

## **The Comfort of God**

**I have a confession to make. I know it's only Advent, but I am already listening to Christmas music. One of my favorite Christmas albums is by Andrea Bocelli, the Italian tenor. I like the entire album but there's one song that really touches me. Bocelli sings it with country music star Reba McEntire, and it's called Blue Christmas. Do you recall that song? Elvis Presley sang it many years ago but it's still popular today, with its refrain: "I'll have a blue, blue Christmas without you."**

**Why does Blue Christmas resonate with so many people? I suspect it's because many of us feel blue. Maybe you're in pain right now, hurting from some blow that life has thrown your way. Perhaps you are in grief over the loss of a loved one. Perhaps you or someone you love is suffering from a serious medical condition. Perhaps your marriage is coming apart or there are family problems. The truth is: there are enough heartbreaks and heartaches to go around for everyone. "I'll have a blue Christmas..."**

**We may be feeling blue this holiday season but God doesn't want us to stay that way. So let me offer you a word of hope. It comes from the prophet Isaiah who**

**speaks a word of comfort to people who have lost everything. Their country no longer exists. The capital city Jerusalem is in ruins. The Jewish temple is a heap of rubble. The priests and most government officials are dead. These exiles live as POWs in a foreign country under the thumb of their Babylonian overlords. Everything that they have known and loved about their Jewish identity is gone.**

**And to this sad, pathetic, motley group of people, the prophet proclaims: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term and that her penalty is paid...”**

**Unless you have been in a similar situation, it is hard to imagine how it felt to hear the good news that God was coming to their rescue. What Isaiah proclaims to the people is God’s presence – as in someone being there for us.**

**Isaiah says, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” God is coming into our world, says Isaiah. God is coming into our lives to offer us hope.**

**God comes to us like the little girl who came home from a neighbor's house where her playmate had died. "Why did you go?" questioned her father. "To comfort her mother," replied the little girl. "What could you do to comfort her?" the father continued. His daughter answered, "I climbed into her lap and cried with her."**

**That's what God does when we are in pain. God cries with us, lives with us, suffers with us, and even dies with us. This is the comfort that says much more than simply, "I care about you." This is the comfort that enters into our life and showers us with love.**

**When the Israelites were forced into exile in Babylon, they faced insurmountable difficulties in even dreaming of the possibility of returning to their homeland, much less being set free. They had no way of removing the obstacles. And nothing you and I do will remove all our hurdles. It takes the comfort of God. It takes the action of God who levels up the valleys, lowers the mountains, who makes the steep places and rough ridges a smooth plain.**

**Real comfort only comes when we concentrate on what God is doing for us, when we recognize that God is with us always and forever, that God is part of our plight, and**

**lives alongside us, and is present to help us overcome our deadliest enemies and worst fears.**

**When the great Scottish preacher Alexander McClaren was fifteen years old, he was sent to work in order to earn his way to college and to find resources for the family. His father walked him to work the first day and they went by a ravine in which people said that there were evil spirits, and anyone who walked through the ravine would be infested with those evil spirits.**

**When Alexander McClaren got to his job, he realized that at the end of the week, he would have to go back through that ravine on his way home. It worried him Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and all day Saturday, and it filled his mind all Saturday evening. He got to the edge of the ravine and he could not do it! He was frozen with fear.**

**And then suddenly he heard a voice, and the voice said, “Alex, it’s your Dad. I’ve come to walk through the ravine with you!”**

**And that is what God says to each of us as we face tough times, as we face an uncertain future; or problems in our home, or with our health, as we face**

**sickness and even death: “I’ve come to walk with you through the ravine!”**

**It’s like a story that Philip Yancey tells about the composer Beethoven, a man not known for social grace. Because of his deafness, Beethoven found conversation difficult. When he heard of the death of a friend’s son, Beethoven hurried to the house, overcome with grief. He had no words of comfort to offer. But he saw a piano in the room. For the next half hour he played the piano, pouring out his emotions in the most eloquent way he could. When he finished playing, he left. The friend later remarked that no one else’s visit had meant so much. (1)**

**I don’t know about you, but when I am going through a tough time, the greatest comfort in the world is having someone being there for me. Maybe that person can’t make things right. Maybe all the person can do is sit by my side, listen to my pain, and offer me a shoulder to lean on. But somehow that act of presence helps me bear what I have to bear, to do what I have to do, and to gain the strength to face the future with hope. That’s the presence of God in our lives.**

**Maybe you know that presence in your own life. I have**

**seen it again and again in persons awaiting major surgery that will determine whether they live or die. The night before the operation, they will be all alone in their hospital bed and feel sustained and strengthened for whatever is to come. They feel an inner peace which they can't explain, but they know it is God with them – in life and even in death.**

**Just think of it. One day, perhaps when you are going through a tough time and you least expect it; you will know with all your being that God is here, that God has never been away, and that God will never leave you or forsake you – no matter what.**

**Yes, I know, sometimes it's hard to discern that presence. But no matter what happens to us in this life, no matter where we are or how we feel, God's presence is with us – all the time.**

**When I was a priest in San Diego, I conducted a funeral for a dear parishioner by the name of Ruth who died just days before Christmas. The funeral service was on Christmas Eve morning. The altar guild had decorated the church the night before so that the funeral could be held in the morning in time for the first afternoon Christmas Eve service which began at 2:00 pm. (In this**

**church we had four services on Christmas Eve!)**

**Ruth was one of the kindest and most joyful people I have ever known. A retired school teacher, her passion for education prompted her to donate a substantial sum of money to our preschool to establish a scholarship fund. Even as Ruth found it increasingly difficult to breathe, she never lost her joy, her resiliency and her love of life.**

**Her husband Will was very much the same – a kind, soft-spoken man with a deep faith. When I was planning the funeral with Will, he had only one request. He said, “Make sure the church bells are rung. I want everyone to know the joy of this season still holds.”**

**The bells rang loudly that morning, and the final hymn as we processed out of the church was, “Joy to the World!”**

**So what word of comfort do we have this holiday season when we are feeling blue? Isaiah proclaims: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”**

**God is with us. God’s presence is among us. God is here, even in the worst moments of our lives when we**

**feel overwhelmed and troubled and benumbed and at our wits' end. God is with us in our living and in our dying, in our life and in our death. The good news, as C.S. Lewis put it, is that we now live in a God-invaded world.**

**Yes God is with us always and forever – to soothe our aching soul, to heal our hurting life, to calm our anxieties and relieve our fears, to give us strength for the journey, and to lead us into heaven's glory.**

**Dr. Gary Nicolosi**

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**Text – Isaiah 40:1-11**

**Advent 2, B**

**1. Philip Yancey, Helping the Hurting (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1984) p. 9**