

COMFORT, O COMFORT MY PEOPLE

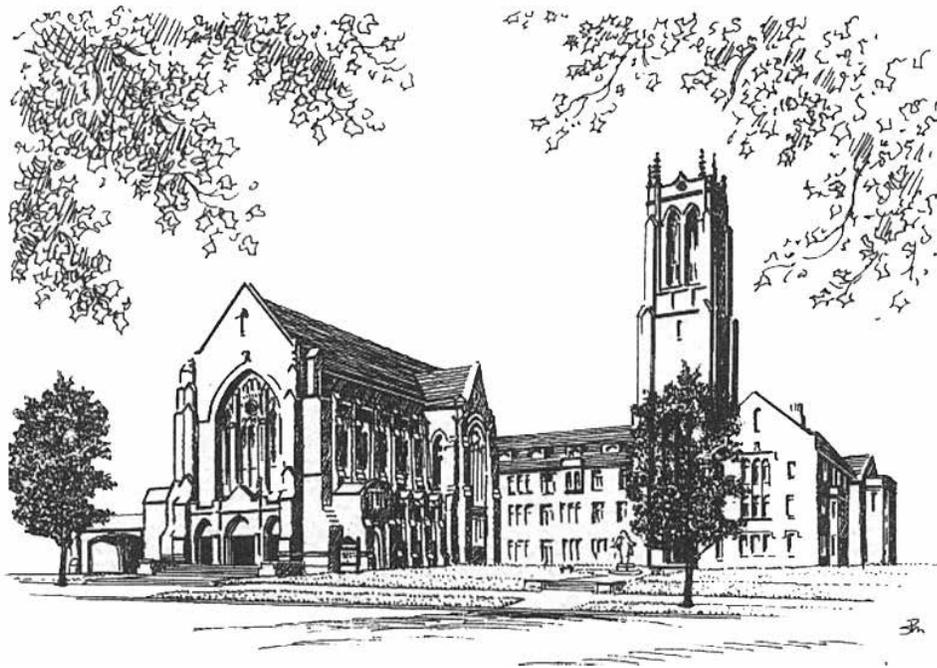
by

Rev. Gail Williford

December 19, 2013

Service of the Longest Night

6 p.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Text: Isaiah 40:1-5

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Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Prayer. Amen.

That first Christmas was hard. Everything seemed just a little out of place — rather like dancing to the same old music but with brand new shoes that didn't quite fit — or looking at a familiar scene but the light was too bright, forcing you to squint. Everything was a little off, just a trifle strange, poignantly painful.

It was like the zillions of times I'd picked up the phone to call her ... realizing the lines didn't reach where she was. Or thinking goodness she'd love this story, or article, or picture — and then catching myself knowing they were mine alone to enjoy. I'd wonder about some issue and just want her thoughts, her reflection, her input ... and knew I would never again in this lifetime hear her voice.

Two months — only two months had passed since her death — less than 60 days — a fraction of time and yet it was a lifetime. The world as I knew it had changed. I remember walking outside the hospital after we'd left her lifeless body in the care of the funeral home.

The world was surreal. I was numb and on edge, calm and broken-hearted, my brain non-functioning and on overdrive.

A mailman was delivering packages. A policeman directed traffic. Throngs of people zipped in and out the sliding glass doors. How could people be acting as if nothing happened, as if things were “normal”?

Understanding this state of suspended reality, in his profound grief, W.H. Auden wrote these lines after the death of his beloved partner:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policeman wear black cotton gloves.
He was my North, my South, my East, my West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

My mother was gone. Dead at the age of 48. She'd had her heart attack four days earlier. Surely she'd recover I thought, surely she'd pull through, surely she'd bounce back, but no.

There were questions I wanted to ask — questions that pertained to right then — questions of the doctors.

How did this happen?

Why didn't you prevent this?

Your job was to save her. Where were you?

Over time the questions changed, and were just as unanswerable — questions like

How do you make that pie crust?

What was it like to live in New York City as an 18-year-old?

What happened with your father?

What's it like to raise children?

Who were you?

What made you tick?

Hers was the first funeral I ever attended. It was also the first funeral I ever planned. We were not big church goers and had no church home. The strangeness of funeral customs bothered me — the hushed tones, the euphemisms — I felt like someone underdressed at a formal function that was being conducted in a foreign language.

In God's supreme and healing irony, subsequently I have been given the chance to be with many people as they approached their own deaths, have witnessed the sanctity of the dying act, and have been with grieving families. I now realize that 40 years ago, I was a 26-year-old overwhelmed by my own grief, thrust into a position to make decisions without a glimmer of background or knowledge.

In the intervening years I have been privileged to hold the space in sacred witness as women and men mourn the loss of their beloved spouses and partners, to agonize with parents who've lost children, share as other children lost parents, and be present as siblings are separated from their beloved brothers or sisters. I have come to see death as a part of life and life as a sheer, unadulterated gift. I have seen people suffer and have seen medicine, community, love, and death ease suffering. I have come to learn that the more I know — the less I truly know. It's all grace and mystery.

We are called to be in loving communion with one another. Loving the Lord, our God, and our neighbor as ourself is our highest and best calling.

Just Sunday after church, I was in Donna Adair's office when my friend Tonya Knauth walked by followed by her darling clan. I asked where they were going. She stopped and smiled and said, "I need to tell you a story."

Now I adore Tonya and know that she and Rick are fantastic people with three of the most precocious and delightful children ever placed on this earth, so I knew I'd be fascinated by whatever tale she'd spin.

When her dad was in St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital having had quadruple bypass surgery, she had taken her brood up to see their grandfather. Visiting hours in the cardiac unit were short and strict, so during one interlude after he had seen his grandfather and before his family returned home, her eldest, 10-year-old Christopher, observed a older woman sitting by herself in a wheelchair hooked up to a Christmas tree full of bags and vials of liquids. Christopher felt moved to go talk to her.

He went and introduced himself and asked if there were anything he could do to help her. She thanked Christopher for his attention and asked him to sit next to her and visit. Happily he joined her, and they talked about their lives. Thus began the friendship between Shirley Stein and Christopher Knauth, which continued until her death.

Both Shirley and Christopher valued their visits. She got to know his parents and sister Katherine and brother Matthew. He met her husband, Phil, and their grown children. The Knauth family attended her funeral service at the local synagogue. The Sunday that I saw them, the family was headed to a party of Phil's company to which Phil had invited them. Calling Christopher a "mensch" because of Christopher's kindness to his wife, Phil has decided to do a kind deed for another person, a mitzvah, every day for the rest of his life.

When I asked Tonya if I could use Christopher's story, she told me that at the party Sunday, a sobbing Phil called Christopher on the stage to introduce him to the thousand people in attendance. The bright, handsome, red-headed,

10-year-old mensch was greeted with a standing ovation and the hug of a grieving and grateful man.

The compassion of a Christopher Knauth, the openness of a Shirley Stein, the gratitude of Phil Stein, the loving, devoted upbringing of Tonya and Rick Knauth we might write off to good genes or great environments, sure. AND I believe that underpinning it all, there is a God of infinite love and mercy who cherishes us more than we can ever comprehend and who desires good things for us.

Forty years ago, my mother died. Today I have peace about her dying and assurance of her continuing in God's presence. Not long ago, I had a dream that my dear friend, Margy Leifeste, gone almost 11 years, visited me. I'm always thrilled to see Margy. This time she came with someone. When I asked her who her companion was, she said "it's your mother. We're having a great time."

I woke up smiling.

Thanks be to God. Amen.