# ***TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND JOY***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Isaiah 40:1-5 and Romans 15:4-13

There is a rule in our house imposed by our children years ago that has endured long after they have grown and gone. It is a rule rooted in experiences of the past and designed to encourage family harmony for the future. It is a rule still policed by Daniel from afar with severe consequences for any violation. The rule is this: No Christmas carols until the day after Thanksgiving. No humming Christmas carols, no Christmas playlists, no *Charlie Brown Christmas* videos, no Bing Crosby *White Christmas* until the day after Thanksgiving. In a day when the secular trappings of Christmas appear earlier and earlier, so that it seems like Christmas decorations appear in stores just after the Fourth of July, we have drawn a line in November’s leaves and declared: no further! Christmas carols begin only after Thanksgiving!

Now that is not to say that from time to time there may not be small violations of this rule unbeknownst to my son. There is something about the sounds of Christmas that lightens the heart and inspires comfort, joy, and peace even before Thanksgiving. Perhaps that spirit is best summed up in that politically incorrect carol that we will sing later on:

*God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay.*

*Remember Christ our savior was born on Christmas Day,*

*To save us all from Satan’s power when we were gone astray.*

And then that wonderful refrain:

*O, tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy!*

*O, tidings of comfort and joy!*

It is those tidings that we find in so many Christmas carols – comfort and joy for all people in

Mary’s child

born away in a manger

in that little town of Bethlehem

on a silent night

that First Nowell

while shepherds watched their flocks by night and

angels we have heard on high sang gloria in excelsis deo

proclaiming joy to the world.

The carols are all about comfort and peace and joy and God’s glory!

It is there in the music – in the lullabies by the manger and in the glorias in the fields and in the hush of centuries of candled congregations recalling that first silent night. These are the melodies of peace that spring from the promises about this child who will be the Prince of Peace; they are the harmonies of hope that abound for all people in this Savior; they are the descants of joy that soar to the heavens above as the glory of the Lord is revealed in a most extraordinary way in a most out-of-the-way place.

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God*. In these carols there is comfort for God’s people, comfort for Jew and Gentile, comfort for slave and free, comfort for male and female, young and old, gay and straight, Ukrainian and Russian and American alike, comfort for all people. At the time Isaiah spoke these words only the Israelites dared lay claim to be God’s people, but in Jesus Christ God came for all people, not just for Jews but also for Gentiles. That was the good news Paul proclaimed to the church in Rome. Rejoice, for all people are God’s people! Comfort all my people, says your God. Comfort them with words of hope and songs of joy and promises of peace. That is what we find in these carols bearing witness to a babe born in Bethlehem. Across the ages, these words have echoed across hill and dale in celebration of the birth of one who brings comfort and joy to a world desperately in need of both. And we still need that comfort and joy today!

We need comfort in the face of violence that has turned our world upside down. In Ukraine people are seeking comfort and peace and searching for joy in the face of war and a bitter winter to come. Across our nation mass shootings have left families and communities longing for comfort and peace. At the border of our nation and many others, refugees are seeking a refuge while many of the communities to which they come are feeling overwhelmed. Across our country the trifecta of COVID, RSV, and flu have swamped hospitals and afflicted families. With climate change driving droughts and fiercer storms and floods alike, there is high anxiety about the future. Comfort my people, says your God. In the midst of uncertainty, comfort them. In the depths of despair, comfort them. In the throes of hunger, comfort them. In the face of violence, comfort them, says the Lord. With what then shall we comfort them?

“*Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction so that…we might have hope*,” writes Paul. In the promises of Isaiah written in those former days there was comfort and hope for people in exile but that comfort and hope extend to later generations far removed from exile, including us. There is comfort and hope in that same “root of Jesse” who is Christ the Lord. There is comfort for you and for me, so that words spoken long ago and far away about the child in Bethlehem still bear hope for our world today. He is our hope in the face of all despair, all wars, all pandemics, all terrorists, all climate change, all uncertainty, all chaos. For two thousand years he has borne the hopes of the world by bearing the sins of the world in his body on the cross. But to get to the cross and empty tomb, he first had to enter the world in a lowly manger bed. So we celebrate in song that birth of hope’s presence among us, God’s love poured out for us, God with us on that first Christmas morn.

Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to hold on to that hope and with one voice to glorify God. Hope and glory are linked in this Christmas story. The hope is ours, and the glory belongs to God. To be a Christian is to dare to hope in the promises of God, to believe that the Christ in the Christmas story is our savior too – yours and mine; 2000 years later and more than 2000 miles removed from the place where he first lay his head, Jesus is still our savior. To be Christian is to trust in that savior, and to live with hope.

Do you live with such hope these days? Do you look at the world around you and find reason to hope or do you look at the carnage and wonder, where is God? If Jesus is indeed Emmanuel, then he is still “God with us.” He is weeping at the senseless loss of life and mourning the suffering of children; he is offering comfort and hope in tragedy, sharing our joys, and at life’s end offering to us joy beyond our wildest imaginations. Those promises give us hope in this season and throughout the year. They are the hope-filled promises of Christ and of Christmas.

We carry that hope with us, offering ourselves in God’s service, committing our lives to glorifying God, dedicating our hands and hearts to serve others to God’s glory. The hope-filled promises of the carols – the promises of a savior – give us reason to live that way. They proclaim hope in living, comfort in dying, and joy in all times. For God comes to save us one and all – those are the tidings of comfort and joy we not only hold, but have to share.

So why not sing those great carols all year round? Why wait until after Thanksgiving to sing tidings of great joy for all people? Why not tarry at the manger, bask in the glory of Christ’s birth, and hear those words of promise that are incarnate in the son of Mary all year round? Are they not tidings of comfort and joy for all people for all seasons? Are they not more than just Christmas tidings whose comfort and joy fades at the dawn of a new year?

They are! They are words of comfort and joy for all people for all time. But they are also reminders of that moment when the world changed, when God came to us in a baby’s birth in a lowly stable. While that is good news for us every day of the year, it is particularly good news at this time when we remember that event, that moment when everything changed while in the night in Bethlehem nothing seemed to change. Christmas carols give expression to the awe of that night as well as the promise for coming days. We dare not take for granted the gift God has given us. So while we ***could*** sing those carols every day of the year, perhaps we are wise not to. Perhaps we are wise to pause each December to listen intently once again for the songs of angels and the promises of prophets and the cry of a babe in Bethlehem who comes for you and for me. We can live each day in the comfort and joy of those carols while treasuring and giving voice to their melodious reminders each Christmas in song:

God rest you merry, gentlepeople. Let nothing you dismay.

Remember Christ our savior was born on Christmas day

to save us all from Satan’s power when we too were gone astray.

O tidings of comfort and joy! Comfort and joy!

For you, for me, for the world – tidings of comfort and joy! Amen