

SERMON FOR JULY 8, 2018
MISSION FESTIVAL SUNDAY: COMFORT DOG SUNDAY
TEXT: ISAIAH 40:1-2
THEME: A COMFORTING MESSAGE

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

In the name of Jesus:

On May 18, the LCMS Texas District's Julie Tucker, head of Disaster services for the District, "got an alert of an active shooting in Santa Fe, Texas." A shooter had opened fire on students and faculty at the town's Santa Fe High School, ultimately killing 10 people and injuring 10 more. Immediately, the Texas District began to respond.

Pastors and congregations in the area did what they could to give comfort and aid to the victims and their families. Care for the community also came in the form of the Lutheran Church Charities' (LCC) comfort dogs, who arrived that Friday night at Gloria Dei. Soon 15 comfort dogs were there. They were also at the prayer vigil." The dogs made it easier, he said, to talk with people and care for them. These dogs made it possible to share the comforting message of Jesus to people in need of healing. They were a light in the midst of darkness, doing what the Church should be doing, giving comfort to sinners broken by sin. Other local LCMS churches prayed for all those affected, and another delivered prayer quilts to shooting victims' families. Pastors in the area reported increased attendance at worship services the Sunday after the shooting.

“Some folks were attending our church for the first time,” shared the Rev. Matthew Brackman, pastor at Peace. “As we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, we found comfort in the Word of God. It was a great blessing to be refreshed and strengthened by the body and blood of the one who brings us true peace in the midst of this upheaval. Shaking hands and seeing the faces of my people as they left emphasized to me how our Lord brings comfort and peace to His people in His house.”

Last year, Pastor Kurt Oknen wasn't really sure about the value of comfort dogs. But on Oct. 24, 2017, there was a shooting at a local high school just down the road from his church. Comfort dogs and their handlers arrived on the scene after five students were killed at Marysville-Pilchuck high school in Washington State. For five days comfort dogs and their handlers were on the scene in an effort to help the students and the whole town feel safe and happy again. Pastor Oknen said that one of his greatest memories was watching three dogs work among students of a special education class affected by the shooting. Eight students with various emotional and learning disabilities, who had been in the high school pool under lockdown for six hours, were understandably traumatized by the incident. But when the dogs entered the room, the faces of the kids lit up, there were smiles, laughter, chatter, and hugs. One little boy was so affected by the shooting that he hadn't said a word all week, but once he met the comfort dogs, he could not stop talking. Another boy, who couldn't stop shaking from the trauma of the shooting, became perfectly calm in the room when the dogs entered. Yet another boy, who didn't even respond initially to the comfort dogs, met the dog and its handler in a private room, just the two of them. The dog laid on the ground, and the child snuggled up and hugged him,

beginning to sob. The affected child, and the other children, began their own journey of healing all because of a comfort dog. The Lutheran Church Charities K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry was launched in 2008. It is a national human care ministry of our Church, using the calming nature and skills of purebred Golden Retrievers. They act as a bridge to open doors to talk to hurting people about Jesus. These Comfort Dogs are working animals, trained to interact with people of all ages and circumstances to help those in need. I will let Dan and Mary share more about why they are in this ministry and more about Rosie. But this is an extremely important ministry, for this mission and ministry opens doors to share the Good News of Jesus. They give help and comfort to the traumatized and those who help in times of trauma, including first responders. They have visited victims of New York and New Jersey after Hurricane Sandy, and in Connecticut after the Sandy Hook Shooting. They are used in hospitals and hospices, nursing homes and schools all in an effort to bring comfort to people who are in need of comfort. Just listen again to our text: Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her

that her warfare is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the Lord's hand

double for all her sins.

All people are in need of comfort. We live in a broken and fallen world. Sin, sickness, trauma, death, is all around. Just listen to the national conversation, no matter

the topic, humanity acts like it is at war with one another and at war with God. There is hatred, vitrol, and violence all around. Who in the world can give comfort? Only God can. That is God's Good News in the midst of brokenness we live in. God gives comfort in His Son Jesus Christ.

That is what God promised Isaiah, as he and the nation of Israel cut themselves off from God. As a result, the nation and its people suffered. They thought that they knew better than God, so they lived their lives as if God didn't matter and they mattered the most. But God allowed them to be taken from their homeland, punished for their sins. God spoke comfort to them through Isaiah, proclaiming that God Himself would pay double for their sins.

And this is what God has done in the person of His Son, Jesus. God's Son not only paid for the sins of His wayward people of Israel and Judah, He paid for yours and mine as well! For the blood of Jesus washes away all sin. You have been made friends with God the Father through His Son Jesus Christ. God is now your Friend all on account of the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And He has given to us the privilege of sharing the Good News that God is friends with everyone all on account of Jesus. To those who are broken by sin, ravaged by disease, separated by hatred, mourning in the midst of death, you and I have Good News to share, News of reconciliation and comfort. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for

Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

And so God uses us, and His creatures of comfort such as Rosie and other Comfort Dogs, so that those who are hurting may be healed, those who feel unloved feel God’s love, and those who do not know or believe in Jesus can come to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior through this comforting ministry. All of us, each and everyone of us, have been comforted by God in our afflictions so that we can comfort others in their afflictions. May God so use Rosie, those in the Comfort Dog Ministry, and us, to bring hope healing and comfort to others in Jesus Name.

Amen