

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Genesis of Our Faith: Comfort  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Genesis 21:8-21; 2 Corinthians 1:1-7

I want to begin this morning with a quote from an article I read by Anton DiSclafani, a professor at Auburn University, *“I find myself astonished these days, by my fellow humans’ meanness, their outrageous spitefulness, as if Covid has invaded not only our lungs but also our psyches, the parts of our brains that ask us to care about not only the people we don’t know, but also the people we do.* What is she talking about? She is talking about two women on a Southwest flight who demanded that other passengers give up their seats so these two women could sit where they wanted and when the seated passengers would not get up, the women began to scream and curse at them and then tried to drag the other passengers out of their seats. She is referring to people at a school board meeting where anti-masking parents followed a pro-masking parent into the parking lot, pounded on the pro-masker’s car windows and screamed, “We know who you are, where you live, and you will never work in this town again.” She is talking about the fight between pro and anti-mask groups yesterday in Los Angeles where a person was stabbed. The question becomes, where is all this meanness and spitefulness coming from? I would argue it is coming from anger that arises out of a feeling of powerlessness: powerlessness over our health, our jobs, our welfare, and our civil rights. Why anger? Because as human beings, anger makes us feel powerful.

These angry outbursts make us feel powerful. They make us feel as if we have taken control. We are in charge. We are top dog. The only trouble is that meanness, spitefulness and the anger behind them do not actually make us powerful, or in control, or top dog. They are all self-defeating actions. They not only destroy the one at whom they are directed but they destroy the one who is angry. Studies have shown these expressions of anger elevate cortisol levels in the body, which has adverse effects on much of a person’s physiology. And in the end, these expressions of anger tear down rather than build up; destroy, rather than create. I wish I could say that Christians are immune to these expressions of anger, that we listen to Jesus who says that to be angry with another person is to commit murder. But I know that is not true. So, the question becomes, how ought we, as Jesus followers, deal with the anger that comes from feeling powerless? How do we keep from becoming those who are mean and spiteful? One answer among many is **comfort**.

I realize that such a suggestion sounds a bit odd because when we speak of comfort we usually think of a soft blanket, a cozy fire, and a reclining lounger. But the way I am using comfort is the way the Bible uses it. The Greek word for comfort which we had in our morning’s text is a multifaceted word. What I mean by that is that it contains nuances from a variety of English words. Let me give you a list. The word comfort contains elements of encouraging, exhorting, strengthening, reassuring and always points to a better, positive future. Finally, what we need to understand about comfort in the Bible, is that it has both a vertical and horizontal dimension. We will see how all of this information about comfort works as we explore our two texts this morning.

We begin with our Genesis text. The backstory for our scripture is that, as we discussed last week, Abraham and Sarah had been promised a child. When that child did not appear, Sarah gave her maid, Hagar, as a wife to Abraham. Together Abraham and Hagar had a child named Ishmael. Later, again as we read last week, Abraham and Sarah had a child of their own, Isaac. It did not take long for Sarah to become fearful of Hagar and Ismael. She was afraid that the pair would steal the inheritance she believed belonged to her son, Isaac. The result is that Abraham, after goading from Sarah, and a conversation with God, sends Hagar and Ishmael out in

the desert with a little water and sparse provisions. When the water and provisions are exhausted, Hagar casts her son under a tree, walks away and gives up. She weeps and cries out, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” She is feeling powerless and angry. In that moment God comes with encouragement, “Do not be afraid.” God comes with strengthening, “Take the boy by the hand.” God comes with reassurance, “I will make a great nation of your son.” God comes with a positive future, “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.” God comforts, with the vertical aspect of comfort, that comfort that always comes from God.

Comfort however, especially in the Jesus community is never supposed to simply be a vertical relationship between God and humanity. It is also intended to be a horizontal relationship between human beings. We can see this in Paul’s amazing introduction to his second letter to the church in Corinth. Again, there is a backstory to this letter which is that the church in Corinth and its members are suffering. They are suffering because they are Christians living on the edge of city in which worship of the Roman gods is considered a mark of loyalty to the Empire and worship of other gods is considered treason. Thus, when the Corinthians worship God in Christ, they are setting themselves up for persecution, loss of businesses and ostracism from family and community. Such suffering left the Corinthian Christians feeling powerless and angry, and much of their anger was focused on the Apostle Paul. Regardless of the anger pointed in his direction, Paul opens his letter by reminding his readers that God is a God of comfort to those who are suffering and feeling powerless. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction.”*

Paul continues by reminding the church that this comfort has been given to them not only for their own support, but to share with one another. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, 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 consoled by God.”* In other words, those who have been comforted by God in Christ are to then comfort others. Comfort is not a possession to be closely guarded but a gift to be given away. And one of the fascinating things about this Greek word for comfort is that it is also the root word for church...the word for “being called out.” So, in essence the church is a to be a community called out to comfort others. And Paul makes this clear when a little while later in the letter he tells the Corinthians to comfort and love someone who had been mean and angry toward him. I want to be clear about one thing though. The more positive outlook here does not mean that all their suffering goes away. This is not a pie-in-the-sky promise. Instead, the positive future is that they are a community grounded in Christ’s salvation, are comforted by God, and are capable of sharing that comfort with others.

This past week I was fortunate enough to lead a memorial service for one of our members, Jim Brophy. When I met with the family, one of his daughters said that every time her father signed off with her on a phone call or video call, he would say these words, “I love you. I am proud of you. You are beautiful.” I see in those words comfort at work. I see encouragement, strengthening, reassuring and a positive outlook for the future. This morning I want us to use those words. And here is how I want us to do so. If you are so inclined, I would like you to repeat after me: God loves me. God is proud of me. I am a beautiful child of God. These are God’s words of comfort to us. God loves me. God is proud of me. I am a beautiful child of God. Then I would like us to take these words with us, and when we meet a friend or family member who is feeling powerless, to offer them these words: God loves you. God is proud of you. You are a beautiful child of God. And hopefully those words can turn powerlessness not to meanness and spitefulness, but to gratitude and grace in these difficult times.

My challenge to you then is to ask yourselves, “How am I allowing God to comfort me, and how am I sharing that comfort with others?”