

Foundations: The Prophets 2
GET CLOSE
Isaiah 40:1-11 (AFBC 5/13/18)

Two Sundays back, we turned to the book of Isaiah as a way of introducing us to the messages of the Old Testament prophets. Jesus was very much in the tradition of these prophets.

He was often called a prophet; and at times, He referred to Himself in this way. I don't think we understand Jesus very well without knowing something about the prophets.

So... we turned to the Prince of the prophets, Isaiah. But if you recall, that message was sandwiched between two special Sundays—the first of these was led by our youth, and the second by our children.

And, OH MY... year after year, under Amy Brown's gifted leadership, our young people touch our hearts and make us both proud of them and thankful for them. We're blessed, friends; and we should never forget that their presence among us brings with it some important responsibilities for our church.

Namely, it matters to God how we care for our children. This matters so much, in fact, that God created... mothers! Fathers too, of course—but, Dads, our abilities are often more limited.

Around here, we also have Sunday School teachers, Music and Missions leaders, coaches, ministers and others—we all share in this responsibility, right? And we count it a privilege to do so!

With this in mind, I want us to turn to that great 40th chapter of Isaiah and reflect on one of the foundational needs of families--and churches too, really. It's the need—and we have this need all through life, but especially... when we're young—the need to get close, to be close, to know that we are held close... by someone.

Listen, please, to the first eleven verses of Isaiah 40 (**Is. 40:1-11**):

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness

prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

⁶ A voice says, “Cry out.” And I said, “What shall I cry?” “All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. ⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.”

⁹ You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!” ¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

What a beautiful picture Isaiah has painted. Now tell me: is your relationship with God such that you can imagine yourself as one of those lambs being carried by the Good Shepherd, being held close to His heart?

I believe this is something that God wants us to experience—all of us—but especially our children. These are our “precious little lambs,” after all—even though, once they reach a certain age, they may not appreciate being referred to in this way.

What does this feel like for you—when you hear these words of the prophet about a shepherding God gathering His lambs in His arms, carrying them close to His heart?

Please note that I didn’t ask what this makes you think of; but, instead, how does this make you feel? There’s a big difference.

To me, these words feel like a... warm embrace—the kind you might get when you see an old friend or a member of your family that you haven’t been around for a long time. It could also be the

kind of embrace you share when you've spoken with someone about a deep sorrow, or... a great joy. Sometimes we need to get close, and embrace!

Friends, God wants to get close with us. He wants you and me to understand that surrounding us, carrying us, bringing us closer to Himself... are the big, powerful, all-encompassing arms of God. The Almighty Himself... seeks to hold us... close to His heart!

What do you think? Can we get our much smaller arms around that notion? Can we get this into our heads... and our hearts? What a difference it would make in our lives if you and I were convinced that undergirding us, surrounding us, embracing us are the strong and compassionate arms of the Good Shepherd.

I don't think I'm overstating the importance of this to say that this one assurance—that we are being held close to God, that we are always in His care—I believe this conviction is something on which we can build happy, meaningful, successful lives.

There's a question, you see, that troubles most all of us at some point. The question is this: "Why am I here?" Rooted deep within our beings is this search for significance.

In the vernacular of our day, we ask, "What's the bottom line-- for my life?" Does life have meaning? Is there anything or anybody undergirding and supporting my existence here?

Isaiah wants us to know the answer is "yes!" `I have Good News about God. Yes, He's powerful, and He rules with a mighty arm. But there's more to God than that.

Here's the really good part: **He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young... (v. 11)**

Here we have this clear-cut, faith-filled answer to our questions about life's meaning. Our lives are no mere accident. We're not just some chance coming together of chemistry and environment. There's more to us than that.

We're God-made; created in His image for the purpose of living in fellowship with Him. We're all embraced by this high and holy purpose.

Jesus had a lot to say about this. He taught us that we're constantly in the Father's care. So, too, are the lilies of the field and the birds of the air; but Jesus said that far more than them, God is concerned about each one of us. He cares about our lives.

God knows when we suffer and struggle and agonize--and He hurts with us. He knows, too, when we're joyful; and He rejoices with us. We're embraced by God's constant care.

