

Pastor Charley:

Well, hello there. Pastor Charley here, wanting to welcome you to Remote Worship here at Johns Creek United Methodist Church. We're so glad that you've joined us today, and we appreciate the time. I know this is a sacred time for many of you as you tune into this worship service. Whether you're with family or by yourself, we hope it's an important time of inspiration and comfort for you. Let us do an attitude of prayer together. To eternal God, we do thank you for this time together, this time that you've given to us.

We need the reminder as often as possible, that you are God, and to be still before you, knowing that you have all of us in the palm of your hand. Now, Lord, you've given me the amazing privilege and responsibility of preaching your word to these my friends and your servants. Lord, a task that I need your strength in order to do. Lord, speak to me and through me in such a way that all of us receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

I'll never forget a Christmas Eve worship service that I led several years back. It was another church I served in Florida, and of course, we got to the end of the service, which is pretty much everyone's favorite part of the service, where you hold the candle and you sing Silent Night, a very sacred time. Well, of course, our job, as we do here at John's Creek, normally, when we have our normal Christmas Eve worship, is that I present the candle to each person down the aisle, the right side of the aisle. Then they take their candle and light the person next to them, and honor goes.

Well, the very first person I got to light their candle in that church was a woman who recently lost her husband, and there was an empty space right next to her. I kept trying to light her candle, and it just wouldn't light. I tried to light it. It was a new wick, I believe. I tried to light it, it just wouldn't light. Finally, my light went out and poof, it was gone. I told her, "I am so sorry." She goes, "No, Pastor Charlie, that's fine. It's actually fitting," she said. "I feel like my light has gone out." Never will forget that. Perhaps that's how some of you feel right now during this Christmas season. You feel like your light has completely gone out.

Maybe it's because of a death of a loved one. I know many people in our church family have experienced great loss of loved ones. I think more people over the last few months have experienced that than any time in my ministry here at Johns Creek. I know many of you are grieving, many of you are great pain, or perhaps you're dealing with mental illness of some sort, with yourself or someone in your family, or maybe it's family dysfunction, or perhaps it's a broken marriage. Maybe it's the loss of a job. Maybe all this COVID business has just totally beaten you down and gotten you down, and the light has gone out.

Everybody keeps singing, "It's the most wonderful time of the year," and you're thinking, "No, it's the most miserable time of the year." Some of you John Denver fans may remember that a while back, Denver wrote a song. There was a very popular. It didn't get a lot of air time, but the title of it was, Please, Daddy, Don't Get Drunk this Christmas. The song tells of a dad who often gets drunk and gets very abusive, and one Christmas, he comes home drunk. He collapses over the Christmas tree, and pushes the Christmas tree over. It's a difficult song, wasn't very popular, but for many, it reveals and expresses the sentiments for themselves of this season.

For many people, holiday memories aren't necessarily happy memories. Maybe your light has gone out, and you're wondering what to do. Maybe you're thinking, "Well, Charlie, is there a word from God for me in the midst of my grief, in the midst of my darkness, in the midst of my blue Christmas?" Well, I believe there is. I want to share a passage of scripture for you that comes from Isaiah Chapter 40, and I believe it's going to be a great help to those of us who are experiencing a blue Christmas. Listen to these words from scripture.

Comfort. Comfort my people, says your God. Isaiah chapter 40. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up. Every mountain and hill made low. The rough ground shall become level. The rugged place is plain, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed. All humankind together will see it, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Are you in pain, this advent season? Has your light gone out? The Lord wants to comfort you. My message for you today is to embrace the comfort of God. I want you to embrace the very comfort of Almighty God, because God comes and he says, "I want to comfort you." He's not saying, "I want to help you get over it. He's not saying, "I want to help you snap out of it." No, the Lord is saying, "I want to comfort you."

Embrace the very comfort of Almighty God. I love the words of Jesus Christ. He says in Matthew chapter 11, "If you are tired from carrying heavy burdens, come to me and I will give you rest." I love what Rick Warren says about that verse. He says, "What's great about that verse is Jesus says the very opposite of what most people think, when God says to them, 'Come to me.' Many people think that when God says, 'Come to me,' God's going to say, 'Come to me and I will give you rules. Come to me and I'll give you regulations. Come to me and I'll give you restrictions. Come to me and I'll give you religion. Come to me and I'll give you ritual.'"

