

**Sermon: *Near to the Heart of God*** (Hymn Sermon Series) 9/29/24  
**Isaiah 40:10-11**

**Opening Story: Near to the Heart**

Today, we take a look at the story behind the classic hymn, *Near to the Heart of God*. It was written in 1903 by Cleland B. McAfee. Upon his graduation from Union Seminary in New York, he became the chaplain and choir director at Park College. His father had founded the university, which today is known as Park University. It now has 38 different campuses and over 17,000 students.

Things were going well for Cleland as he began his young career in ministry, until one terrible week in 1903 when his brother Howard's two young daughters became very sick with diphtheria (dip-thee-ree-uh). Diphtheria is a bacterial infection that attacks the nose and throat. Cleland's family and the community began praying for the girls but after a few weeks one of them tragically died. Less than 24 hours later her sister also died. The family and community was devastated. Cleland "sat long and late thinking of what could be said in word and song on the coming Sunday." Finally, the words and melody of *Near to the Heart of God* came to him. The choir learned the song at their Saturday night rehearsal and afterwards they went to the home of Cleland's brother. Holding candles, under starlit skies, the choir sang the hymn outside of the quarantined house. It was sung again the next morning at the Sunday service.

This song became an anthem of healing for this hurting community. It also helped them to draw near to the heart of God, even in a time such as this. Our scripture today is also about drawing near to God.

**Isaiah 40:10-11 (pg.667)**

*<sup>10</sup> See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.*

*11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

### **Scripture Reflection**

This scripture was written, most likely, by one of the disciples of the prophet Isaiah. It's the first chapter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of what we call the book of Isaiah today. Like the hymn, *Near to the Heart of God*, this scripture was also written under devastating circumstances. Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed and the Jewish people were taken away on a forced march to Babylon. It is estimated the march would have been somewhere around 500 miles. In these verses the author seeks to provide comfort to the exiles living in Babylon. We see the familiar image of God as the good shepherd, the same image that Jesus would later use in his ministry. Verse 11 says, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." The overall message of this verse is comfort and hope. God feeds his flock, he sustains them and provides their physical needs. In this **we see God as the sustainer**. God is also the one who gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his chest. This image reminds me of a mother carrying her child. In this image we see **God as the protector and comforter**. He becomes the source of life. The source of safety and tranquility in the face of injustice. God is also our leader. He leads the mother sheep in the direction they need to go in. God leads us in times of trial too. We can see **God as our trustworthy guide**.

Now, the author of Isaiah is doing something interesting in this verse. *The Hammurabi Code* is a Babylonian legal text from 1750 B.C. We know from the *Hammurabi Code* that the king of Babylon referred to himself as the "beneficent" or "good shepherd" and says, "In my bosom I carried the peoples of the land of Sumer and Akkad." So you can see what the Isaian prophet is doing, right? He's being subversive :) He's saying, "You

know that guy that calls himself your shepherd, that calls himself your king? Well, that's not the guy you should put your trust in. You should put your trust in YHWH, the TRUE shepherd of Israel. He's the one you should let carry you in HIS bosom." It's like the prophet is telling them that "God is bigger than any problem they face." Isaiah (Ch. 40) teaches Israel that God is going to be with them and bring them through this time of trial. All they need to do is to trust in him and let him take care of them.

How about you? Do you believe that? Do you believe that God is bigger than any problem you face? It can be easy to forget that. But the truth remains that the Lord is with us. He wants us to give him all of our fears and worries, and to find our rest and our hope in him.

**Sometimes when we face difficulties we suffer twice, when we need only suffer once.** We suffer the physical ailment that's bothering us, but we also suffer the worry in our own minds. The Lord wants you to cast all of your anxiety on him because he cares for you. It's the trust in God's character that allows us to overcome our struggles because we know that he is with us. We know that he is carrying us when we can't go another step. The Lord is our good shepherd and he is with us always, even until the end of the age.

### **Near to the Heart... Lyrics (#472)**

I want to close by taking a look at the words of *Near to the Heart of God*.

**Verse 1** says, "There is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God, a place where sin cannot molest, near to the heart of God." The theme of verse 1 is finding safety and quiet rest in the presence of the Lord. It's a trust that, no matter what comes our way, God is in control. God will lead us, and so we have nothing to fear.

**The Refrain** of this hymn says, "O Jesus, blest Redeemer, sent from the heart of God, hold us, who wait before thee, near to the heart of God." The refrain simply asks Jesus, the good shepherd, to hold us near to the

heart of God. It reminds us that Jesus is our redeemer and our savior, the one who mends the gap between a righteous God and a fallen humanity. He is our shepherd, who does for us what we can't do for ourselves, he holds us close to God's presence.

**Verse 2** says, "There is a place of comfort sweet, near to the heart of God, a place where we our Savior meet, near to the heart of God." The theme of verse 2 is comfort. It reminds us that God is the one who brings us the comfort we cannot bring ourselves. It's the kind of comfort where we learn not to worry about things, but to simply trust in God's peace that passes understanding.

Finally, **Verse 3** says, "There is a place of full release, near to the heart of God, a place where all is joy and peace, near to the heart of God." I'm not sure Cleland McAfee's original intention for this verse but to me the theme here is heaven. When one day, we enter in through God's other door, there will be a complete release to all of the things that worry us and weigh us down. We will find a freedom unlike anything we have ever known. It's like Cleland is addressing his brother Howard directly and reminding him that his girls are in a place of total bliss where all is well. It's a place with no more suffering; or as Cleland puts it "a place where all is joy and peace." One day, we will all get to see it for ourselves.

This hymn seems to remind us that we don't have to go to heaven to be near to the heart of God. We can be near to his presence right here and right now. When we do his work of serving others we are near to the heart of God. When we take care of the sick, we are near to the heart of God. When we take time to worship the Lord in song, we are near to the heart of God. When we take time to pray, and read scripture, and meditate, we are near to the heart of God. These are all things that draw us into God's perfect presence and remind us that there is nothing to fear, for God's perfect love casts out all fear!

## **Conclusion**

So may you let Jesus sustain you in all that you do.

May you trust him, as your comforter, who will see you through.

And may he 'ever lead you on, near to the heart of God.

## **Children's Moment:** Near to the Heart of God 9/29/24

Object: Stuffed Animal

Today I've brought with me a stuffed animal. Has everyone had one of these at some point in their life? What do we use stuffed animals for? We might play with them and imagine they are real. One of the main things we do with our stuffed animals when we are little is we snuggle them. They are a source of comfort and security when we feel nervous or afraid.

Have you ever been afraid of something? Some people are afraid of the dark; maybe that's you. Can you think of some other things people are afraid of? Everyone is afraid of something. Do you know adults are even afraid of things too? Well, when we are afraid it's important that we find comfort. As Christians we believe that we can find our comfort in God.

In the Bible Jesus told his disciples that he would be leaving them soon and that made them afraid so Jesus told them this: "Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many rooms. I'm going to prepare a place for you that where I am you may also be."

After Jesus was gone he sent his Holy Spirit to comfort his followers. The Holy Spirit is God's presence that lives within all of us. It helps us, comforts us, and gives us what we need to keep going.

So the next time you are afraid, I want you to remember that God is with you. Say a prayer, and ask him to comfort you and give you his protection and peace.