



Sermon delivered by
The Rev. Dr. Augustus E. Succop III
Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina
December 17, 2017

"Move Over Currier & Ives"

(Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11)

There is a word in the Bible that we think we know, but we really don't. Isaiah uses that word and so does St. Matthew. Speaking for Israel, Isaiah speaks of *comforting those who mourn*, and then in the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus teaches that *blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*. That word, *to mourn*, can mean to grieve, to be sad because of a loss; but that word also means "to be disappointed," and disappointed at the way something did not turn out. Have you ever felt let down because your expectations fell far short of what you had hoped for and desired, and even prayed for? I know I have.

This time of the year is filled with grand expectations, hopes and dreams. The children are chomping at the bit for Christmas Day, and not a few of us are hoping that this Christmas will be the best Christmas ever. But, December is a dicey month. December can be filled with disappointment. December is notorious for shattering expectations and for reminding us that life doesn't always work out as we had planned and hoped. This time of the year is a fragile time, and it doesn't take much for hopes and dreams of a perfect holiday to be unexpectedly shattered. How is it and why is it that I do more counseling prior to and after Christmas than I do prior to and after Easter? Let's admit it. We want Christmas to be as perfect as possible, and when it becomes marred and bruised and chipped due to unforeseen events, especially behavior, we *mourn*. We become sad for what we had hoped might be.

I would venture to say most of us can handle, most of us can manage loss. We have a harder time negotiating dashed hopes and unfulfilled expectations. Most of us find it difficult getting over "what might have been," and when we revisit what might have been, we mourn, we become sad, even depressed. But to that, the Lord says, *I can help with that. I can comfort you in your moment of unrealized dreams and shattered hopes*.

The prophet makes it known *for our day and for our lives* that the God of Jesus Christ is in the "repair" business. The God of Jesus Christ heals and mends and puts back together what becomes broken, be it a shattered dream or a broken heart. The God Who once made

possible the birth of Jesus Christ is the same God Who gives hope where hope appears to be lost. No wonder the prophet says it as plainly as one can say it: *I will greatly rejoice in the LORD. My entire being shall exult in God*, because only God can breathe new life into life, into our lives, and there is nothing, *nothing* metaphorical about that. When God gives new life, when God puts life back together, piece by piece, the broken pieces become whole, and our life becomes better than it once was.

A few weeks ago, I was talking with someone about their family. That family has had rough times, as of late. I won't go into detail, but as one family member told me, that family is in crisis. As I was leaving, I noticed in the hallway a framed print of a house and a front yard and dogs and children at play. It is one of those prints by Currier & Ives. I stopped to admire the scene, and the family member with whom I had been speaking approached, and said, *I wish I could live in that world. It looks so perfect, so peaceful.* Who wouldn't want to live in a perfect and peaceful world? We all do!

In exile, Israel was living an unthinkable nightmare. Her world had been turned upside down. What got Israel into exile was her own fault, bad choices, bad religion, bad beliefs, bad relationships. What Israel needed was a *new* life. She needed to hit the reset button. Which is why Isaiah calls to Israel, which is why Isaiah tells Israel there is only One Who can provide a new life, only One Who can locate the reset button; there is only One Who can comfort in the midst of Israel's mourning and deep, deep sadness.

You and I long for a perfect and peaceful world because you and I don't live in a perfect and peaceful world; and yet, you and I are loved by a perfect God, a God Whose peace goes far beyond human understanding. That is why when it comes to human lives such as yours and mine the God of Jesus Christ is not clueless. The God of Jesus Christ knows how important it is that our hopes and dreams get pieced back together. And when that begins to happen, we begin to notice how it is that God works in our lives repairing and restoring and returning and reimbursing and resurrecting, and hopefully it is then that it dawns on us that that God, the God of Jesus Christ, can no longer remain for us some grand option. Faith in that God, the God of Jesus Christ, makes life better. For the sake of our lives, the God of the Christmas Child takes us from imperfection to perfection, from chaos to peace, from hopelessness to hopefulness.

There were those within Israel who thought all was lost, forever lost when she was marched into Babylon and where she remained for 40 long years. In those 40 years, there were those who gave up all hope of ever being a nation again. Which is why the LORD called

Isaiah to speak a word of hope to Israel, which is why we remember that word in our day, which is why when we connect the dots in our life, we notice that our word of hope **is** Jesus Christ, the living Word, not some metaphor, not some distant, half-baked possibility, but a concrete reality present in this life and present to those who believe that long ago in a village called Bethlehem the Word became flesh, became our flesh, in order to give us new life.

Now, hear this, and take this to heart: our definition of perfection and God's definition of perfection are not the same. Which is why you can take this to the bank: *God's perfecting Spirit never disappoints*. God's perfecting Spirit always causes us to rejoice, as in, *I will greatly rejoice in the LORD. Everything about me shall exult in the God Who knows me through and through*. This is the God Who perfects life, doesn't make life perfect, but perfects life, and there is a difference, there is a huge difference between a perfect life and a God Who perfects life, and the sooner we learn that difference, the better.

What the LORD does when the LORD comforts those who mourn is to reassure them that God's perfecting difference is near, is at work, is never far from them. Faith in Jesus Christ is the perfecting difference we want. Jesus Christ is not some abstract vestige of what might have been or could have been. He is the perfecting difference for human a life, such as your life and such as my life. When you and I live into that difference, when we become one with Christ through faith, that's when it becomes known, that's when it becomes revealed that we know a God far greater than all the other gods who catch our distracted attention so often and so easily.

Last week, after the special election in Alabama, a friend of mine was lamenting how distracting the build up to that special election had been for him. He said that every time he turned on the radio, turned on the television, picked up a newspaper or scanned the news on-line, that's all there was. I told my friend, *In one sense, there is always a special election in Alabama*. In one sense, there is always some distraction causing us to look the other way and, thus, we miss the God Who is here, the God Who comforts, the God Who cares, the God Who knows how to put life back together, again and again.

That is why we rejoice in the Lord. The God of Jesus Christ is the only God Who can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, the only God Who risked everything so nothing would ever be able to separate us from God's love given, revealed in Jesus, once born in Bethlehem so He might be alive for us, and with us, and in us, forever.

Let us pray: Lord God, we thank You for the perfecting difference You provide through faith in Jesus. Thank You for making available to us the joy of knowing Him, personally, and for allowing Him to comfort us through His undying love. Work through our joy so others may come to know Jesus in us and through us, and all through His joyful obedience to You. Amen.