

“Comfort Ye, My People”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Dr. John B. Wolf, Minister Emeritus
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on May 7, 2006

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith the Lord.

*A voice was heard in Ramah,
Rachel weeping for her children.
She refused to be consoled,
Because they were no more.*

These chilling words from the prophet Jeremiah, he who had witnessed the defeat and exile of his people at the hands of a brutal tyrant, are echoed again in the Christmas Story, in the gospel according to Matthew. A portent of the horrendous grief to follow. We, all of us, know the end of that story.

And we know of the portent of grief that every moment threatens our lives and the lives of those nearest and dearest to us.

*Did someone say that here would be an end,
An end, Oh, an end, to love and mourning?
What has been once so interwoven cannot be raveled,
Nor the gift ungiven.*

-May Sarton

There is no consolation for what has happened to Marlin and Anitra. It makes no sense. It is beyond imagining. It cannot be smoothed out. It cannot be made straight. There is no word that can be spoken, or that anyone knows to speak, that can comfort them. Theirs is a desert no highway can cross.

We lost our first grandchild, a baby a'borning. But we have never lost a child of our own. I do not know what it would be like to lose a child. All I know is that it is unthinkable – something beyond imagining. I have no idea how I would survive it. I have no idea how anyone survives it. I believe it is a miracle if they do.

Many years ago now – some of you may remember – there was a series of deaths of children. One after another, it seemed to me, in our congregation. I felt completely helpless. I knew there was nothing I could do. There was, literally, nothing that I could say, nothing that did not sound empty and contrived. It was getting to me.

Then, at once, I happened to be reading one of May Sarton's diaries. That remarkable poet. That remarkable woman. She told about the death of a child she knew, and that she had been listening to Mahler's Symphony, "Der Toten Lieder," based on a poem by Schiller. "Der Toten Lieder:" The Death of Children. And, out of Mahler's powerful harmonies wailed Schiller's word set to music:

*Do not let the children go out.
Do not let the children go out.
Oh, God, do not let the children go out!
Something might happen to them.
What if something happened to them?!*

Has there ever been a parent who has not carried the burden of that fear? Somehow we all know what could happen. The unthinkable. The unspeakable. And the dread fear is always there. As I was saying, it was getting to me. And so I decided to come right out with it. All of it – my helplessness, my own fears included. I told you that I needed to share what I was feeling with you. That I could no longer pretend to go it alone.

It was then I discovered that there were still more people in our congregation who had lost children than even I knew about. It was something they didn't talk about. It was, as often as not, something they *couldn't* talk about. And it was something they never got over!

And there was something else I learned. Something else I did not know about. Many of the people in our congregation who had lost children knew one another. They were sharing what they felt and what they knew with each other. What they could not share with me. Because what they felt, and what they knew, someone who had never lost a child could never understand.

As it is written:

*The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light.
They that dwelt in the deep darkness,
Even the Valley of the Shadow of death,
Upon them has the light shined.*

By the way, Dearly Beloved, that is what a church is about. A church is not a church for religion's sake. As a matter of fact, too much religion in a church (like too much religion in a family or a school or a nation) too much religion in anything, can destroy it. No, a church is a place where religion, the fierce business of judging and being judged, does not matter.

Quite the contrary. A church is a place where people who have been there, people who have doubted and despaired of any meaning, find their faith again. People who have done what they ought not to have done, and not done what they ought to have done, find understanding and even forgiveness. People who have all but given up on living, find the will to breathe again. And people who have lost a child can slowly, slowly – healing is adagio – come back to love and mourning.

You want to know what God is? Don't, for God's sake, look to religion. Look to the church. Look to the people who have been there, to people who know how it feels as no one who has never been there can ever know.

*The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light.
They that dwelt in the deep darkness,
Upon them has the light shined.*

So let us now get a few things straight: God did not “call Sienna home.” God did not sicken and kill her, or cause her to die. God is not punishing Anitra and Marlin for their sins, or because they were not right with God. God is not punishing or testing them – or us!

Such business is not what God is about. There is a word for such nonsense. (Doubtless a word or two that you would not want me to use.) So let us just settle, in this House of Light, with calling it religion. Or, at the very least, the wrong kind of religion.

I will tell you where God fits into this, if you will allow me. Consider: we are surrounded on every side with death. Or what philosophers call “non-being.” Here we are, spinning around on a little blue marble out in the middle of nowhere. So far as we know, we are out here alone. We don't know where we are going. (Oh, we do know where we came from, we just can't remember. And for that matter we have a pretty good idea where we are going, but that is neither here nor there.) The fact is, here we are. Anything can happen to us at any time. For no reason. Or none that makes any sense. But one thing is absolutely certain: this is not a good situation.

The question is, the ultimate question – the theological question – is: why do we put up with it? Because we do. Why don't we just end it all and be done with it? Because we don't. Instead, we not only put up with it, we transcend it. We do not just cash in our chips and save ourselves all the trouble. We steadfastly persist.

No one can tell you, because no one really knows, how someone survives the death of a child. Even as no one knows, or can even begin to tell you, why people pick up and start all

over again, when everything they loved and cherished has been washed away. All we know or can tell you is that they do. And where, in Heaven's name, does that come from?

One thing is certain. It is not a matter of believing or not believing. Like believing in God, or not believing in God. No, it is a matter of observation. It is not something we believe or do not believe. It is something we know is there because we have observed it. We have seen it. We have witnessed it in countless lives of living, breathing, loving and mourning human beings like ourselves.

The great theologian, Paul Tillick, called this something that drives us on, that sustains us, that will not let us go: "courage." "The courage to be," he said. But where does this courage come from? This courage that defies all reason, all explanation? Where does this courage to live "in spite of," if not "because of" come from? Paul Tillick's great sentence was, "The possibility of this courage is the possibility of God."

*Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people,
[for] the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.
And all flesh shall see it together.*

My own teacher, Bernard Meland, put it another way. At the least level of abstraction, call it the will to life. Like what we observe in crabgrass! Anyone can tell you about crabgrass. There is no stopping it. It will grow out of stone walls. But, at the highest level of abstraction it is some grand affirmation of the existence of God.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall," wrote Robert Frost. Something there is that insists against every "no" a courageous "yes."

*i thank You God for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes.
-ee cummings*

There are simpler ways to put it. How can we survive such grief as there is in the world? Such senseless, unthinkable, unexplainable madness as that which, in the blink of an eye, snuffs out the life of a little girl. We are at our wits end.

I give you another poet. A Unitarian poet, as it turns out. This is Philip Booth, and his poem titled: "First Lesson."

*Lie back, daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.*

Again, in this time of so great mourning and hurt, it is important that I tell you what God is not. God did not cause this child's death. Or issue vengeance against her parents and her brother. There is no such God.

But I can also tell you what God *is*. God is that something within us and about us, which is the engine of life itself. It is that miracle, which we cannot even name, that calls us to life even in the midst of death. It is not something about which we can believe or disbelieve, but rather it is something which we behold in one another. A holy spirit like unto which we know because we have felt its presence here, in this place, in this House of Light, in this people all together.

We are, ourselves here, like the sea, like the Everlasting Arms. We will be here. To hold Marlin and Anitra and Elias, and one another, up. No matter what.

Join me in saying once again:

*Love is the spirit of this Church,
and service is its law.
This is our Great Covenant:
to dwell together in peace,
seek the truth in love,
and to help one another.*

Amen.