we will need to be open to seeing a different perspective.
 - And sometimes part of what we have to offer to other people who are struggling is a different perspective on what they're going through.
 - That is sometimes how we can help and offer comfort is to help them see that they're not alone.
 - Now we probably shouldn't start by trying to change someone's mind.
 - In the story, the Lord doesn't lead with telling Elijah what to do.
 - He starts by letting him sleep.
 - And then he feeds Elijah and lets him sleep again.
 - And lets him go on a whole journey and asks him some questions and lets him experience fire, wind, and earthquakes and only then tells him what to do and how his perspective is inaccurate.
 - We should be careful to not jump too quickly to advice and arguing with a person who is struggling.
 - But, gently offering a different perspective than the one they currently have, could well be part of what will bring them protection and comfort.

- Think of a young couple that has only been married for a short amount of time.
 - And, for the first time, they run into a situation where one of them wants one thing out of their life and the other wants a different thing out of their life and they can't do both, they have to pick one or the other.
 - It's easy for them to feel pretty terrible and pretty alone in that situation.
 - And various thoughts will occur to them, "Should I not have married this person?"
 - And they feel bad for even thinking that thought but there it is whether they like it or not.
- And then let's imagine that that couple goes to a marriage support group and hears an older couple talking about a time when they wanted very different things.
 - And maybe the story doesn't even have a tidy bow on it.
 - Maybe they had to make a hard decision and it hurt then and it still hurts a little today to think back on it but the couple can talk about it without any blame or resentment and the young couple can see that they still clearly love each other and are still committed to the marriage and to each other.
- That example can be a rod and a staff to comfort that young couple and protect them from hell trying to break up their marriage.
 - They can know that they're not alone in their challenge and that there is a way forward.

We Need Light, Not Just Warmth

- Here's one other way of thinking about the comforting role of truth.
 - The teachings of the New Church say that the "valley of the shadow of death" is "an obscure understanding that does not see truths from light" (*Apocalypse Explained* §727:2).
- When we're in a dark place, we don't just need the warmth of love, we need the light of truth.
- And often we don't need to learn something new and complicated, we just need to be reminded of things we already know.
 - The Lord said in John that the Comforter that He will send to us, which is His Holy Spirit or His presence with us will "teach you all things, and will remind you of all things which I have said to you" (John 14:26).
 - Sometimes other people can play that role of gently reminding us of things that we already know.

We Will Take Turns

- At different stages of our lives we will be in the role of offering comfort and being the one in need of comfort.
 - It's much less comfortable to be in the role of the person receiving comfort but, if we're only ever offering comfort to others and never acknowledging that we need help, then we're doing something wrong.
- Some days you might be struggling to believe that what the Lord says is true and so it might be my role to try to comfort you, and strengthen you in your faith, and remind you of things you already know.
 - And on other days it will be me that is struggling and I will need you to comfort me and strengthen me and remind me of things I already know.

Learning from the Real Comforter

- We'll do this well sometimes; and other times we're going to make a mess of it.
 - We're going to say something insensitive.
 - Or we're going to be so scared to say the wrong thing that we don't say anything at all.
 - Or we're going to find ourselves preaching at someone and trying to cheer them up when we were meaning to actually focus on listening.
- Those things are going to happen.
- And it's still worth trying.
- And it will be OK because the real Comforter can bring us comfort when everyone else fails.
 - "When other helpers fail, and comforts flee, help of the helpless, O abide with me."
 - Whatever pain we're going through, the Lord gets it and can help us get through it.
- And if we keep turning to the real Comforter, He will help us get better at comforting.
 - As Paul says in 2nd Corinthians,
 - 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (NKJV)
 - ³ Blessed be... the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.
- We can pray that, as individuals and as a community, the Lord will help us to slowly get better at offering and receiving comfort from each other and that we will grow into more and more of the community that the Lord wants us to be.
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.