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 Oxford Circle Mennonite Church  
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 Sermon Series: "Let Your Face Shine"

### **"The Comforting Face of God"**

Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, 2 Peter 3:8-15, Mark 1:1-8

As many of you know, Christy and I are house-sitting for the Dow family as Pastor Leonard is on sabbatical and they are in Puerto Rico. We've received some instructions as to the care of the house and the property, but a lot of things we just have to figure out. "Welcome to home ownership," Leonard told us as he was leaving. So in the past few months I've learned how to fix a toilet and a garbage disposal, whom to call when a tree falls on your power line, and why home owners like the practice of taking shoes off at the door.

As the weather started changing we had to turn our attention more to the outside property. It seems like the trees decided to shed not just their leaves but also their branches. A few weeks ago we had a time when the leaves were falling thickly and it was raining day after day. After it stopped I decided it was time to clear the yard, so I went out and started raking the leaves. They were so wet and heavy that I broke not just the rake handle but also the handle of the heavy duty broom that I was using to push them off the sidewalk. Well, I had to replace both of them, but in the meantime a big pile of wet leaves sat in the front yard. By the time I got the new rake and pushed them out into the street, the grass underneath had turned a pale sickly yellow. You can still see it; it looks like a crop circle in our yard.

But it showed me how quickly grass can die. That's why we have this illustration in our passage in Isaiah: "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa. 40:6-8).

When we first moved in the front our house was bright and green. Now the frost has reduced it to bleak brown. This is from a plant bed that used to be full of life – now look at it. And these flowers are from outside the church – how would you respond if someone gave you a bouquet of these? "The grass withers," the prophet Isaiah said. To know what really was behind the prophet's illustration, we need to know the context. God's people were taken from their homes by a foreign king named Nebuchadnezzar to a faraway city called Babylon. Their hope that was once green and strong had withered, just like this grass. They had miraculously been brought out of Egypt not by their own strength, but by the hand of God. God had brought them into a land flowing with milk and honey, the promised land. God had made a covenant with them, but the covenant was broken; not by God, but by their own sinful deeds. A foreign king who did not know God had cruelly conquered and exiled them to a city that they did not know. And they had no one to blame but themselves. Their hope had indeed shriveled up and died, like a flower in winter.

But this is where the voice of God speaks through the prophet and pierces through the despair. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (40:1-2). At the point of their despair God speaks to them as one

might speak to a crying child, or to someone who's mourning. Comfort – it will be ok, there is hope.

I'm sure we've all had the experience of comforting someone. And we all need to be comforted at one time or another. I'm learning a lot about myself through the change of being married. Christy has helped me to see something about myself that is humbling and sometimes makes us laugh. One time we were sitting down to eat supper and I couldn't get a jar of pickles open. I tried hot water, using a cloth, everything. Christy said, "Let's just eat, we don't need pickles." And it was true, we didn't. So I sat down, but not for long. I just couldn't stand that I couldn't open the jar. So I finally took it out the back door and broke the bottom, and got the pickles out.

Later we laughed at how ridiculous it was that I got so concentrated that I had to break the jar, right then and there. We began using the term "Pickle jar problem" to refer to those times when I got so focused on solving a problem that I couldn't think about anything else. It's in these times that I need comfort and a voice of reason.

When I got a virus on my computer through an email this week, it turned into one of these "pickle jar problems." And the more I tried to solve the problem and the more I failed, the more frustrated I became. Eventually Christy had to help me put things in perspective. Lives are not at stake here. The world will not fall apart if my poor computer has a bug. It'll be ok, she told me, comfort.

If you're like me, and you need comforting even from petty problems, how much more does God comfort us when the issues are huge, when life seems overwhelming. Sometimes it's a little voice that encourages. Sometimes it's a sense of peace in the middle of turmoil. But God is a faithful comforter for his people, just as he was for his children in the days of Isaiah.

When the odds seem too big, the obstacles too high, when we feel most vulnerable, that's when God comforts us. Facing a plague of racism, those working for reconciliation fifty years ago must have felt overwhelmed. In January 1956, during the tense and uncertain days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King struggled with sleeplessness after he received a terrifying threat over the phone. He prayed, "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I am afraid. . . . The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. . . I can't face it alone."

This may well have been what the prophet Isaiah felt as he looked around at the situation facing his beloved people. Rather than living in shalom in the promised land, they were captured and taken to a Babylon. Surrounded by idols, they were tempted to give up the worship of the one true God, the same sin that had always plagued them. Where is the hope? Isaiah laments. Judah is at the end of its powers. But in the midst of this, Isaiah sees a glimmer of hope: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken'" (40:3-5).

In the midst of his own dark night of despair and fear, Dr. King wrote later: “At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.”

This is the kind of comfort that comes from God alone. It has no fear of death, but only the joy of God’s promise to be with us forever. If we accept God’s gracious invitation to join in the struggle for justice and wholeness and peace, God will never abandon us. In God’s reign, God’s rule, God’s sovereignty, better things are on the way. When the glory of God is revealed, everything will be made right – everything.

The grass has withered; the flower has faded. But...“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;(1 )lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,(2 )lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (40:9-11).

In this second Sunday of Advent we begin to see the mighty hand of God that came in the flesh as a little baby. When we turn to the Gospel of Mark some five hundred years later we find him quoting this passage from Isaiah: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Mk 1:1-3).

