

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, June 14, 2020
“Comfort in Troubled Times” *(Psalm 46)*

It started the ball rolling. It was just a comment by the Chair of Worship at Richmond Hill United Church. He had called to ask about my availability for pulpit supply in July. In the course of the conversation, he mentioned that no matter who the preacher was, what people were looking for in these troubled times was comfort. That word kept bouncing around in my mind, generating a whole series of questions: what does comfort look and sound like; is it the same for each one of us; where do we seek comfort; how satisfying are these sources. As people of faith, what do our scriptures have to offer in the way of comfort?

Starting with probably the easiest, the “where” question, do you ever turn to food for comfort? When I asked the people in my coffee breakout group on Sunday: “what do you regard as ‘comfort food’”, they suggested spaghetti made from an old family recipe, and pizza - something warm, something satisfyingly filling, something that might speak of childhood, a parent’s love, a time when life seemed simpler, easier. Although television sit-coms may show women in particular turning to ice cream, eating an entire tub to drown their sorrows over a broken love affair, no one named any kind of dessert. I alone suggested oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. I remembered how when I was residing far from Canada and feeling homesick, I would go to great lengths hunting for the ingredients, chopping chocolate, substituting coconut oil for Crisco shortening, all to produce some semblance of the Butler family cookie that to this day my brother and sister, my niece and nephew, and my six greats always expect to find at my house.

Do you sometimes seek out a place? As a child, growing up by Lake Ontario, I would go down to the shore. There was something about waves lapping against the

rocks that soothed and calmed me. Today, I still find the sound of water comforting whether it is the fountain on the patio at my mother's retirement residence or the stream flowing out of the Mill Pond or rain falling on the metal roof here at Sharon-Hope United Church. Do you have a chair in which you rock or curl up, perhaps with your favourite afghan? Do you head out to the garden to pull weeds - a simple task in which you can lose yourself - or to the woods for a walk, surrounded by the timelessness of nature, the never ending cycle of life?

Do you turn to pets for comfort? I have always been an animal person. As a child, I had turtles and pet sat for guinea pigs, hamsters and dogs. As an adult, it has been dogs. This one black Labrador I was fostering for Canine Vision was a natural for pastoral care. Even as a young pup, if someone was distraught, she would put her head on their lap, and gaze at them with her gentle brown eyes until they were composed enough to tell me their story. When she failed as a guide dog for being too cautious, she became the perfect church dog, offering kisses to crying children, wags for homeless street people dropping by and plenty of warm Labrador leans for the lonely.

Do you seek out people for comfort? Perhaps a group like this church's Hope and Healing where you know you will be heard - with a talking stick in your hand, no one will interrupt to contradict you or offer advice or share their own similar story - and where you are confident your grief and struggle will be understood. Perhaps, you contact an old friend who when you have fallen apart in the past has always reassembled the pieces or an individual whose role as spiritual companion, counsellor, therapist suggests that they will be able to meet you where you are and offer you the touch, the words, the empathy that will comfort your heart.

Food and places, pets and people are all potential sources of comfort. During this time of pandemic, Sharon-Hope people have been good at offering each other comfort in the form not only of a casserole or homemade soup delivered to the doorstep or freshly baked muffins, cookies or a loaf of sourdough bread, but also of phone calls, cards and emails - all meant to convey the same message: "you are not forgotten. You are loved. You are cared for." Sometimes, these things do the trick. We are comforted: we are ready once more to take up the challenges of our lives. But sometimes, they are not enough. This is particularly true when our would-be comforters mis-step like my Lab putting her head on the lap of a non-dog lover who was repulsed by what he regarded not as soothing licks, but gross slobber. Since we are fallible human beings, we may say or do the wrong thing even when we have the best of intentions. I was reminded of that when I was reading Kate Bowler's book, ***Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved***. There was the smiling nurse who tried to cheer her up with an: "I just know that everything is going to work out!" This as Kate was recuperating from surgery for Stage four colon cancer. Kate heard the words alright, but in the face of her pain, weakness and grim prognosis, they sounded as believable and helpful as the promises of a fairy godmother. Then there were the people who wrote her letters which basically started with: "You think you have it bad? Listen to this!", followed by a litany of complaints. Perhaps, the senders hoped that Kate would realize her situation could be worse, and be comforted, but she was only irritated and annoyed. There were also the individuals whose comments began with: "Well, at least..." Kate heard these not as comforting reminders of what she still had - a son, a husband, a job, friends - but as minimizing what she was up against.

When people let us down, when our favourite food or place or pet is not enough to bring us comfort, where can we turn? I was thinking about this when I picked up the latest issue of "Broadview". My eye was caught by the article "Praying at Home". The author, Will Pearson, wrote: "as the prayer book led me through daily readings of the Psalms, I found it easier to identify with the Israelites who struggled to keep faith during adversity." "Right!" I thought. Where better to look for comfort in troubling times than to the psalmists. As Thomas Merton observed, "The Psalms are our Bread of Heaven in the wilderness of our Exodus." These poets are under no illusion that life is fair and that as people of faith, we are specially protected from all harm and danger, and guaranteed a smooth, easy path. Just listen to the poet who composed Psalm 46 that Susan read for us today. He paints powerful word pictures of the earth itself changing - the earth we depend on to be there for us to walk upon; to support our structures; to provide food to sustain us. He sees the mountains shaking, and the waters roaring and foaming. As if this is not enough of a disaster, he speaks of nations being at war, and countries lying in ruins. He may not be living in 2020, this year marked by the shooting down of an airliner, a global pandemic, brutality and racism, but he knows troubled times. And yet, he holds out comfort. Real comfort not just facile statements like "everything will be okay" or "don't worry; you will be alright."

The psalmist points to God as our refuge and strength. For Martin Luther living in a land of castles, and himself holing up in one when he was in danger from the authorities, God was a mighty fortress. Living in our twenty-first century North American landscape, "refuge" might conjure up a different sort of image, but the message is unchanged. No matter where we are, no matter what is happening to us or around us,

we can turn to God. And God is ready to welcome us and embrace us with compassion. Our United Church creed starts with the words “we are not alone” and repeats them towards the end. God’s ongoing, steadfast presence with us is that important. It makes all the difference in the world. As a young teenager, I really enjoyed figure skating. I liked my group classes and practiced long and hard. What I dreaded were the tests: having to execute a spin or figure 8 out on the ice by myself with the judges watching. So I wasn’t looking forward to trying my preliminary dance test. The music started, my partner scooped me up in her arms, and we were off. My knees still trembled, but by the end I was even smiling - all because I wasn’t out there alone. I drew strength and courage from my partner.

We are not alone; we have a partner. God is with us. We can draw strength and courage from God. Joyce Rupp who is one of my favourite spiritual writers puts it this way in her prayer / poem “Leaning On The Heart Of God”:

“I am leaning on the heart of God. I am resting there is silence. All the turmoil that exhausts me is brought to bear on this great love.

No resistance or complaint is heard as I lean upon God’s welcome. There is gladness for my coming. There is comfort for my pain.

I lean, and lean, and lean upon this heart that hurts with me. Strength lifts the weight of my distress. Courage wraps around my troubles.

No miracle of instant recovery. No taking away life’s burdens. Yet, there is solace for my soul, and refuge for my exiled tears.

It is enough for me to know the heart of God is with me, full of mercy and compassion, tending to the wounds I bear.”