My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord of our expectant Advent hearts, minds, spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

How many of you have heard of the Heavenly Council before? Just as we long ago knew that WE were not alone in the universe and have now all kinds of pictures, video, and testimony that life on earth is not the only life in this big broad universe that we keep learning about, let’s learn one more thing today: God is not alone, either. There are others with whom God shares. And we get a glimpse of that in today’s reading in Isaiah.

And in the Hebrew language, the word nahamu has a basic meaning: to reverse our minds, to change the state of our feelings. So “comfort” also could mean a few other things, right? What might some of these be? OK, it’s early on a Sunday morning so I’ll help us out a little bit. It could be for us to be sorry. To repent. To have a change of heart. To regret. Even to mourn.

We know how the ancient Hebrews repeatedly suffered in the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, losing the Temple and Jerusalem, their loved ones, their very homes as the ones who were not killed or enslaved were shipped off as little more than unwelcome aliens to do jobs that no Assyrian or Babylonian would do. The Hebrews suffer captivity, exile, and a diaspora. And now God comes and announces to the Heavenly Council: it is time for comfort. Divine providence and care, if ever in doubt, is assured again.

Fear becomes hope; sorrow, joy; shame is washed away to self-esteem and self-love. This is what God’s words must proclaim, and Isaiah is just the one to do it. Proclamations have to have this turn-around.

Whatever good news is planned, proclamations should speak not to the head, but the heart. It’s the difference between “Germany Surrenders” in 1945 ending war in Europe and “Mission Accomplished” in 2004 trying vainly to capture that same spirit. Proclamations, when true, must see, acknowledge, and touch the inner core of feelings—salving suffering, releasing confusion, ameliorating fear to make possible the radical reversal that God gives us this day.

Proclamations must be true to the heart, not the mind. George Orwell taught us that, right? Just for fun, read “1984” sometime this winter, and let it sink in. Proclamations must be felt to be true, or it won’t matter that the valleys are lifted up and the mountains leveled to the ground if the heart-work isn’t done first. The people will not come home. Neither home from their exile, nor home to their faith, nor home to their God: if it doesn’t feel true, there is no amount of seeing and hearing that will make is so.

We talk about this a lot when we comfort one another, that there is a time for words of assurance, but that the heart will need time to catch up. But the work of comforting is not just ours in that way, is it? It’s why we’re here, why we assure those around us that God is near and here, and that ‘comfort’ is more than just a head thing. That peace of God that starts to descend is the opening of our hearts to proclamation. To know that reversals can happen. To know that where we’re at will not always be true.

Or, as Little Orphan Annie might have said or sung, the sun will come out tomorrow, with a turn-around.

We take this seriously, don’t we? And the reason for why this partnership of God and us is so crucial is that we are not sufficient to the task alone. None of us are counselors of grief and pain and loss which can heal a broken soul. And yet our lack of credentials doesn’t disqualify us, does it? The command “comfort my people” is an invitation to participate in God’s work of opening hearts, but because we continue to engage and proclaim to one another that there will be a day ahead where the pain will not be acute and paralyzing, our work is iterative. The paths are not apparent until the heart is ready. And for all of us who have been down that path, we can now see that God’s proclamation is a comfort of past, present, and future.

The proclamation of God and from Isaiah is for all peoples who turn their ear to God. It is especially poignant these last two months as we are witness to yet another war in the middle east between, yet again, two peoples of God’s blessing. Suffering once again prevails as innocent civilians are killed, wounded, and taken prisoner. Our heads long to label who is at fault and who is to blame, which sides engage in terrorism inflicting the pain. We need God’s help, because we are bounded by time and it shades our perceptions. God has no such limitations.

And that matter’s greatly, as I leave us with these final thoughts.

If we were citizens of the British Empire during World War II, we might have lived in British controlled Egypt or Palestine. In addition to the War, key terrorists in the region would have been Anwar Sadat who engaged the Axis to help overthrow British rule of Egypt, and Menachim Begin of Israel who also headed a Jewish paramilitary organization that engaged in a series of bombings intended to humiliate Britain into withdrawing from Palestine. These names may be familiar to you: these “terrorists” later led their countries in the 1970s, and together won the 1978 Nobel Peace Prize for having the courage to step out into God’s proclamation of comfort. We must be careful who we label and their actions. Context is everything, which is why we pray for peace and focus on the end to suffering. Only then can comfort come.

The arc of the universe bends towards justice; God proclaims this even today. It’s up to us to do the iterative work, to help people see God’s merciful and just being as the great comforter. Feeding the hungry. Gathering the vulnerable. Defending the small, meek and lost, of each kibbutz and also of Gaza city.

If the promise of a straight path, the highway in the desert is the proclamation, then our fears of going on that road need assurance, and God will take responsibility for all the sons of Abraham—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim alike—for guiding them home, carrying all who need help for the journey.

Are we prepared as God’s iterative partner of comfort? The hope of the world depends upon it.

Thanks be to God, Amen.