

It was a day that called for tuna noodle casserole.

Tuna noodle casserole. It's not the healthiest dish -- I'm pretty sure the first ingredient is "preservatives." It's not the most sophisticated meal for the most discerning palate. It's not my favorite food, not by a long shot. I'm not even entirely sure I like it. But it's a simple, three-ingredient, go-to meal that, where I grew up, was part of every church lady's casserole arsenal. Honestly, the apocalypse could happen this afternoon and the UMW ladies of the coal-mining regions of northeastern Pennsylvania would still have everything they need to whip up a tuna noodle casserole by tomorrow.

It's a memory in the shape of a 9x13 casserole pan. When I eat tuna noodle casserole, I'm instantly transported to the church potluck dinners of my childhood. When I eat tuna noodle casserole, I feel like a kid again. I feel safe. It is the very definition of comfort food.

Do you have something like that? Some food, some flavor, some smell that... it's not even about how it tastes. It's about how it makes you feel. Like a kid again -- warm and cared for. Watched over. Secure. Safe.

See, it had been a rough week, the week I was planning out this sermon series... so in the face of that rough week, I pulled out those three go-to ingredients and whipped up some tuna noodle casserole. I made it because I was hungry... but more than that, I made it because I wanted to feel warm and cared for and watched over and secure and safe. I made comfort food because I wanted to feel comfort. What can I say? I eat my feelings.

This idea of comfort -- it's critical to our scripture today. Throughout this season of Advent, we're exploring stories of sheep and shepherds -- and not just those shepherds

of Bethlehem, the ones who heard the angels' song. We're searching for those stories of sheep and shepherds that might fall a bit under the radar in the Advent season. And today, that search takes us to the words of the prophet Isaiah, the words of Isaiah 40. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God" (Isaiah 40:1, NRSV). "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings... say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" (Isaiah 40:9, NRSV).

It's a scripture that speaks of God's presence, God's power, God's comfort. And the people who first encountered Isaiah's words? They were in need of some comfort. A well-beyond-the-scope-of-comfort-food kind of comfort. Honestly, there's not a casserole big enough to meet their need.

You see, this passage here in Isaiah 40 is pivotal in the purest sense of the word. It's a pivot, a hinge connecting two very different realities. In the first part of the book we know as "Isaiah", chapters 1-39, we find words of warning, condemnation, and impending destruction. *Change your ways* -- that's the chorus of the first part of Isaiah. *Turn your hearts back to God. If you don't, you'll plant the seeds of your own destruction.*

By and large, God's people don't change their ways. They don't turn their hearts back to God. They plant the seeds of their own destruction -- a destruction we've come to call the exile. Invading armies descend. Lives are lost. The temple is destroyed. Jerusalem burns. And the survivors? They're forced from their homes, cut off from the land God gave to their ancestors, and carried off into exile.

That utter nation-wide trauma -- that's what happens in the thin white space between Isaiah 39 and Isaiah 40. And then, the prophet pivots. When we open to Isaiah 40, we find a different tone, a different message -- almost a different book. The prophet's

words are no longer directed to a stubborn and rebellious people; now, in the wake of the exile, these words are offered to a devastated and weary people. In this time and situation and context, God's people no longer need words of dire warning. Now, they need words of steadfast comfort. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God" (Isaiah 40:1, NRSV). This, now, is God's priority for the prophet. To this devastated, weary, hardened, nigh-on hopeless people, God wants to speak words of comfort.

And church... I think that resonates more now than it has in years past. We often read this portion of Isaiah at some point during the season of Advent. It shows up in lessons & carols, in renditions of Handel's *Messiah*. We've heard these words of comfort before. We've heard them in Advent.

But in this Advent? A second Advent in the extended season of COVID-tide? In this Advent, at this stage of COVID-related weariness... these words of comfort may resonate with us more than ever before.

And -- okay -- let's not get out of hand with comparisons here. The truth is that the vast majority of us cannot *begin* to comprehend the scope of devastation that Isaiah's original audience experienced in the midst of exile. We can't begin to appreciate that level of suffering. The better part of these past two years have served up struggle like many of us have never before experienced... and even still, we can't begin to understand.

Even so, church... it's not a competition. We can experience our own struggle or suffering without comparing it to or ranking it with the struggle and suffering of others. So it's not wrong to find a little resonance. It's not wrong to say: *I've felt kind of devastated, and weary, and hardened, and nigh-on hopeless these last twenty-plus months. I could use a little comfort right now, too.*

Isaiah offers up that comfort. And what he offers isn't the empty carbs of comfort food -- much as I appreciate them. Isaiah offers up something better, a comfort rooted in something more lasting.

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God" (Isaiah 40:1, NRSV). *Says your God.* I do have to wonder how those words might have sounded to those first listeners, those who were not only weary... but also kind of wary. I can almost imagine them saying... *comfort? From God?* As one biblical scholar writes, "... Isaiah was forced to preach to an audience that had experienced trauma and whose relationship to God had been deeply wounded as a result."¹ Suffering can take a toll on one's relationship with God, am I right? Based on their experience of exile, God's people might well feel that God -- this God who's now serving up words of comfort? -- is punishing and judgmental at worst, and just... absent and disinterested at best. Maybe they want nothing to do with this God.

