

Isaiah 66:13 (NRSV)

As a mother comforts her child,  
so I will comfort you;  
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

## As a Mother Comforts Her Child

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: May 8, 2016 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Isaiah 66:13

I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to be a little risqué to start things off this morning. Can I assume that everyone here knows how babies are made? Good. Then let me play you a verse of a song I like a lot.

Oh baby look what we made when we made love  
All by ourselves with some help from above

Do you remember the day you were born? Probably not. But there was someone there who remembers or remembered that day as though it were yesterday.

Pregnancies, some are hard; very few are completely easy. Morning sickness, tiredness, a sore back, an ever-increasing abdominal area, and the pangs of childbirth that God told Eve would be every mother's lot. Some of these things your mother no doubt remembered. But the thing that never left her mind was the moment when she beheld and held you for the first time. She looked down at your tiny fingers and wrinkled face and marveled that from her life had been born. The stirring and kicking that had been inside her, she knew in her mind that that was you being made. But even that did not prepare her to gaze upon your wiggling, possibly howling, but unquestionably beautiful living self, bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh. A miracle beyond imagining.

It is of course no accident that your birth was very like the first one there ever was. The first creation story in Genesis tells us that "God created them in his image, in the image of God God created them; male and female God created them." The second creation story adds the gritty details: "Then the LORD God formed Adam (the human being) from the dust of the ground (Adamah), and breathed into the human's nostrils the breath of life; and Adam became a living being." God began with a lifeless lump of mud, shaped it and breathed life into it, shaped it after God's own image and brought it to life.

In every birth God plays this part: God makes a new being breathe with life. And we get to play our part, too, in this glorious miracle.

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There's a funny, sometimes annoying thing that results from the intimate and blessed day of your birth. You are forever your mother's baby. You may be an adult with children of your own, but you are still your mother's baby. You may be accomplished in a thousand different ways, but in your mother's eyes you will also always be that ruddy newborn, the miracle of her life.

I imagine that God is much like your mother in this way. God knows you are an adult. God expects you to be an adult, maybe even a parent yourself. And some days God is very proud of you. And then there are some days, let us just say, that God wishes you would behave a little better. And sometimes God may even be a little petulant. But here's the thing. On both days, God sees you as a mother sees her child. It's a kind of double vision. Like your mother, even when you're an adult, and maybe especially on those days when things are hard and by luck or

your own missteps you're not what you could be or should be or want to be, God weeps and desires to fold you in a tender motherly embrace all the more.

Life has a way of growing complicated. I read somewhere recently that people have to learn to hate. As an example the writer said the only thing her toddler hates is nap time. But she winced a bit as she mused about what her toddler would become, because she knew that whatever he became his innocence would not last.

I sometimes think we misread the story of the Garden of Eden, at least when we read it simply as a story of disobedience and the fall, the beginning of original sin. It may be more accurate to read the story as a parable about the inevitable process of coming of age. At first Adam and Eve were like toddlers. Life was uncomplicated. Their basic needs were amply satisfied. It was Paradise. But Adam and Eve ultimately yearned to grow up. Symbolized in the bite of the apple from the tree of knowledge, growing up meant that they learned good, but they also learned evil. Almost immediately they learned about blame—the woman gave me the apple, says Adam. They learned about shame—I was afraid for I was naked, and I hid myself, Adam tells God. And within a chapter rivalry infects the first family, and Cain murders his brother Abel.

Like so many mothers God is disappointed. Tom shared with us part of the Mother's Day declaration of 1870. Still very much in the shadow of the almost unimaginable bloodbath of the civil war, the proclamation declared:

Arise, then, women of this day!...

Our husbands shall not come to us reeking of carnage,  
for caresses and applause.

Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn  
all that we have been able to teach them of  
charity, mercy and patience.

Alas, 150 years later the same proclamation would do today. So, too, throughout the pages of the Bible God has protested what God's offspring becomes generation after generation. The failures are so consistent that it would defy logic to call it anything but the human condition. Very often God's anger has been kindled. Think of the flood. Think of the corrupt kings who brought about the Exile in Babylon. Think of Jesus rebuking Peter when the disciple continued to misunderstand the teacher. More often, like the mother looking lovingly at her toddler knowing the innocence will not last, I believe God winces. I owe it to you before I leave my post as your senior minister to tell you why the brokenness of the human condition persists so implacably. I promise to do that the next time I preach, on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, so be sure not to miss it.

But for now suffice it to say that God winces, but like the mother who will love the toddler whatever the future brings, so God also continues to love and seek to comfort her children. Like a mother, come what may, God cannot help Godself. That day when human-being (Adam) first took a breath, made in God's image; that day when God held Adamah in his hands and marveled at his own visage come to life in the clay, God was hooked.

This morning we read a brief section from the final chapter of the prophet Isaiah. Many readers believe that Isaiah should be divided into three parts. The first two were written before Israel was carried off into Exile. The part we read from, Third Isaiah was written after the Exiles returned. Our verse tells the people, "You shall be comforted in Jerusalem."

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem."

The promise seems to say that finally all will be well in Jerusalem. But when this verse was written, it was already clear that in the restored Jerusalem, there was nothing close to paradise. Old quarrels persisted. New ones arose. The condition of God's people was little different from before. The comfort God was pointing to in Jerusalem was still out of reach, at least in any complete sense.

And maybe that's the message here. A paradise of adult human beings is tantalizingly drawn for us, but it remains ever beyond us, at least in this life. But like a mother who loves her errant son, God continues to love us toward it and to make it our aspiration. But there's even more. God is pointing toward a reality that we will one day inhabit, where grownups will live in love and peace, where as it says elsewhere in Isaiah "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together."

In that day, the sentiment your mother sang in her heart the day she first saw you—Oh baby look what we made when we made love, all by ourselves with some help from above—will have produced the place. And God will say at last, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." Amen.