That voice in the wilderness, the gospel writer is saying, is John the baptizer. Crowds of people were coming to him from all over the countryside and from Jerusalem, and were repenting of their sins and being baptized in the Jordan River. The prophet John was such a figure of true repentance and righteousness that some even thought that he might be the long-expected Messiah. No, said John, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (1:7-8).

Five hundred years later, we have the same story, different actors. The people of God are captive, this time not to Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar, but to the Roman Empire and Caesar. The attempts at violent uprising had failed. And the people are still trapped in the same old sins of idolatry and neglect of the poor. Some still looked to the promise of the Messiah, the anointed one who would save them from their sins and from their captivity. They were waiting...waiting...

This week in the after-school program run by the OCCEDA, the theme was patience. We talked about waiting, and how hard that can be. Christy asked the kids if there was something they were waiting for, and some of them said yes, their Christmas presents. How long have you been waiting for that thing you want? And one kid said, “years.” I suspect that his sense of time was not quite accurate, but we can understand how it could *seem* like years. Maybe you know what it’s like to be waiting for something in the mail. Every day you look for it and

it doesn't arrive. You begin to think it's never going to come. And then one day somebody might say to you, "There's a package for you setting on the table." And you get that feeling of excitement in your stomach; it's finally arrived!

John the Baptist is like that messenger. "The package has finally arrived," he is saying. "The time has come for the long-awaited Messiah to save his people from sin and oppression." The centuries of captivity to sin will finally end.

But just as the person portrayed in Isaiah, Jesus comes not as a mighty king, but as a servant of all who suffers in obedience to God. Jesus the Messiah does not overthrow the Roman government as some expected, but instead is executed on a cross at the hands of the Romans. The Messiah does not sacrifice the oppressors for the common good, but instead sacrifices himself to save his people from sin. It is an act of love so pure that it can only come from God himself.

"Comfort, O comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem," God says. And Jesus, when he sees the violence and disobedience of God's chosen people, says "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37). The salvation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the only hope for peace in this world of violence. God longs to comfort his people who are overwhelmed by sin both inside and out. Comfort, my people – rest assured that the rough places are becoming smooth as the reign of God breaks into this world.

John came baptizing in the wilderness, a baptism of repentance, by water. And just as John baptized, and followers of Jesus through the centuries have baptized those who are sorry for their sins, we also believe that baptism is God's will for us. Next week we will baptize some among us who have decided to follow Jesus. We will do it with water, just like John. But John says that there is another kind of baptism that comes from one more powerful than him – the baptism of the Holy Spirit. All of us who know salvation in Jesus are given the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are immersed in the Spirit; we are filled with the Spirit.

Scripture says that the Holy Spirit is our comforter. As we face our situations in life that steal our joy and crush our peace, we are still being comforted by God. We don't have the prophet Isaiah speaking the words of God directly into our exact situation, as he did for God's people who were in exile in Babylon. We don't have the physical person of Jesus to gather us in his arms like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But we do have an ever-present comforter in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Let that Spirit be your comforter. Just like Dr. King, as he faced an ocean of injustice, was suddenly filled with God's presence and the peace that comes with it, let the presence of God heal you and strengthen your resolve to follow Jesus no matter what. When we are most vulnerable, that's when God offers us comfort and direction.

The comfort that we receive from God is not just the sympathy of one who suffers with us. The source of the comfort is the deep, unshakeable promise that God is in the act of making everything right. "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every

mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isa 40:3-5).

God is redeeming the world, which is another way of saying that all of those things that are wrong about the world in which we live – the fact that hungry children die and wars rage and disease kills and marriages fail and dreams are destroyed – all of that is coming to an end in the Reign of God that Jesus proclaims is already here but not yet quite what it will be.

And sisters and brothers, *it will be*. When the valley of the shadow of death is lifted up in new life, the Reign of God will be here. When the mountains of guilt and sin are brought down in forgiveness, the Reign of God will be here. When the uneven ground of poverty, violence, and injustice is made level by Jesus the anointed one, God’s Reign will be here. When the rough places of hatred across racial, ethnic, gender, and class lines are made into a plain of God’s wholeness and peace, then the Reign of God will be here in all its fullness. And Isaiah says, “Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

We have been given advanced notice. We’ve been given a chance to live as citizens of God’s Reign even now. We can receive God’s forgiveness and forgive others in turn. We can love our neighbors and even our enemies. With God’s help we can live lives of holiness and obedience to God. All this is possible because of the comfort that we know in Jesus Christ, a hope for the future that will never fade, no matter what the situation.

Sometimes our best plans are like grass that withers, like this. Our hopes can be like the flowers outside the church, which are now brown and dead. Isaiah says, “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.” When we are most vulnerable, God says to us: “Comfort, O comfort my people.” Everything will be all right.

*Prayer:* Our redeeming Lord, we confess that in our sin our hopes for life and wholeness wither like grass and fade like flowers. Just as Israel’s hopes were like dead grass, you spoke comfort and hope into their situation through the prophet Isaiah. Lord, we thank you for this time of year, Advent, when we look forward to the hope of redemption through Jesus Christ. Thank you that you came in the flesh as a Servant who suffers to save those you love. But Lord we thank you most of all that you are in the act of making everything right in Jesus Christ, that you are making smooth the rough places, and the valleys and hills level. Lord, in the meantime, give us courage, give us perseverance, give us hope so that we can live as citizens of your Reign, be your children in this world, by the power of your Spirit. Amen.