

Please turn in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

This morning I will be taking a break from preaching through James and preach a message on Comfort for the Afflicted. We will focus our attention primarily on 2 Cor. 1.3-4, but I will be drawing from different texts throughout the sermon.

2 Cor. 1:3-4 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Let's pray.

In August of 2005, Katrina, a category 5 hurricane devastated Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. It was estimated that 80% of New Orleans was under water, some places reaching 20 feet deep. The death toll reached close to 2,000 people.

According to one source, “Katrina was ‘the single most catastrophic natural disaster in U.S. history....’”¹ It caused \$81 billion in property damages and many houses were completely destroyed. Money poured in from all over the world to help the victims of this disaster.

Flooded homes, schools, churches and hospitals make people want to help. There is something about this sort of disaster that causes people to want to bring relief and help them to restore their communities and their lives.

But the kind of disaster that hits the news is different than the difficulties that take place at the personal level, which are more common to us. These are the problems that don't get the attention of the world, that are found in those who quietly struggle...they are the problems that go unnoticed by many, including those closest to us.

Who can measure personal loss? It can't measure up against hurricanes or natural disasters that bring billions of dollars in loss. And yet, the loss and devastation on the personal level can be much deeper and devastating than the loss of material possessions caused by a natural disaster.

Personal tragedy and trauma often go largely unnoticed and uncared for. It can be isolating and discouraging. It can be a lonely place to live, and can be deeply disheartening. It can take us to dark places and make us feel powerless.

¹ <https://money.cnn.com/2017/09/11/news/costliest-natural-disasters/index.html>

In the passage we are focusing on this morning, God reminds us that when we find ourselves in affliction, he is with us, to bring us comfort. He calls us to himself, that we might find in him a place of comfort, and refuge.

Now if there were an example of someone who knew God as his refuge, it was David.

And in Pastor Nicoletti's evening series on 1 Samuel, we have been learning a lot about David's personal struggles. We have been peering into David's heart, seeing his sorrows, his afflictions, and his triumphs.

And we do see a lot of sorrow in David's life. If you read the psalms of David, you see a lot of raw emotion. You read of his desperation and of his discouragement, his disappointment and frustration.

At the same time, we see that David's response to these problems was to go to his knees. It was from that humble point that he was able to better see the Lord and rejoice in his comfort. David, who was challenged in so many ways, somehow came out of those moments unshaken and confident. Like a young boy who stands tall because he walks in the presence of his father, David stands tall.

When we read David's psalms, at times he appears to be utterly desperate and feeling like he is on the brink of despair and then in the next verse it is as if the clouds have lifted and he is able to see clearly that the Lord is his refuge and begins to praise him in prayer and worship.

David was a man who really wrestled with God. He learned to come to him with everything. He approached him in his hour of need, and in his hour of thanks. He lived with God. He dwelled in his presence and found in him a strong refuge.

And David went through extreme personal hardships.

He was betrayed by Saul, he was separated from his friend Jonathan. He committed sins that would follow him all the days of his life, he suffered the death of his baby son and was betrayed by Absalom. He made decisions that took the lives of many Israelites and was forbidden from building the temple of the Lord because he had too much blood on his hands. The list could go on. He lived a full life with many dark moments and valleys. His life could have caused any man to despair.

But David's stronghold was God. God was his refuge. His trust was not in the strength of his army, or in his mighty men. He didn't speak of those. Rather, in his greatest moments of anguish, and greatest moments of joy, we see that he speaks to God as the source of his strength and his refuge. He turned to God in the midst of his despair because he knew that God would comfort him in his affliction.

You see, David took his afflictions to God all the time. God was his refuge and his rock. He went to God in his moments of despair and anguish. He learned to rest in who God was. He learned to depend on God's mercy by taking his problems to Him.

Do you find your comfort in God? Do you bring your afflictions to him?