No, what does our Lord say? Our Lord says, "No, come to me and I will give you rest." If your light has gone out, if you're carrying a heavy burden, if you don't know what you're going to do with yourself in the midst of your blue Christmas, I implore you today to embrace the comfort of Almighty God. Why? Well, because God cares about you. God cares about you quite simply. Isaiah chapter 40 is a powerful chapter, because the prophet Isaiah is speaking to a nation, the nation of Israel, an exile. They long to be home, and they didn't know if they would ever get there. The prophet Isaiah reminds them that the Lord has not forgotten them. The Lord has not forsaken them, that the Lord would bring them home one day to the very promised land.

Of course, John the Baptist would then use this particular passage of scripture to share with us how God and Jesus Christ would bring us back, would reconcile us to God, in Jesus Christ. There's a powerful image in this chapter of the picture of God. I don't know if you've ever noticed it, but as you read further along in Isaiah chapter 40, it says this about God. "God gathers lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart." If there ever was a message I want you to receive today in this Christmas, it is that God carries you very close to his heart, that God cares about you, that God wants to comfort you and give you strength.

A friend of mine talks about the time when he went to a Christmas party, a dinner party. It was with a very loving family. Of course, the house was decorated, all covered in Christmas. They had a Christmas tree with a train going around the base of it. Now, we don't see that very often anymore. Perhaps your home has one of those. I think it's great. There was this train going around the base of the Christmas tree, and of course, the family had a couple kids. During dinner, my friend watched as their little daughter was playing with the train.

She was running the train too quickly across the track, and it fell off, it derailed. My friend watched as the little girl was trying her best to fix the train. She was kind of kneeling on top of it, trying to fix the train and put it back on the track. She was having a very difficult time doing it.. then my friend remembers watching her dad get up from the table and say, "No, no, sweetie. You see, you can't do something like that from above. You see, you have to get down beside it and put it back down on the track. See, honey, watch." He watched as her dad got down beside the train and put it back on the track.

I tell you, do you feel like your life is derailed? Do you feel like your life has been thrown off the track? Do you feel like you have wrecked? You see, God Almighty came from above to get beside us, to fix us, to put us back on track, to fix our broken places. The Lord God Almighty emptied himself of all of his power and all of his majesty, and got down beside us to fix us. You see, God cares about you. Embrace

the comfort of Almighty God, because Advent tells us that God cares about you, God cares about us, but it also shows us that God understands us. Embrace the comfort of God, because God understands you.

Maybe that's a message you need to hear today, because have you ever felt like no one really understands you? Ever had a very difficult day, a difficult time at work or at home, or just in life in general? You think to yourself, does anybody understand me? Does anybody really know me? Has anybody ever gone through this before? The good news of Christmas is that God almighty understands what it's like to be human. God almighty understands you, because God decided to put skin on and walk in very human shoes. He understands what it's like to be human. He understands what it's like to suffer. He understands what it's like to be lost.

I recall many years ago, when Brandon and I lived in a parsonage in St. Petersburg, there was a big screened-in porch. I was taking the dog out one night and letting the dog out. After the dog came back in, I noticed there was a big screech owl in the middle of this porch. It was kind of perching itself on a light, and it just looked at me, blinking its eyes. As I looked around, and I noticed both doors to the porch were shut, I realized that the screech owl was trapped. It couldn't get out. Earlier, I heard a lot of fluttering and I was wondering what that was. The owl didn't know how to get out of the porch. Of course, I can speak owl, right?

The first thing I did was, I went like this to it, "Go." I pointed to the door, "Go out that way. That way, that way." It didn't work. Then I went to the other door, and I opened it, and I said, "Well, go out that way. Go that way. That way." It just kept looking at me and staring at me. Well, finally, I just had to give up. The thing wasn't listening to me. It didn't understand me. I got my dog and went back upstairs to go to bed. The interesting thing was, as I went to bed that night, I thought to himself, you know what? The only way I could show that owl how to get out of my porch would be to become an owl myself, and show owl the way out, to become an owl myself and set him free.

That is exactly what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us. That's why we light the Christmas trees, and that's why we light the candles, and that's why we sing the carols. That's why we have this spirit of the season, because our Lord, God, decided to become one of us to understand us. When we cry, God cries. When we hurt, God is hurt. God became one of us. God came to us, so we would go to him. That's the power of Christmas. God understands you. No matter how sad you are today, no matter how grief stricken you are today, God understands you.

