

“Jesus: Comforter”

December 14, 2020

Incarnation series – Blue Christmas – Livestream

No doubt you’ve noticed the empty chair on our altar area tonight. Perhaps you’ve been noticing an empty chair around your dinner table or in your living room, the seat in your car where your loved one usually drove or rode, the empty place in the booth or table where you sat with a dear friend, or those other places that were special to you.

My dad died earlier this year in February, and his chair is still in the living room of my childhood. It’s still strange to walk in and see it empty of his familiar frame. But it’s a reminder of him and his place in my childhood home and my life.

So many of us are settling into this reality of loss – whatever it might be for us. Maybe it’s an empty chair – or maybe it just feels like emptiness. All of us carry some of the collective grief of this year. It comes in waves – sometimes we call it an “ambush” of grief. It’s not consistent. It’s sometimes inconvenient. It’s hard, and in the midst of it all, I offer us good news: Jesus is our Comforter.

It might be difficult to believe right now. You might be grieving or struggling. You might find it hard to believe that a baby born so many years ago, who grew up and lived so many years ago, who taught and healed so many years ago, who was put to death on a cross so many years ago and then rose again so many years ago, has anything to offer you or any comfort to give anyone in the midst of what we’re feeling.

It’s hard to feel good. Holidays can be tough when we’re grieving anyway. This year there’s extra. Let’s not deny it: it’s been a tough year. The sentiment has been true from the first time I read it: *We’re all in the same storm, but we’re not in the same boat*. But I remind myself and all of us that Jesus can comfort us because he understands it.

The Christmas story that we reflect on during this season is full of uncertainty, fear, chaos, and even pain. Jesus didn’t enter this earthly realm in a sanitized, safe moment. He was born to parents who both had to hear “Do not be afraid” as a preface to the announcement of his coming. He was welcomed by his parents not in a comfortable room, but in a space made for livestock. And from the start, he was in danger. King Herod wanted him gone, and his family had to flee – not unlike those in our world who know the reality of refugee life even in this present moment.

In this season, we’re focusing on the Incarnation – the powerful truth of our faith that God comes to be with us – that Jesus is God Incarnate – God in the flesh. Jesus knows deeply and intimately what it means to be human – what it feels like to experience the greatest happiness and the greatest suffering, struggle, and worry. We can take some comfort in that Good News - that Jesus gets it, and Jesus gets us. Tonight, I want you to hear that Jesus gets you and wants to offer you comfort.

And though we didn't read the Christmas story in Matthew or Luke, we hear words of comfort throughout Scripture. The psalmist reminds us that God is a help in times of trouble. God is a refuge – a place to be and find some comfort.

Paul has a word for us: Paul writes to the church in Rome talking about the present struggles they're facing. It wasn't easy to be faithful. Surely, they faced uncertainty and pain, too. But Paul says that Jesus is working to intercede for us – to bring comfort from God.

And then Paul proclaims it boldly: Nothing can separate us from God's love because God is love. Nothing can separate us from God's love because Jesus is with us fully. God's story of love, redemption, comfort doesn't end with death or illness or struggle or virus or violence or hatred or anything else. Nothing can separate us from God's love.

Perhaps that's comfort in itself. God is bigger than all of this. That doesn't discount our pain or grief, but it does remind that love will always be victorious. Ultimately, love wins.

Love is stronger than death, and we know that because of love remains even after our loved one is gone. I think of my dad often, and the best parts of that relationship are a gift to me.

Love is stronger than illness, and we feel that because people care about us. They send cards and texts. They bring food. They check in.

Love is stronger than this virus, and we see examples of help and care and selflessness each day. Strangers are connected with acts of compassion.

Love is stronger than hatred and violence because people stand up and say "enough" in the name of Jesus – who calls all of us to do the work of seeking justice and making peace.

Jesus is our Comforter, and his love is strong. And even though we may still struggle, even those we have questions, even though grief isn't over, I pray that we'll be able to take comfort in God's comfort and know that the candles we light – whether you come here later on or light one at home – are powerful reminders of God's presence and care.

Rachel Held Evans wrote in 2012, just after the tragic act of violence at Sandy Hook Elementary School, that the "stubborn flames" of candles we light this time of year "represent the divine promise that even the smallest light can chase away the shadows lurking in this world, that even in the darkest places, *God can't be kept out.*"

God can't be kept out. Be still, and know that God is with us. Nothing can separate us from God's love. Take comfort in God's love in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.