Just in this past week our congregation has been faced with the loss of life, with difficult conversations on abortion and on abuse. Some of you have likely felt overwhelmed or saddled with grief and shame by some of these hard topics. These are significant issues that can leave people feeling hopeless and powerless.

And of course, these are just the things we are aware of. Surely others of you are suffering secretly as well. We live in a broken world and we are broken people and sometimes no one knows that you are in pain, or how deeply you are suffering.

If you find yourself entering or in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death, it is important that you resist the temptation to look inward for your hope, for your security.

In the same way a lion or another predator seeks to isolate his prey to capture him more easily, the Enemy wants you one on one. He wants you to be isolated and in the dark with your sorrow and shame. He doesn't want you sharing your problems with God or with others. He wants you alone feeling self-doubt, insecurity and the agony of your guilt and shame. In so doing he knows you will beat yourself up and believe that you are undeserving of God's grace and mercy.

And as they say, "the devil is in the details." The Enemy knows that we are undeserving of God's mercy, grace and comfort, so he reminds us of that. But what he leaves out and what we forget far too often, is that it is not just you. **No one** is worthy of that grace. But the Enemy wants you to dwell on your unworthiness so that you think you are the only one who is undeserving of God's comfort.

But that is the whole point of mercy and grace - no one deserves it. We are undeserving of God's mercy and comfort and yet Paul reminds us that our situation is different, because we are hidden in Christ. He says, "Blessed be the God and Father of **our Lord Jesus Christ.**" **Our Lord.**

This wording reminds us that Jesus is ours. And if Jesus is ours, then his Father, the God of Comfort and the Father of Mercies is ours as well. Our union in Jesus gives us access to the Father's mercy and comfort. Do you deserve it? No. None of us do. And yet, Jesus has accomplished it all. He has given us access to the Father. He has given us access to God's comfort. And because of Jesus, we are entitled to the privilege of God's comfort through our inheritance in Christ.

Knowing this..... "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Heb 4.16)

This is a simple principle. One that shouldn't be too hard to understand and accept. Because of Jesus, the doors to the throne room of grace are wide open to us. We can go running in!

And yet, this concept is easier to conceptualize than to act on. We struggle to turn to God and find refuge in him. I think it is due, in part, to the fact that we have turned to him at some point or another and felt some level of disappointment when we didn't feel like he listened to us.

In our moment of need, maybe we didn't feel his presence as we had hoped for. In our moment of anguish, maybe he seemed absent. Or maybe we never experienced that special feeling of comfort or peace. When we went through that moment of despair, we didn't feel God coming to our aid.

What should we make of that? If you did not feel God in that moment of distress, or you did not feel his presence in your greatest moments of need, should we assume that God did not respond? The answer to this rhetorical question is a resounding "no!" God does respond, but we aren't always as prepared for his responses as we think we are.

Let me illustrate. As you probably know, US culture is very different from Latin American culture. For many Latinos, lunch is a true break with conversation and rest. It is the largest meal of the day. Sometimes so much so that it is experienced best with a good old-fashioned siesta. For US culture, if people even decide to take a lunch break, it might be a very small meal eaten over your computer keyboard. I admit, I fall into the latter category – (please don't look closely at my computer keyboard.)

US culture runs on efficiency. We want immediate results. We don't have time for long lunches or siestas. We want instant internet speeds, instant emails and instant messages. We have instant noodles, microwavable meals and apparently we even have instant pho. We want minute clinics and no wait time at the dental office. Oil changes in under an hour, mobile check-in options for theaters, haircuts and restaurants. We are a culture obsessed with instant results and efficiency.

And how does God treat our passion for efficiency and instant results? Does he cater to it? Does he indulge us? Or does he shut down our idols of efficiency?

He shuts them down. He makes us wait on him. He won't be rushed by impatient creatures with their impatient demands. His grace and comfort is sufficient for us in the timing that he is giving it to us. He calls us to be still. To be silent and to find our comfort in him. To rest in him. To be still.

