



## SERMONS

### Behind the Mask: Getting Real

#### We Have Comfort

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

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“What do you think, Pastor Mark: are we in the end times?” I’ve been asked that question a lot. Who knows! But 2020 has certainly served up a smorgasbord of crises: pandemic, famine, racial unrest, violence, political turmoil...and worst of all, a toilet paper shortage! And if that weren’t enough, forest fires in the west, floods in the mid-west, hurricanes in the south. When you look up and see a blood-red sun peeking through a smoky haze, it’s hard NOT to think about the book of Revelation, isn’t it?

It has been a season of affliction, no doubt. That’s why I’m so grateful that when I open the Bible, I discover honest, raw stories about my spiritual parents who ALSO faced suffering. That kind of honesty doesn’t always come naturally to us. We Gig Harbor Christians often feel the need to put on a mask; to pretend everything is okay. Well, in this sermon series, we are ripping off that mask. We are asking what it means to live authentically...even in affliction. Let’s begin by listening to these raw words from the Apostle Paul to the Corinthian Christians. II Cor 1. 8-9.

**For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. II Cor 1: 8-9**



“...utterly burdened beyond our strength....we despaired of life itself...” says Paul. That’s pretty authentic, isn’t it? So, as the hits keep on coming in 2020, do we have the courage to admit we are feeling beaten up? To admit when **we** feel a little despair?

I’m an early morning riser. 5:00, 5:30 am. 6:00 am would be a late start for me. But I realized this week that I’ve been staying in bed longer than usual. One morning ‘til 8:00 am. That’s the middle of the day! I was awake. I had been for a while. But I just laid there and prayed...and held my wife as she slept. There was part of me that didn’t want to get up and look out the window; that knew that this would be the most peaceful moment of my day...and I didn’t want to let go of it. Any of you relate to that?

Well...we DO have to get up. We DO have to face the day. We DO have to admit when we are overwhelmed. And we DO have to turn to God’s word to find how to deal with times of suffering or fear or discouragement. And the gospel word from Paul this morning is... comfort. We who belong to Jesus have comfort such as the world can never know. Listen to these opening verses of II Corinthians and as you do, count the number of times that “comfort” appears. II Cor 1:3 ff.

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and 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 comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.**



One of the most soothing images in scripture is that of our heavenly father comforting his children. **“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they...(what?)...they comfort me.”** God invites Isaiah into a ministry of comfort when he commanded the prophet, **“Comfort... comfort my people! Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...”**

In our text, Paul calls US to a ministry of comfort. Did you count how many times that word appears? TEN! Think he’s trying to drive home a point? In this season when the world is so UN-comfortable... what can we learn from Paul about our ministry of comfort? Well...I see 6 things in this text about our ministry of comfort. I know, that’s a lot. More than usual. But see which ones speak to you. Ready?

### **1. Our ministry of comfort makes SOME sense out of suffering.**

These last days have produced scenes of immense suffering. A one-year old who dies after his family is trapped by fire on the highway. A 13-year old whose remains are found in a burned car with his dog on his lap. An assassination attempt against two young deputies. Suffering and evil like this are the greatest obstacles to faith. Unbelievers say, “If God is all-loving and all-powerful, why doesn’t he put an end to suffering?” It’s a good...and hard question.

Of course, Christianity is not the only religion that must answer this question. EVERY religion must pose an answer to the question of evil...and I’ll return to Christianity’s response in just a moment. But for now, I want to show you how our ministry of comfort makes at least SOME sense of suffering. In verse 3, Paul says,

**Blessed be the ...Father of mercies and 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 comforted by God.**



When WE suffer, the Holy Spirit comforts us...and teaches us how to minister that same comfort to others. Our suffering is never wasted. Who better to comfort a young woman who has miscarried than a woman who experienced that same trauma? Who better to comfort a man facing prostate cancer than another who has walked that road? Our suffering is never wasted. One of the ways God redeems it...is that it equips us to speak into broken lives in the way that someone else, untouched by that tragedy, never can.

## 2. **Our Ministry of Comfort links the generations.**

One of my young friends said something powerful: **"We need you older people to tell us that everything is going to be okay!"** Isn't that the truth? The younger generation needs the perspective of those who have faced hard times...and made it through! One woman said, "I remember being terrified as a child that the Russians were going to bomb us." Remember that? We used to do air raid drills in school in which we were told to hide under our desks in the event of a nuclear attack. (Like THAT would do any good!) Yet we lived to see the Soviet Union collapse and the wall come down! We can tell that story to the next generation. And we all need to hear from the WWII generation who faced down the Nazis...REAL fascists... and defeated them. Every generation faces hard and horrible times. We need the comfort that comes when our Christian parents and grandparents can say to us, "I've been there; it will be okay."

