

## **“Comforters”**

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### **Scripture:**

### **Psalm 86 (NRSV)**

#### **Supplication for Help against Enemies - A Prayer of David.**

- <sup>1</sup> Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.
- <sup>2</sup> Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God;
- <sup>3</sup> be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long.
- <sup>4</sup> Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
- <sup>5</sup> For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.
- <sup>6</sup> Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.
- <sup>7</sup> In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.
- <sup>8</sup> There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours.
- <sup>9</sup> All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.
- <sup>10</sup> For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.
- <sup>11</sup> Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name.
- <sup>12</sup> I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.
- <sup>13</sup> For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.
- <sup>14</sup> O God, the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life, and they do not set you before them.
- <sup>15</sup> But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
- <sup>16</sup> Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving girl.
- <sup>17</sup> Show me a sign of your favor, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame, because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

## **The Sermon:**

Still-speaking God, we come before you now and ask that you open our minds and our hearts. Open us to hear your Word to us, this day. Please grant us wisdom and understanding. Thank you. Amen.

What does the word comforter mean to you? When you read or hear the word comforter, what comes to mind? Do you think of a soft bedcovering, one that is just right to snuggle up in? Perhaps you are thinking of comforters in human form—right now you may be visualizing a person or a group of people who helped you through a very difficult time, a time when you needed to be comforted. Or perhaps at this moment you are thinking of Comforter as a name for God, a name found in more than one place in the Bible. This morning I invite you to consider the many meanings of the word comforter.

Comforter is a name for a particular type of quilt—one that is tied together at the corners of patches rather than quilted all over. Often, comforter is used as a generic name for a patchwork quilt such as the one I have brought to share with you today.

This quilt was created last summer during the week of Junior High Camp at N-Sid-Sen. For this craft project, all of the campers and counselors were given a square of plain fabric and invited to decorate it with a fabric marker. We could make a design or we could write something, and we were to include our name on our square. We knew from the start that this quilt would be given away, and a few suggestions were provided about where it might go. The camp community voted to give this comforter to Hospice House. Recognizing that a resident of Hospice House might be in the closing season of life, we trusted that this quilt would be a gift of comfort and love.

The theme of last summer's camp was peace. Peace symbols and the word peace are found in many places on this quilt, and there is at least one illustration of a peace sign. You'll also notice quite a few labyrinths on the quilt because a labyrinth workshop was taught early in the week of camp.

Campers and counselors decorated squares, then those squares and the colored fabric squares were placed on the floor in Stillwater Lodge. There was quite a bit of kibitzing as we determined which squares should go where. I spent most of a day stitching all the squares together, and then the quilt top was used as a backdrop for our closing worship service. Just a few weeks ago, the quilt top was stitched to batting and backing, and the binding was added to complete the project.

This quilt represents a particular community at a specific church camp during a certain period of time—the summer of 2015. The quilt was created with the intention of being given to a person in need of comfort, a resident of Hospice House, a person we probably do not know.

Listen now to some of the words written on the quilt squares by junior high campers and counselors: Stay strong. Peace, hope, love is probably what you need. God will surround you with courage and love. Love is all you need. (God's) love never fails—it never gives up—it never runs out on me. We are loved, we are forgiven, we are accepted. Share those gifts! May you be filled with peace and love. Peace—dream—respect—happiness—love. Peace like a river, peace like a river—may you know God's peace in all of your life. May God bless you with peace. Peace be with you. Peace—peace—peace.

These words of comfort and peace, written by campers and counselors at junior high camp last summer, have made this quilt a comforter in the truest sense of the word.

Comforter is such a wonderful name for a quilt—the name itself makes you feel warm and loved! A comforter provides physical warmth—it feels so good to snuggle under it—and it is also beautiful to look at. A comforter not only warms our bodies, it can warm our hearts as well. Often there is love, or hopes, or memories, or prayers, stitched and tied into a comforter.

This comforter serves as a reminder that every one of us needs a comforter at some point in time. Sometimes we simply need a comforter to keep us warm and cozy, but often we need a comforter that will do much more than physically warm us. Our lives can be so complicated, or so lonely, or so painful, or so difficult, that we need a COMFORTER with capital letters! We may have sleepless nights that even a beautiful quilt won't help. We may feel like the pieces of our lives are coming unstitched, and we need mending. Or we may feel that our lives are so terribly complicated that our threads are all tangled and full of knots. There are so many, many times when each one of us needs a comforter.