But we can't help ourselves. Sometimes we ask for help, but what we actually want is that things be done exactly the way we want them to be done, don't we? I'm sure I'm not the only person who has asked someone for help only to micromanage that help and then end up taking over in impatience when that help is not done the way we want it to be done.

God doesn't respond to those types of requests. If you need examples, turn to the lives of Abraham and Sarah who waited for God to take away their shame and pain until they were as the Scripture puts it, "as good as dead."

God's purpose is not to accommodate our preferences. God in his perfect wisdom knows that making us wait on him and rest in him is the best option for us.

If you've ever booked a hotel room online, there is usually an option for special requests: extra pillows? Turn down service? Mints on the bed? It isn't enough that they will give us a room, we need more options.

Is this how we treat God? Do we demand early check-in for our needs? Do we want him to comfort us even before we've gone through an ordeal? Do we want him to alleviate all of our pains and sorrows immediately so we don't have to suffer at all? Do we say that we are open to God's sovereign rule and comfort so long as it doesn't overstep our preferences? And are we ok with God's wisdom so long as it aligns with our perceived needs and expectations?

I believe that we have been conditioned by our sins and our culture so much that we expect that our Almighty God must conform to our personal needs and requests. Somehow we have come to believe that we are entitled to the motto "the customer is always right" in all areas of life, and even when it comes to our prayers.

If the apostle Paul were here today, he might interrupt me at this point with a booming voice and probably say something like, "Who are you, O man, to grow impatient in your requests to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why aren't you helping me the way I asked?!" (modified from Rom 9.20)

You see, if we struggle to see how God is our comfort, I can promise you that the problem is not on God's end. God is not failing to meet his end of his promises.

Last week Pastor Nicoletti said in his sermon, if you approach God in his Word and in prayer "...and then step back, but you don't feel as if your thirst has been quenched ... don't assume that you have not received anything. **Assume instead that you have a lot more drinking to do before you begin to feel satisfied.** Many of us draw close to Christ through the means of grace far too infrequently ... and we need to drink deeply many times to make up for our negligence."

Let us make no mistake. The God of comfort will comfort us in our affliction, but let us take care not to mistake his pace, timing and methods to mean that he is not comforting us. He does not operate on our timeframes, or on our instructions, and he calls us to pray, pray, pray and when we are done praying, to pray some more.

It is not that he has not comforted or cared for us. Don't fall into the assumption that God has not kept his promise to be your refuge and your comfort. Assume instead that you have

sought comfort in God in your own ways. Rather than wait on him, you have impatiently turned to help yourself or turned to your idols or other counterfeit gods.

The model given to us in Scripture is a model of patient and continuous prayer. Paul calls us to “Pray without ceasing.” Do we pray like that? Do we pray without ceasing?

Or do we assume that uttering an instant prayer in a moment of distress is the same thing as the fervent prayers of a persistent widow? A woman who keeps pleading over and over again until she is heard. Who would not stop praying until she had received her request.

Or Hannah, who bore her heart wide-open before God in the temple and prayed so fervently that even Eli couldn't help but notice her. She emptied her tears in that temple in great pain and anguish. She turned to the Lord and wept bitterly.

In these cases, we don't see half-hearted prayers. We see people wrestling with God. Asking God for comfort. Asking God to give them a response.

And the we do see a clear response from God. We see his mighty hand move. He comforted these women in their affliction.

God comforts the afflicted through his church

We know God's comfort comes through persistent and personal prayer, but God also offers us comfort through his church.

So in order to be a church that opens the doors to those in need, we must seek to be a church that offers God's comfort in who we are as people. We must help people in their moments of need.

Galatians 6:2 says, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

The parable of the Good Samaritan is so powerful because men who were known to be religious and to have some sort of relationship with God, completely bypass a man who was deeply in need of mercy. They walked by someone who had been assaulted, robbed, beaten and just left him to die alone.