## 3. **Our Ministry of Comfort unites us with Christ.**

Earlier I mentioned that Christianity has a unique response to the issue of suffering. Islam declares that **we suffer because Allah wills it**. Hinduism teaches Karma; **we suffer because we deserve it**. Christianity does something that other religions consider absurd. Almighty God enters INTO our suffering. V. 5: **For as we share**



**abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.**

Only Christianity does this. Jesus says, "I won't explain why you are experiencing this pain...but I will step right into the midst of it. I will share it. I will take it upon myself."

**The Cross...where the Son of God gave himself up to suffering and death...is Christianity's answer to the problem of evil and pain.** SO when WE suffer... as Jesus promised we would... in that moment we are **united with Christ** as at no other time.

Years ago when I was building our home, I shot a 3-inch nail under my knee cap with a nail gun. As I was being driven to the hospital, in pain and shock, it struck me: Jesus had rusty nails driven through his joints. He could have prevented it... but he accepted that torture as payment for MY sin. I began to weep in the back seat of that car as, in that moment of suffering, I was suddenly united with my savior in his crucifixion as I never had been before. That's what suffering does; UNITES us with Jesus who suffered for us.

#### 4. **Our Ministry of Comfort redirects our self-pity.**

v. 6: **"If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort..."**

Last week I heard something from my wife I've never heard in our 31 years of marriage. Cyndi said, **"I think I'm a little depressed..."** In all the time we've been together, Cyndi has **never** said she was depressed. She's my rock! I'M the one who gets depressed! That's MY thing! And HER job over the years has been to encourage me, calm me, reassure me, champion me. But suddenly...the tables were turned. It was MY turn, MY privilege ... to comfort my sweetheart; to be HER encourager...to be

HER rock. To turn my attention away from myself and toward her. When we respond to the Spirit's call to be comforters, it redirects our self-pity toward others.

**5. Our Ministry of Comfort strips away our self-sufficiency and reveals God's power.**

**V9. "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again."**

I want share a quote from Pastor Ellis: "I've been asking God, 'Why are you piling on more and more?' And I sense he is saying, 'Because you are still looking for comfort in earthly things. I'm stripping it all away until you are at the end of your rope.' Suffering is the only time we can and must trust God totally. A year like this forces us to ask ourselves, 'Are we relying on God...or not?' 2020 should bring us to the end of ourselves... an end to our self-sufficiency. And if it doesn't, there is something wrong with our faith." Do we believe that God will deliver us...or NOT?

As Cyndi and I drove back from church the other day, she said something provocative. "I wonder if we REALLY believe what we say we believe about Heaven. I don't think we do. Because if we did, we wouldn't cling with such fear to this life." If you are clinging desperately to your plans, your comfort, your will, your safety ...perhaps this experience of suffering has not yet stripped you of your own idolatry. Our only comfort in time such as this...the only comfort we can offer others...is to remember that we can NOT rely on ourselves... but we CAN rely on a God who raises the dead to life!

**6. Our Ministry of Comfort is unleashed through prayer.**

v. 11 **You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.**

Tuesday night we gathered for our “Kingdom Come” prayer event. It was a great turnout and every person left feeling like they had entered the courts of our King. So...were you there? And if not, why not? Again and again, I have summoned you to prayer. Again and again I have asked, “If this season won’t drive us to our knees, what will?” God responds to the corporate prayers of his people to bring comfort to a suffering world. If you are not yet praying...I beg you...start! We need your voice added to ours.

You are called to a ministry of comfort. I want to close with a quote from Samuel Rutherford, a 17<sup>th</sup> century pastor and professor from St. Andrews University. I don’t know if you will find it comforting or not. I hope so ...because it reminds us of how God takes even the worst of our suffering and uses it for our good. Be comforted with these words:

***The greatest temptation out of hell is to live without trials. A pool of standing water will turn stagnant. Faith grows more with the sharp winter storm in its face. Grace withers without adversity. You cannot sneak quietly into heaven without a cross. Crosses form us into His image. They cut away the pieces of our corruption. Lord cut, carve, wound; Lord do anything to perfect Your image in us and make us fit for glory!***