

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Isaiah 50:4-9a

September 17, 2006  
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- 4 The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue,  
to know the word that sustains the weary.  
He wakens me morning by morning,  
wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.
- 5 The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears,  
and I have not been rebellious;  
I have not drawn back.
- 6 I offered my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from mocking and spitting.
- 7 Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,  
I will not be disgraced.  
Therefore have I set my face like flint,  
and I know I will not be put to shame.
- 8 He who vindicates me is near.  
Who then will bring charges against me?  
Let us face each other!  
Who is my accuser?  
Let him confront me!
- 9 It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me.  
Who is he that will condemn me?

Did you know you can listen to *The Wheels on the Bus Go 'Round and 'Round* ten and a half times between my home in Maple City and this church. I've tried to escape it, tried to tune into NPR, tried to listen to an audio book, I've even tried to just turn the radio off completely. But Nathan, Nathan will have none of that. Nathan only wants his "tongs." Usually it's not as bad as the same song twelve times in a row. Normally the CD spins through inspiring hits such as *Old McDonald* then *B-I-N-G-O* then *Jack and Jill*. But on Nathan's grouchier days, it's just those wheels going 'round and 'round and 'round, over and over again. And I'm sure that many of you think that I'm indulging him too much by letting him be the music dictator in the car—but when you're a working mother and then you have a job outside the home besides that—you learn to pick your battles. And because I'd rather listen to *The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round* twelve times than listen to Nathan screaming at twelve decibels above what it comfortable to the human ear, I indulge him.

But all of this listening to annoying songs that I do is not for naught. Some of those songs have good little messages for him to be hearing. In one stirring rendition of *Home on the Range*, the singer is interrupted by the voices of little children when he gets to the "and seldom is heard a discouraging word . . ." part. They ask him, "What's a discouraging word." And he responds . . . "a discouraging word is saying you're mean, that's dumb, or you can't play with us. Instead of discouraging words we should use *encouraging* words like that's great, how nice, and you're beautiful." And so even though these songs aren't great works of musical genius, they're teaching Nathan good lessons about how to live and they're offering me important reminders of the same.

Obviously we'd all like to hear encouraging words a little more often. And the writer of second Isaiah knew this. A word of explanation—even though Isaiah appears as one extended book in the Old Testament, it is generally believed that it was actually written by at least two, if not more, authors. The themes and issues found in second Isaiah—chapters 44 through 66—appear to be of one unit written by a single author. The author of these words is writing during the Babylonian exile. At this point in the history of ancient Israel, the Jewish homeland had been invaded by Babylonian troops. It was, in a way, a peaceful invasion and many Jews were permitted to go on living in many of the ways in which they had been before the invasion. However, respected leaders of the community, important merchants, teachers, and Temple leaders were sent into exile—made to leave their homes and settle in far off places. Essentially, the Babylonians interrupted the religious, political, and economic lives of the Jews to the extent that they would not be able to organize and regain power. It is to this sad, exiled, and weary group of folks that the author of second Isaiah writes. He understands the necessity, now more than ever, of preserving their faith as it is the essential element of their culture and way of life. Without it they will lose their identity as the chosen people of God. They are surrounded by outside influences, foreign gods, and the constant lure of wealth and success in the Babylonian world that will lead them ever farther from their own truth and their own God. The author understands the great responsibility that it is to speak the words that will, in his words, comfort the weary and essentially keep them faithful. He understands the need to avoid discouraging words as his people face an uncertain future together. They need encouraging words if they're going to stick together and remain faithful to each other, and more importantly, to God.

We too need encouraging words, words to comfort the weary, if we are to remain faithful to each other and to God. Indeed, it would be easy to lose our faith and neglect our bond to each other as sisters and brothers in Christ. But how do we hear that comforting word, and how do we speak that comforting word, when all around us are the shouts of discouraging words in news reports, gossip, the senseless chatter of the media, and the din of the chaos of life? If you are a student, made weary by bullying peers and the pressures to do and excel more, how do you speak a word to comfort the weary? If the daily juggle of carpools, your job, your friends, and your extended family has you feeling so over-extended that you have a hard time forming a coherent thought as a result of the never-ending “To Do” list running through your mind, how do you speak a word of comfort to the weary? If you yourself are weary, having suffered yet another medical set back or unable to escape the grief you feel because of the loss of that loved one you miss so dearly, how do you speak a word to comfort the weary? If you're blessed enough in this life to be enjoying your retirement in this lovely corner of the world and you want to help but don't know how, how do speak word to comfort the weary? If you're a minister charged with the awesome responsibility of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, how do you speak a word to comfort the weary?

