Second Sunday of Advent: Comfort

Twenty-five years ago we Americans were in a national depression. The Christmas season was beginning, the stores were offering all their bargains, but the people of the United States were still in a national shock and not in much of a mood for an oncoming celebration. The events of September 11, 2001, were in our minds to such an extent that even the media had to limit its sensationalism. Pictures of the plane crashes and people leaping to their deaths were no longer being aired. We could not handle it. Some people were too depressed to work. The government was concerned. The president addressed the nation pleading with people to resume their lives or, as the phrase used at that time went, "the terrorists will win." Noted doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists and behavior specialists told people that it was OK for them to eat food that would relax them even if it was not the best for them. They called it comfort food. Frito-lay and the captains of the cheese doodle industry did banner business. A short while later cardiologists would see a bit of a spike in the number of their patients. I should know, because by the end of the next Spring I was enjoying their services myself.

Comfort in times of stress cannot be provided by food, even if that food is really, really good tasting. The prophet of the Second part of the *Book of Isaiah*, is told to bring comfort to the people. But he is not told to tell them to eat cheese doodles. Instead, he is told to tell them that God is aware of their plight and will deliver them from captivity. You see, the Hebrews had been conquered by the Babylonians in 588 BC. Those who were not murdered were exiled to Babylon. They were marched over the desert bound together, some even with hooks through their noses to keep them from running away. While they were in Babylon they had no army, no power, no ability to revolt, no hope for escape. They had no hope of their own, except the greatest hope. Their hope was that God would see their plight and deliver them from their slavery just as he had delivered their ancestors from slavery in Egypt during the time of Moses. So, the people became far more fervent, far more committed to their faith.

And God heard them. And he promised them a Savior, a Deliverer. They had to prepare for His coming, for He would come in a power and might the world had never experienced. Then Jerusalem, the city that had been destroyed, will not only be rebuilt but will be restored as the center of God's people. *"See, He comes," the prophet says, "And like a shepherd he will feed his flock, gather his lambs in his arms, and lead the ewe lambs home with great care."*

A little over six hundred years after this prophecy, John the Baptist appeared with a mandate: he was to proclaim that the Kingdom of God was at hand, that the Savior was coming. The people of his day were oppressed by the Romans, and by their own religious leaders. Ths was a time of fierce conquest, of slaughter. The Romans had no concern for life. To oppose them was to chance being crucified, as hundreds and perhaps thousands would be crucified after the rebellion of 70 AD. Most of the people's religious leaders viewed them as slum with no chance of fulfilling all the Jewish laws. But, as in the time of Babylon, a Savior, a Deliverer would come; only

this Deliverer would save the people from the power that gave the Romans their fierce domination and gave their religious leaders their arrogance, that was the power of sin.

As in the time of Isaiah, the people had to prepare for the Savior. John the Baptist would preach a message of repentance. Sin had to be defeated within each person for evil to be defeated in the world. The people who went out from Jerusalem and all over the Judean countryside to hear John saw a man dressed like a prophet, clothed in camel hair, eating insects and honey. They listened to his call for them to join him in preparing the Kingdom of God. They listened to His telling them that the Savior was at hand.

The annual spiritual exercise of Advent returns us to those days before the public manifestation of Jesus. The world was sitting on the edge of its chair, ready to leap with joy at the Coming of the Lord. Comfort was coming then. Comfort is coming now. It is not found in food. Comfort is found in union with the Lord. Well, comfort is found in a very special food, the food the Lord would give, His Body and Blood, the Eucharist. Think about this, we most often feel great comfort when we go to communion.

And we prepare for Christmas. We prepare not just to celebrate the birth of the Lord 2026 years ago, but to celebrate His coming into each of our lives. Like the prophet Isaiah predicted, like the prophet John the Baptist demanded, we must fill in the valleys of our hearts, the gapes where we exclude the Lord, and level the mountains, the barriers of resistence we construct that block His Way. We must build a highway for Christ into our hearts.

Jesus Christ is a reality, not an ideal. He is comes into our lives, if we let Him. We have to prepare for Him. Christmas is the celebration of love. It is a celebration of the Love that God the Father has for us to send us His Son. We need to return this Gift to Him by giving our deep love to each other. To do this we need to fill in those holes where we allow ourselves to be empty, where we refuse love. For some of us, those holes are canyons. Our refusal to forgive those who have hurt us has created a hole in our hearts that has hampered the coming of the Lord into our lives. We have to level the mountains and hills we have constructed as barriers to love. We cannot hate. We cannot take advantage of others for our happiness. We cannot depend on externals for happiness. Hedonism and materialism have become mountains and hills, barriers to love. We cannot and must not allow this to continue. We can fill in the canyons. We can forgive. We can level the mountains. We can remove the barriers to the spiritual.

We can be people ready to receive their King, their Savior, their Deliverer. We can sing out with our lives, as Rich Mullins had the captives singing:

My Deliverer is coming - my Deliverer is standing by.
My Deliverer is coming - my Deliverer is standing by.
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He is coming. Jesus really is coming into each of our lives.

Even better.

He is already here!

And that is our great comfort.