

Reflection for Sunday November 16, 2025

by Jennifer Irving

As I considered our scripture readings for today, I kept coming back to what I talked about in our time for wondering. The need for comfort in our world. Let's face it, this world can be a hard place – filled with hard things: grief, injustice, suffering, anger, poverty, incurable illnesses, wars, natural disasters—you get the picture. Sometimes all in one year, one month, one day. And we think if we can just survive this then things will start getting better and instead, life just keeps happening—and the next curveball comes our way. And we wonder, “how much more of this can I handle”. And people try to offer us comfort—words like “God never gives us more than we can handle.” (which is not all that comforting and not something I believe—not least of all because I don't believe God is giving us the bad things that happen in our lives at all—I believe God is with us through it all and just as sad as we are when we face hard things not that our God would pull strings behind the scene to “test” us or help us “grow”—that's not a comfort for me and also not least of all, I know people who could not handle all the things that came at them in life—not at all—life broke them in one way or another) But, I do understand the desire to offer comfort to those who are struggling. I don't begrudge trying to figure out how to soothe the wounded souls of those we love. And our own souls. Let me be the first to admit that I'm a big fan of comfort food—just something warm and filling – like an apple pie left on my desk by the sip 'n' serve last Monday heated up in the microwave – just as an example... I'm also not adverse to binge watching a comfort tv show (for me, Parks and Rec, Ted Lasso and Brooklyn 99 are an excellent panacea to soothe my soul and make me smile even on the worst day). And at this time of year, Hallmark Christmas movies are playing 24/7.

And, I'm not gonna lie, I'm kind of a fan of Isaiah's words from long ago that were meant to offer just that – comfort to a people. You see, originally, it was written to encourage the post-Exilic Jewish community. They were home, but home wasn't what it used to be, what they wanted it to be, not by a long shot. They needed hope that it would get better—a vision of new heavens and a new earth free from all the hard things they were going through was given to comfort them. And they comfort me still.

For anyone who has lost an infant child, lost their home, works hard and never gets ahead, even someone who has grieved the loss of a grandparent at the age of 100, or worries that their children will face persecution just because of the colour of their skin or who they love or their gender identity, there is comfort in these words that promise a place free from those troubles and sorrows and where all will be beloved and blessed. I believe that the community for whom these words were first preached and many ears that have heard them since, found great comfort in them.

Yet I also believe that for some—these words about new heavens and a new earth don't offer much comfort at all—they are empty promises of a time that isn't now. In the now, the one we love is still gone, the pain is real, the bombs are still falling.

Maybe they weren't hitting the mark for those living in the early days after Jesus' death and resurrection facing persecution and execution for following Jesus. In the days after the destruction of the Temple when Luke attributed these words to Jesus from our gospel reading this morning in the hopes that they would bring comfort for those times when terrifying and terrible things were happening all around them. I mean, it doesn't seem that comforting when you read this list of “Predictions” from Jesus.

“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. ¹²“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ... ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all because of my name.” *Luke 21 NRSV*

But the truth is, these things were already happening so to hear that the Holy Spirit would give them the words they needed to defend themselves and that even in the face of death there would be salvation—some way that they would not perish. I believe this was indeed written to offer comfort to those who were persecuted.

Once again, I don't think everyone finds this message necessarily comforting. But for many these words assuring us that in some way, somehow, those we love, live on even after death are a great comfort indeed. And that God is with us through it all—no matter how terrible things get—strong comfort indeed.

I know that I'm always saying that what God wants most is that each of us feel and know that we are loved—unconditionally and wholeheartedly—just as we are, exactly how we are. But this week, it struck me that I believe God wants just as much for each one of us to find comfort—to be comforted in the hardest and most difficult moments of our life. And I believe this comfort can come in a wide variety of ways—from a cuddle with a dog curled up on a couch; from the sweet heat given off by a wood-burning stove glowing beside a freshly decorated Christmas tree; from a phat nap before you hit the books to study for that mid-term; or the pocket prayer shawl held in your hand during a hospital stay.

Comfort comes in as many shapes and sizes as we do!

A little story of surprising comfort I found last week. I was attending a Pastor's Encouragement Luncheon in Collingwood. In case you think, oh, that's nice, must have been comforting for Jennifer. Nope, it wasn't. It was awkward and I was feeling particularly uncomfortable worried that what I believed about God was very different than what the people at my table believed and that I was going to say something that would give me away or that they were going to say something to make me cringe and want to leave. And then, they invited one of the Pastor's up to offer prayer. And instead of praying for us, he did the most uncomfortable thing of all. He asked us to step out of our comfort zones and do something different. He asked people who felt they were in need of prayers—for whatever reason—to remain seated. And people who felt called to offer prayer to stand up. You know, I'm grieving, and that day, I was feeling particularly raw, and even though every bone in my body was screaming “STAND UP!” I stayed seated. And a group of “Pastor's” gathered around me and put their hands on my shoulders and prayed. This was literally my worst nightmare. I could not have been more uncomfortable. And these people, some who knew me, more who didn't—prayed that I would feel God's arms around me like a hug, comforting me and giving me strength. And here's the shocker—at least to me—those prayers, offered in love, comforted me in a way almost nothing else since Neil died has been able to. God works in mysterious ways.

So, today, it is my prayer that you too feel God's arms around you like a hug, comforting you and giving you strength for whatever lies ahead. May God speak to you and give you peace.