At the end of Psalm 86, the psalm we shared this morning, the Psalmist lifts up the image of God as comforter: "...you, O God, have helped me and comforted me." Another passage depicting God as comforter is Isaiah 66:13: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." In the King James version of the Bible, in the Gospel of John, as Jesus speaks to his disciples about his coming departure, he uses the word Comforter as he speaks about the Holy Spirit: "(God) shall give you another Comforter, that (God) may abide with you forever..." the comforter will dwell "with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless," says Jesus. "...The Comforter, which is the

Holy Ghost, whom (God) will send in my name, shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.” (John 14:16-18, 26)

This understanding of God as comforter is a very important image for us to hold, when we feel like our lives are in bits and pieces.

God can comfort us in many ways. Sometimes that comfort is given through the people around us. A while back a friend shared a story which illustrates how God’s comfort can come through other people. My friend had a co-worker who was diagnosed with cancer. My friend and the people she worked with decided to make a quilt as a gift for their co-worker. They knew that a hand-made quilt would comfort their friend as she went for her chemotherapy treatments. But the friends and co-workers who made squares for the quilt and stitched it together discovered that they were being comforted as well. Making the quilt helped them deal with their friend’s cancer. The love that was shared as these friends made the quilt is an example of how God’s love and comfort can be experienced through other people.

Through the hearts and hands of others, God provides comfort. God also comforts us when we turn to God in prayer.

I can remember one day many years ago when prayers and pieces for a patchwork quilt were all mixed together. That day was October 20, 1991, the day a huge fire raged through Oakland and Berkeley, California. I was living in a dormitory at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. On the day of that terrible fire,, my dorm-mates and I spent much time in prayer. The wind was so strong that day, and we could see the flames from the fire even though it was still a mile away. The sky was black with smoke. We had our bags packed and prepared for evacuation. It was impossible to study that day, so I worked on a calligraphy project and then cut out squares for a quilt while I listened to the radio and prayed. I really needed God as a comforter that day.

When the wind finally died and the fire departments could begin to manage the flames, we felt enormous relief. Over 3000 homes burned in the East Bay hills that day. When I look at the calligraphy piece I made that day, or when I think of the quilt made from the fabric squares I cut out during that fire, then the memories of that day return. A lot of prayers helped me and many others make it through that difficult day.

For generations and generations, people have looked to God as a Comforter. The Bible is full of stories of people who have turned to God when in need of comfort. Even Jesus himself needed comforting; after his last meal with his disciples, he spent the entire night in prayer. Jesus understands exactly what it is like to have a sleepless night, in need of comfort, and he found that comfort in his prayers to God.

There are so many ways that we can find God's comfort. Comfort may come in the form of another person—a friend or family member, a counselor, or perhaps a medical staff person or a Hospice volunteer. Just as each of us may look to other people for comfort, we will have many opportunities to provide comfort for others. God works through us and through others to bring comfort. Comfort can also be found in familiar words of scripture, or songs, or prayers. And comfort and courage will be found in the awareness of God's faithful presence with us.

The beautiful quilt here with us today is a comforter made for a person who is probably in the last season of life. The yet-to-be-determined person, a resident of Hospice House, will be given this quilt to cover and to comfort them, no matter what the circumstances of their life. The person who receives this quilt is certain to understand that someone cared for them enough to make them a comforter. That person will surely be comforted by the love and prayers that are part of this quilt. May this quilt be a true comforter for the person receiving it.

Not everyone is blessed to have a quilt or comforter that is a tangible symbol of comfort and love. But every one of us has a Comforter. Every one of us has a Comforter who loves and cares for us always. God is with us always—through the joys and the sorrows, through the struggles and the celebrations, through all the seasons of life.

Next time you find yourself feeling lonely or scared, insecure or uncertain, slightly depressed or downright terrified, imagine yourself wrapped in a comforter. That comforter is made of God's love. Be aware of God's presence with you.

Remember what Jesus told his friends when they were feeling afraid, uncertain what the future would hold: "(God) shall give you another Comforter, that (God) may abide with you forever...(the Comforter will dwell) with you, and shall be in you. I shall not leave you comfortless." May we affirm, as did the Psalmist so long ago, "...you, O God, have helped me and comforted me...you, O God, have helped me and comforted me." Thanks be to God for the blessing of God's comforting and empowering presence through all of life. Amen.