



THE GOD

WHO Comforts

KEL GROSECLOSE

I was a young, wet-behind-the-ear pastor just a few years out of theological school. I had been appointed to serve in an isolated rural community tucked away in a pristine river valley of northern Idaho. It was the only incorporated town in the entire area. Our congregation was well established, had a beautiful sanctuary, and boasted the biggest parking lot for miles around.

Consequently, I performed a large number of weddings, funerals, and memorial services. Things went well until my second year there. It happened after my first ever infant committal service.

Thirty years later I still vividly recall that first panic attack. I thought I was going to faint and hadn't even yet made it to the eulogy. I remember a little voice in my head saying, "Breathe,

breathe." Somehow I kept talking until I reached the benediction, then went home and collapsed. Unfortunately, it wasn't a one-time aberration. I began experiencing panic at every subsequent funeral. During my daily devotions, I prayed that no one in Boundary County would die that week; but if someone did, I begged God, "Please let them be a Baptist or Lutheran."

Those following months of my young life are a blur. I do not know how many more funerals I struggled through. I feel sorry for all those people I was supposed to comfort. One cold, wintry afternoon as I stood before a grieving group of family and friends, God gave me a precious gift. It changed my ministry and my whole life from that moment on. I was just beginning to talk, sharing several familiar Scripture verses, when God healed my troubled spirit. It happened as I recited Psalm 27:1. *The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?* I suddenly realized this text was just for me. My mouth kept moving as I continued the service, but all the while a deep inner peace washed over me. I continue to quote Psalm 27:1 in every funeral I conduct. I have not failed to use it in officiating at nearly 750 services since that day.

One of the great themes of the Bible is the way God has comforted his people. Both the Old and New Testaments are rich with examples of God's reassuring presence, of how the Creator of the universe has upheld and sustained, nurtured and protected faithful followers. The Scriptures reveal God as the One who holds our hands, walks with us in times of danger, tickles and teases us when we take ourselves too seriously, and offers giant bear hugs when we're lonely or hurting. The list of comforting biblical passages is long and impressive: Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;" Psalm 121:1-2, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." God led the Hebrew people out of slavery and comforted them in their seemingly endless desert wanderings by providing for their daily needs. In the midst of their fears and struggles, "The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light." (Exodus 13:21).

One of my favorite illustrations of God's watchfulness and caring is found in Hosea 11:3. "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them." The fortieth chapter of Isaiah contains words of great solace and inspiration. "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" (40:11). Or consider these words of promise: "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (40:31). Though several millennia have come and gone since these words were spoken, yet they still possess profound power to comfort God's people.

The New Testament continues this theme in many of Jesus' statements and in almost every one of its books and letters. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens," said Jesus, "and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Or again in the Gospel of John, Jesus offers words of comfort for those who grieve. "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." (John 11:25-26). Three chapters later in this same Gospel, Jesus comforts his frightened disciples. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27). New Testament references of assurance and support include Romans 8:18-39, 1 Corinthians 15, 2 Corinthians 4, Hebrews 12:1-13, and Revelation 21:1-7 among many others.

The God who hugs us, however, is the same God who tugs and nudges and

pushes us. Both comfort and challenge are necessary components in God's relationship with the human race. We are calmed and strengthened in order that we might serve others and be in mission to the world. Again the words of Jesus: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." (John 15:16). This is clearly the meaning of the Apostle Paul's message in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. "Blessed

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be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... who consoles us in all our affliction, *so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction, with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God*" (italics mine). If we seek for and receive the consolation of God, we must be prepared to share our strength, our gifts, and our blessings with others who need them. God's comfort is not designed simply to make us feel better. Its purpose is to produce spiritual growth and inner power, enabling us to love others more effectively.

Thanks be to God, who with wisdom and perfect timing knows when to comfort and when to challenge us, when to pat our heads and when to shove us forward. Our Divine Parent gives us both giant bear hugs and insistent tugs! □



Kel Groseclose is pastor of congregational care at First United Methodist Church in Wenatchee, Washington. He is author of several books, including *This Too Shall Pass (Dimensions for Living)* © 1995.

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