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[BLANK] [PRAYER] It is a privilege to welcome you to our church, and a joy to help you experience God's love, comfort and hope in this place. We all come from different families, different houses of worship, or from no particular faith, and here, in this place, today, we honor and respect your differences; but we honor more greatly the need that makes us one today. We may not be companions when we leave this place, but right now, in this place, we are companions with one another, and for one another. Let's please acknowledge our companionship now, and turn to the person to your right, and to your left, and welcome them to this place, whether you know them or not. [WELCOME SHARING]

Thank you, and bless you, for affirming our companionship with one another today. I am also a companion with you on this journey of hope today, as my family remembers my wife's parents, both of whom died earlier this year. When we lose a loved person in our lives, the rhythm of life changes. We expected a companion in our life to be there to respond to things in a particular way, and not having that response, even if it was not always a very warm response, changes the rhythm of how we experience life. Life becomes a different story, no matter what, because a key person in that story is not with us.

And when it comes to the holidays, often it's the small things that might not have seemed so great at the time that remind us of things the most. In our family, I know that there will come a time after dinner on Christmas day when we would normally break out a box of Mike's Pastries, from the North End of Boston. My wife's father brought them every Christmas for more than thirty years. We'll do something good that day, I am sure, but the rhythm of our traditions has changed, because our companion is gone.

For those people who have faith, we can find some comfort knowing that even though our companions are not here with us on earth, they are with us in heaven. We have a different kind of companionship with them, now. They are with us, but it's...different. And that is the hard part, isn't it? At times like Christmas, we become more aware not only of who is not with us, but also with how there is a new kind of way that they can be with us. The story of their companionship with us is over in one way, but a new story of companionship with them has begun.

In this new companionship with our loved ones, though, there can be both comfort, and hope. There can be both healing, and the potential for new growth. There can be, like gifts under a Christmas tree, the possibilities of unopened gifts, coming from new types of companionship with our loved ones, and with others in our lives. We can see that life is a process of eternal beginnings and endings, not a "forever" frozen in time. We are being invited by God constantly into new possibilities. The pastries from Boston on my family's Christmas dinner table were great, but just pastries in a box. Life is not something that comes in a box, and we cannot put our love for our missed companions, or their lives, into a box. Life is something more, love is something more, and should be something more, and filled with the possibilities of something more.

And God wants us to have this "something more" in our lives. God wants to

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comfort us, and give us a way forward, as the prophet Isaiah reminds us in today's reading from the Hebrew Bible. Isaiah is speaking the word of God to the people of Israel, who have lost everything near and dear to their hearts. Their kingdom, and their magnificent Temple in Jerusalem, was destroyed. Their nation had become slaves to the king of Babylon. They felt abandoned, and punished, by God. Every day for them must have seemed like a mountain to climb, a valley of despair to escape, a winding road, with no end in sight to the curves and twists that come from to us in our grief.

And in the middle of this bleak picture of grieving for what could no longer be, the prophet Isaiah offers one of the most amazing messages from God in all of the Bible. The word of God came to Isaiah, and he told Israel what God had told him: "Comfort, comfort my people! says your God. Speak compassionately to Jerusalem." Our God knew that grief that was in the hearts of Israel's people, and God did not say "It's all your fault." Our God, knowing how lost the people of Israel were in their grief, did not say, "Snap out of it, get on with it." Our God, the hope of all Creation, offered the grieving people of Israel what we all want in the middle of our grief: comfort, and hope. God asked Israel, through Isaiah, to let go of the burdens of guilt that weighed them down. God asked Israel to hear the word of hope from the God who loved the people who God had created, who God led out of slavery in Egypt. God asks Israel to listen to a voice, a voice from a new companion, who would make the twists and turns of grief give way to straight roads of hope, a companion who would make the unclimbable mountains and valleys of grief a level plain. God's companion would come to them, and offer them comfort, and transforming hope.

In our Christian tradition, we see Jesus, in today's reading from John's gospel, letting his followers know that nothing would ever stop God from offering us this companionship of comfort and transforming hope that our hearts want so very much. We hear the words of Jesus in John's gospel story on the night before Jesus died on a cross. His companionship was ending, and he knew his followers would feel orphaned from losing him. But Jesus promised his followers that God will never leave them to feel like orphans. Even death on a cross would not remove the comfort and transforming hope of God's love from their lives. God would always be their companion of hope.

And to seal this promise of everlasting companionship and hope, Jesus offered his followers the ultimate companion: God's Holy Spirit.

Some translations of this passage from John's gospel call the Holy Spirit God's Advocate. And that is one way to look at who God is, as God walks with us in our lives through faith. But the original text of John's gospel reminds us that God's Holy Spirit who encourages us, who speaks the truth to us, and who invites us to change how we live, is also our God as our Companion. We all need one another as our companions on this journey of healing and hope that we're on. But we also need to turn to the God who offers us comfort and hope. a Companion who, through faith, will never, ever, leave our side.

Perhaps the idea of God's Holy Spirit might seem like a small comfort to us, at a time when we long for a hug, a tender moment, a familiar laugh, a funny joke, from our

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life companions. But God is here, alive, in this place, right now, to tell us that the living Companion of God is the gift that will unlock God's comfort and hope. God's comfort and hope will lead us to the gifts of new possibilities for life, gifts which give us faith in our unending relationship with our loved ones in God's eternal hands, gifts which will help God to sustain and transform us, and to see straight highways, level plains, that lead to the love, healing and hope that God wants for us, and everyone.

In our worship this month, our church is focusing on opening the gifts of faith that will help us to receive God's comfort and hope. This Christian season of Advent, our preparing for the coming of Jesus on Christmas, is a time of preparing for new life. We are in a season of new beginnings, even as seasons end, and our calendar year ends. When will the beginnings begin? When will we turn the corner, and see a new story unfolding? When will we sense God's companionship in our lives, calling us to renewed companionship in God's world? Our season of Advent tells us: soon. Very soon. God is here, and God is coming, the God of Christmas called Emmanuel, the ancient Hebrew word, meaning: "God is with us."

The love of the living God surrounds us in this place of God's promises for hope. The love of God surrounds our loved ones, safe forever in the everlasting arms of God. God is your companion, together. My prayer for you, for your families and friends, and for all who you love, is that God's love will comfort you, heal you, and help you to see both the amazing journey of life that brings us here today, and the possibilities of life ahead of us, and beyond us, that a God of love is ready to offer us. May this season of new beginnings, offer you everything that your heart longs for, with the living God as your everlasting companion. Amen.