Many years ago, there was a popular song sung by Bette Midler. It was played ad nauseum on the radio. God is Watching Us From a Distance. You remember that? God is Watching Us From a Distance. Many people thought it was great that the radio was playing such a song, about God and God watching us. It is a beautiful song, but you know what? It is theologically wrong. God does not watch us from a distance. God decided to empty himself, of all of his majesty, and power, and glory, and to come down and be one of us in Jesus Christ, to understand us, to understand our predicament, to understand what it's like to be lost, and to set us free.

The cross of ours is a very powerful symbol, but you know what? There are two kinds of crosses we have in the church. The most common one, of course, is the cross without the body of Jesus on it. Of course, that represents the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and boy, do we need that. It is a reminder that our faith means nothing without the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We look at it and we gaze, and we find comfort from the fact that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, but there is another type of cross. That is a crucifix with the body of Jesus on it.

There are days, and perhaps this is one of them, where we need that cross. It reminds us that God understands our suffering, that God understands our pain, that God has chosen to be in the thick of it and the muck of it with us. You see, there are two sides to the cross: our redemption, and God's

understanding. Today, embrace the comfort of Almighty God, because God cares about you and God understands you. Embrace the comfort of God today, because God is with you. That's what Emmanuel well means, right? God with us, that God is with you, giving you the strength you need to take the next step, that God is with you, to give you the wisdom you need to move forward, that God is with you, to give you the power to cope. God is with you.

There's an old story about a Christian cruise liner, and perhaps you've heard this story before, but it bears repeating. A bunch of Christians got together to go on this big cruise liner, and all Christian denominations were represented for the most part. Imagine what a wild ride that must have been, huh? In the middle of the voyage, somebody fell overboard. All the Christians ran to one side of the boat to try to find this drowning man. The first person to call out was the fundamentalist. The fundamentalist screamed out to the drowning man, "Oh, too bad. You should have done what the Good book said."

The next one called out was the Moralist, and the moralist said, "Oh, I'm sorry. You must not be living right." The next one to call out was the revivalist, and the revivalist, seeing the hand of the man saying, "Help me," said, "Oh, I see that hand of salvation. Are there others?" The next one to call out, of course, was the Baptist. The Baptist screamed out, "Oh, son, that's the only way to be baptized." The next one to cry out and to scream out to the man was the Presbyterian. The Presbyterian said, "Oh, I guess you're just predestined to be there." Then the Methodist called out, and the Methodist said, "I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going to form a committee to look at your problem."

Then the Quaker spoke up and said, "I'll tell you what, we're going to gather together in Silas on this ship and pray for you." Then a loving stranger showed up out of nowhere. No one really understood or could recognize who he was, but he didn't say a word. Instead, he jumped overboard, swam to that man, grabbed hold of him, and brought him home. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. You see, folks, sometimes we can only stay afloat in life for so long. The tides of life, the big waves of life crash into us, and we can only keep our head above water for so long. When that happens, the deep in us calls out for some great deep answer, and the answer is not, "Look what the world has come to." The answer is, "Look what has come into the world."

An invasion of God and Jesus Christ, the only one who can reach the deepest parts of us, the only one who can heal us, the only one who can make us whole, the only one who truly cares about us and understands us, and is truly with us. The world will disappoint. Friends and even family will disappoint. Only God and Jesus Christ will stand firm and live out his promises for you. Only God and Jesus Christ can reach the depths of you. Well, I love what Frederick Buechner says about this. He says, "Once we've seen God in a stable, we can never be sure where God will appear or what ludicrous depths of self humiliation he will descend in the wild pursuit of each of us."

If the awesome power and majesty of God were present in the birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly or earthbound that God cannot be present there too, which means there is no place that God cannot find us. Has your light gone out this season? Are you sick and tired of the COVID news? Are you feeling grief stricken over a loss? Do you feel like you don't know how you're going to get out of a particular situation? Embrace the comfort of God, because God cares about you, and God understands you, and God is with you. This I know, because the Christmas story tells me so. Let's pray.

Oh, come Lord, we want to embrace your comfort for us. Come Lord and bring your healing power. Bring your strength. Bring us your intimate understanding of who we are and our suffering. Help us to see that we don't face these valleys alone, that you walk with us every step of the way, that there is a strength beyond us, there is a power beyond us, there is a wisdom beyond us, and that is you. It's in Christ's name we pray, amen.

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Receive this benediction. Now, may that mind that was in Christ Jesus be in you also, and the love of God, our Heavenly Father, abide with you this day and through this week. May the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit fall fresh upon you, and the faith and fellowship of all your disciples of Jesus Christ, go with you and sustain you, both now and forevermore. Amen.