But faith is a journey. So say they do decide to give God and his prophet the time of day. I can imagine some of them warily asking: *okay, then... what kind of God is this anyway? You say "say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'"* (Isaiah 40:9, NRSV). *But what's this God really like?* The prophet provides a portrait:

¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him. (Isaiah 40:10, NRSV)

To be honest, I wonder if the first part is at all comforting or reassuring. "See, the Lord GOD comes with might"? (Isaiah 40:10, NRSV). That's a warrior image of God.

¹ Michael J. Chan, "Commentary on Isaiah 40:1-11," in *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/isaiah-of-the-exile/commentary-on-isaiah-401-11>.

A warrior image, offered to a people who have experienced the threat of invading armies and the devastation of war. I would imagine that Isaiah's listeners have probably had enough of warrior talk by this point in their journey. (It would almost be like me trying to take a page out of Jesus' make-up-a-parable book, saying something like: *the kingdom of God is like a virus, growing within us and spreading beyond us.* It's actually a decent metaphor, but my guess is that you'd respond by saying: *yeah, pastor, we've kind of had enough virus talk for the time being.*) I imagine they're "over" battle talk and warrior metaphors, even traumatized by them.

But Isaiah takes this warrior talk and completely turns it on its head. What will this mighty warrior God do with his mighty warrior arm? Isaiah tells us in the next verse:

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. (Isaiah 40:11, NRSV)

What will this mighty warrior God do with his mighty warrior arm? Tenderly scoop up the lambs, carry them against his chest, and gently lead the mother sheep. That warrior arm brings comfort, not destruction. As one commentator puts it: "That divine warrior, with arm outstretched to slay an enemy, instead bends down and scoops the little lambs into the divine bosom. If only lambs could purr."² To a warfare-weary, warrior-wary people, Isaiah says, "*Here is your God!*" *The mighty warrior... who will gather you tenderly, cradle you gently, like a shepherd with a lamb.* To a warfare-weary, warrior-wary people... this may be an image of God they can get behind, one that can bring them comfort, connection, and even healing.

² Corrinne Carvalho, "Commentary on Isaiah 40:1-11," in *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-isaiah-40-1-11-6>

This is not the first or last time that the God of Israel will be likened to a shepherd... or to a warrior, for that matter. But the way the prophet does it here? It's powerful. The juxtaposition is powerful. That mighty-warrior/gentle-shepherd image is powerful. *The Lord is a mighty warrior, sure, Isaiah conveys... but that doesn't mean the Lord isn't a gentle shepherd, too. Your God is mighty enough to have your back... and gentle enough to scoop you up. This is your God!* Scholar Michael J. Chan writes: "The God announced is both powerful and gentle, able to comfort as well as defend. This God is a shepherd."³

I can't imagine how much God's people need that kind of divine shepherd talk, that kind of image of God. It's almost as if Isaiah is saying: *Has this experience of exile caused you to believe that God is distant or disinterested? Look to the shepherd, cradling the lamb. Your God is that near, that close. Has the experience of war convinced you that God revels in judgment and wrath? Look to the shepherd, cradling the lamb. Your God is that loving, that gentle. Has this long, unrelenting struggle devastated your understanding of God? Look to the shepherd, cradling the lamb. That is who your God is. That is what your God is like.*

That is what your God is like. Isaiah is essentially responding to the question that exile raises, the question that suffering always raises, the question: "Who is God? What is God like?" It's the same question author Rachel Held Evans tackles in the children's book *What Is God Like?*, (the same book I shared during the children's message). It's an incredible book. (I like when smart theologians write children's books. It makes me feel like I don't have to do so much correcting and commenting as I read them to my kids. There's a whole lot of messed-up theology out there in children's books. It takes us

³ Chan, "Commentary."

preachers years to untangle the messes they can cause.)

This one is one of the good ones. It's filled with biblical images and portraits of God, all with their roots solidly in scripture, all that seek to convey just a piece of who this transcendent God is.

"God is like a river," Evans writes, "constant and life giving. ...

"God is like the stars, forever present and bright. ...

"God is like a shepherd, brave and good, a protector who loves her sheep so much that she watches over all of them and knows each of their names by heart.⁴

On and on it goes, with one biblical metaphor after another, none of them giving the whole picture of God, but all of them conveying something deeply true about God.

And then it ends: "What is God like? That's a very big question. ... But whenever you aren't sure what God is like, think about what makes you feel safe, what makes you feel brave, and what makes you feel loved. That's what God is like."⁵ Never underestimate the wisdom of children's books, church. Sometimes they tell us -- even us grown-ups -- exactly what we need to hear.

Listen, friends: I don't know where each and every one of you are, spiritually and emotionally. I don't know all the details of what life has served up for you lately, or what your experience of COVID-tide has been. I don't know how any of that has impacted your relationship with God. I don't know whether, or to what extent, you're desperately in need of some divine comfort food right now.

But I've heard enough from enough of you to know that this season has been so hard, and that some of us are so weary, and many of us are struggling with God right

⁴ Rachel Held Evans and Matthew Paul Turner, *What Is God Like?* (Convergent Books, 2021).

⁵ Ibid.

now. So if life has left you feeling at all devastated, or weary, or hardened, or nigh-on hopeless... and if any of that has impeded your relationship with God and left you wondering: *what is God even like?*... then I want to offer you this. When you wonder if God is distant, your God -- your shepherd God -- is lamb-cuddlingly close. When you worry that God is harsh, your God -- your shepherd God -- is lamb-cuddlingly gentle. It's spiritual comfort food, I hope... and I hope it makes you feel warm and cared for and watched over and secure and safe.