1 John 4:20 condemns anyone who would forgo helping someone in need and tells us that “he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

We are called to love others, as the Samaritan did – by sacrificing our time, our hearts and our lives to help others.

God calls us to bear one another's burdens. But how can we bear each other's burdens if those burdens are hidden and unknown to one another?

To begin, we have to gain people's trust. We live in a broken world with betrayal, judgement and legalism. We must earn people's trust by truly demonstrating grace and forgiveness, mercy and comfort.

We as a church must foster a community where people can seek refuge in God and in his body. We need to pray for and be open to those who are broken and in deep despair. Let us walk by the way of the religious leaders, leaving people to fend for themselves in life's most difficult and critical moments.

Often times we can hear a message like this and want to go somewhere and do something to help those who are in need.

There is a meme going around the internet where someone says, "I want to go serve the Lord on a missions trip!" and a skeptical looking cat responds with grim look on his face saying, "But you don't even serve in the nursery!"

When people get passionate about a subject it is easy to go overboard and start talking about grandiose visions and ideas. Helping those in other countries, helping those in impoverished communities – obviously all good things. But when you aren't even doing those things at home, what makes you think that everything will change if you are on the mission field or if you are in some ministry?

We must not get lost in the ideals we create in our minds of what we could do, or what we could be. We need to be faithful where we are, here in our own church, with our brothers and sisters.

We need to love those whom God has placed around us. And we need to foster in ourselves and in our church a place of God's comfort and refuge.

That means that we will be a church full of individuals that not only receive God's forgiveness, but a people who freely offer God's forgiveness and our forgiveness to others. We must strive to be a people who receive God's mercy and are eager to give that mercy to those who are desperately in need of it.

As we foster this environment and seek to bear other people's burdens intentionally, loving them as we love ourselves, we will provide an environment of refuge and healing. We become extensions of God's comfort to those who feel far from God.

It is in this place of refuge and healing that we can welcome others in, and offer them to drink from the eternal fountain of all grace and comfort. From God himself through our Lord Jesus Christ. This is what we must strive to become. A people who are extending God's comfort to others.

Now, if you are going through affliction alone, and find yourself isolated, beware! We too easily deceive ourselves and think we can go it alone. But we don't realize that avoiding

God's provision for us in community and keeping things covered up, can actually be detrimental to our healing. We too easily deceive ourselves into thinking we are fine by ourselves.

We deceive ourselves all the time. Have you ever recommended a good book, tv show or idea to someone and they sort of dismissed it? But then when someone else recommends it, they get all excited about it and tell you about this new idea or show or book they have discovered.

Irritating, isn't it?!

Sometimes I tell my wife that she is amazing, or that her cooking is amazing and she will hear it, but it isn't until someone else says it that it really sticks.

We can all be like that. ***Sometimes we have a hard time believing something is true.*** We have convinced ourselves of something and it can sometimes take heaven and earth to change that way of thinking. Especially when it is something we feel convinced of.

Depression, shame and tragedy can be like that sometimes and can grow worse in that isolated and introspective environment.

You see, people who are in the middle of depression, for example, can often find it difficult to think that their depression will ever end. It can feel impossible to even imagine something like depression will ever be relieved. This is compounded by the fact that often people are ashamed of their depression and so they can cover it up and keep it to themselves. Burying it deeper and finding additional reasons to cover up pain.

It is easy to convince yourself that something is true, (like that depression will never end). And what we all need is for someone to help us hold onto the fact that the depression almost certainly will end, and there are almost certainly things that can be done to relieve it. It is hard to imagine this by yourself, and that is why Jesus has given us his body to remind us and help us.

In the same way compliments that I give my wife sometimes need to be seconded and reinforced by more than just my voice, we need more than one voice speaking into our lives about these deep struggles. We can't be the only ones speaking into our lives about our shame, depression or trauma.