I confess that I do not know. But here's an example of someone who has figured out how to speak, or more appropriately sing, a word of comfort to the weary. And this someone just happens to be my grandma. It turns out that she considers herself, and other Christians like her, to be living in what has essentially become a foreign land. Surely this passage from Isaiah about feeling disconnected and exiled from all you hold dear would resonate with her. For she sees in society so much sin—greed, hubris, dishonesty, hoarding, violence, oppression, and war. And right now it's the warring that's really getting to her. Now, lest you think I'm getting political

here, I need to tell you that my grandma is a life long Republican. No matter how fine the candidate, she seems unable to mark a ballot next to the name of anyone with a “D” after their name, and believe you me, those of you who know me well certainly know that it’s not for lack of her grand-daughter trying to get her to do otherwise. And so, if I am preaching politics here, they’re certainly not my own. My 88 year old grandma lived through the Great Depression. She married my grandpa right before World War II and wrote him a letter every single day of the four long years that they were apart while he fought that war in the Pacific Theater. She survived the 60s with all their societal uproar—much of it which I’m sure her good Methodist self found absolutely appalling. I’ve never seen her take a sip of alcohol and Lord help the poor soul who lights up a cigarette in her presence. As long as her legs would allow her to do so, she stood outside the Kroger store every Christmas ringing the Salvation Army bell and she is still, in her words, taking care of the “old ladies” at church—now mind you, she herself is nearly 90 years old. And this patriotic, sweet, and faithful grandma of mine who has seen a lot of living in her years needs some words to comfort her weary soul now, in this time which feels to her like one of the most trying times our nation has ever experienced. And because she feels this need, she has begun insisting—now none of you get any ideas here—she has been insisting that the minister of their little Methodist church allow the congregation to sing *Let There Be Peace on Earth* every Sunday in worship until the war ends. And really, that’s not political, that’s simply faithful. Indeed, the pursuit of peace is a higher ideal than any mere political aspiration could ever be. Peace—that’s what Jesus came to bring—peace on earth. And if bringing peace was Jesus’ mission, well then we can rest assured that it is our mission as well. And so in singing that song, week after week, month after month, and surely we all pray that it won’t be year after year, Grandma and her brothers and sisters in faith at Calvary United Methodist Church in Grand Rapids, Ohio are speaking a word of comfort to the weary while remaining faithful to their God and to each other.

But the question remains, how will we do the same? As you might have guessed we’re going to sing that same song of inspiration and comfort at the conclusion of the sermon this morning. But that’ll only get us so far. What are we going to do—what are you going to do—out there in the world to speak a word of comfort to the weary? When you return here next week, what will you have done in your effort to remain faithful to God and faithful to your brothers and sisters, not just of our faith, but indeed of all faiths. How will yours be a voice of encouraging, and not discouraging, words? And will you repeat them over and over and over again—indeed will the words of comfort go round and round in your own head—until they start to become reality? Now let’s not fool ourselves, it’s not going to be easy. If you’re in school and decide to speak a word of comfort to a peer who is weary because he is unpopular and totally uncool, you then run the risk of becoming unpopular and uncool. If you’re at work and you decide to speak a word of comfort to a weary co-worker who has betrayed you in the past and yet is having a tough time, then you’re going to need to garner up the courage to put your own ego aside and forgive them. If you’re one of our retired folks and you decide that you’re going to speak a word of comfort to the weary by putting yourself out there to volunteer at hospice, the hospital, or Tendercare, then you’re going to be faced with the prospect of growing to really care about people who will only be in your life for but a short time. And if I, as a minister, decide to speak a word of comfort to the weary, then I need to face the risk of getting out from behind my desk and getting into the messy details of folks grief and despair that sometimes bring up painful reminders of my own grief and despair. But all of these, my friends, are what we’re called to do as God’s people. We

are called to be faithful to God and each other by speaking a word of comfort to the weary. And because it is hard week, let's all agree to meet back here next Sunday for a little comfort for our own weary souls so that when we leave here again then, we'll be ready for another week of comforting the weary. Thanks be to God for this awesome responsibility and may we be willing disciples on this and all of our days.