We need someone trusted to know that we are struggling. We need to allow others to bear our burdens and we need to surround ourselves with people who are disproving Satan's lies about depress, shame and tragedy.

Remember, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17.9) Our hearts will trick us into thinking that the pain will never go away and that the only answer is to despair. That people finding out about us would be too much. That we simply have run out of other options and are at the end of our ropes.

But God has not only called us to come and find refuge in him and his word in those moments, but he has called us to find comfort and refuge in his church. To open our hearts to people we can trust and find solace in their voices as they point us to truth and help us fight the lies.

Those things that we have hidden in darkness because of our shame or our fear, we must bring into the light so that we can, together as his body, combat the lies we believe, and trust in the truth and hope found in God's mercy and comfort.

We not only need to realize that we need the church, but we need to be aware that others in the church needs us too.

Freeze Tag

Growing up, one of the games we would play a lot as kids was a game called freeze tag. Many of you know or remember the rules. If someone tagged you, you had to stand still as "frozen" people until one of your teammates "un-froze" you by tagging you. When you were "unfrozen", your priority was to "unfreeze" others who were frozen.

And as we find comfort in God from our afflictions, and find hope in him and in his church, we also become "unfrozen" in some sense. We who were comforted by others are now called to comfort and "unfreeze" others who have gone through similar afflictions.

Look back to our passage: Paul says, blessed by the "God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, **so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.**"

Again, it is as he heals us and restores us through the relief and refuge he has given us, that we too will be able to serve others with our experiences and take our newfound freedom from bondage to help free others.

You see, God isn't just in the job of healing people for healing's sake. Though that is important, that is not the main thing. God is in the business of healing broken people through broken people in his comfort and grace.

After all, broken people know where to get help and understand suffering. They are better equipped and know what helping others needs to look like. They have been in the pit of despair, they have gone through the shame and hopelessness. They not only have a better understanding of what people are going through, but they know there is a light at the end of the tunnel. They know that there is hope in Jesus Christ.

But more than our wisdom and experience, the broken need us to take them to Jesus. And there is hope in Jesus Christ. There is comfort. Jesus knows our suffering and knows how to comfort us.

You see, Hebrews tells us that Jesus was made like us in every respect. When he wept over his friend Lazarus, his tears were real tears and his grief was real grief. When his hands and feet were pierced with those nails, he didn't feel it as a spirit, he felt it like any man would, in his nervous system. His body screamed out in pain. Judas's betrayal was not a story in a book, it was betrayal from a friend who shared bread with him. Jesus felt pain and suffered deeply. Make no mistake about it, Jesus suffered like us.

We learn from Scripture that Jesus was despised and rejected by men. He was man of sorrows and acquainted with grief..." he **bore our griefs** and **carried our sorrows**; he was **pierced** for our transgressions; he was **crushed** for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are **healed**. (Is 53.3ff)

Jesus, calls us to come to him, because he is a faithful friend and intercessor. We can trust him because he suffered and he knows our pain. You know how we aren't supposed to say, "we know what you are going through" because we don't really know what people are going through? Well, Jesus actually and literally "knows what you are going through" and he tells us to come to him. He took on our sins, but he also took on our griefs and carried our sorrows.

God put our shame, our guilt, our grief, our pain on him and by his wounds we are healed.

Jesus came to be our refuge our relief, and our restorer and when we go to him and direct others to him, we find true comfort in the midst of our affliction. Something no one else can offer us.

To conclude:

When we are afflicted, we must remember, that our God is the God of Comfort. He brings comfort for those who are in affliction. As we face our afflictions, may we turn to him in our moment of need.

And may we also remember that he brings us comfort through his body, the church. May we, as a church, foster this type of environment.

May we be ready to listen, ready to pray, and ready to come alongside those who are in need. May we extend the comfort and love that God has graciously given to us in our time of need to those around us who so desperately need to hear of his love and his comfort afresh. And may we do all of this as we go and point others to Jesus. Amen.