This means when we face times of fear and anxiety, and all of us do sooner or later, we're not alone. We're not left to our own resources. We can draw upon the infinite wisdom, strength, and mercy of the Good Shepherd.

When Moses was coming to the end of his ministry, he spoke to the people who had been with him through those difficult times out in the wilderness. The Israelites were just learning that he would not be going with them into the Promised Land.

This was troubling news for them; so Moses reminds them that God had been with them all along, and He would continue to support them in this new venture. He shared with them a faith-filled perspective that they would need for the struggles ahead.

Here's what he said: **"The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."** (Deuteronomy 33:27)

Hundreds of years later, Isaiah would speak of this same God **'gathering the lambs in His arms and carrying them close to His heart.'** This beautiful assurance, friends, is at the very heart of our faith.

But let's back up a bit. If we're honest, we'll admit that it's not always easy to believe this. Sometimes we have doubts.

It happens during those times when our faith--which by definition is not a function of sight (we walk by faith, not by sight)—doubt happens when our faith is confronted and challenged by the things we do see. Suffering, misery, hatred—these cause us to ask some hard questions about faith—questions about God.

And if the world situation doesn't cause this, then some personal crisis comes along and forces us to pose these difficult, doubt-filled questions: "Does God really exist; and if so, does He care?"

We may prefer not to talk about it, but I dare say that every one of us has struggled with such questions sometime. And in that moment, during the struggle, we're confronted with a choice.

It's the same choice every person faces. It's the choice between faith and fear... trust and doubt... hope and despair. Either we live the life of faith... or we live the life of "un-faith," which is really just another form of faith, when you think about it.

"Unfaith"—unbelief—is a conviction, that there is 'no God.' Both the Christian and the atheist walk by faith and not by sight.

I heard an interview with former President George Bush. He was talking about this very thing. He pointed out that neither position can be proven. He said he simply reached a point in his life when he made a personal, conscious decision... to live by faith.

As Christians, we stake our lives on the conviction that God *is*, and... that He's *good*. And because God is who He is, we are convinced "that love is stronger than hate, that goodness will conquer evil, and the cross will outlive the sword." By faith, we experience the closeness of God, and know this to be one of the sweetest blessings in life.

By faith... and not by sight; yet at the same time, it's not blind faith. Our faith is not "a shot in the dark," nor is it an invention of our own imaginations. It's faith in the God who reveals Himself to us—the God who chooses to make Himself known.

Those everlasting arms have reached down to us time and time again. Scripture records the actions of God on behalf of His people. We found this in the passage we read earlier from Isaiah.

And then, in the New Testament, we find that when the time was right, God reached down and embraced us in a new way. He came to live among us in the person of His Son, Jesus.

Read the Gospels! Hear them speak of Jesus embracing people with love and understanding such as they had never experienced

before. See their lives being transformed and made meaningful by this new-found faith.

Then read about Calvary. Christ died there with love in His heart and forgiveness on His lips. He died on the cross for the very people who put Him there.

He died for you and me, suffering the death we deserved, bearing the sins we committed. But He died with His arms outstretched, as if attempting even then to *embrace*... the whole world.

Those of us who, by faith, have embraced him in return... have found that in Him, our burden of sin is lifted, and our fears and anxieties about life have eased.

In Jesus Christ, we've experienced God "up close." We've found peace and security through the undergirding presence of these strong, loving, everlasting arms.

One evening, quite a few years ago—and yes, I did tell some of you this story one year on Father's Day, but I think it's worth repeating—anyway, I got down on the floor of our den.

It was a cold night up in Roanoke, VA. We had a fire in the fireplace—not gas logs... real wood! I spread a large map out over the carpet, and began studying it. This was long before GPS, Mapquest, and Siri!

I was trying to locate a small town in Southwest Virginia. When I found it, I marked the spot with my finger so as not to lose my place.

About the time I located that tiny town, however, some tiny feet began walking across the map. They belonged to Claire—our little daughter who was only two. Again, this has been... a while.

Now, focused as I was on the task at hand, I was a bit irritated by this interruption; so I said in my sternest fatherly tone, "No."

But that didn't work. Claire continued to toddle across the map; so... I stuck out my hand and stopped her. Put it right on her belly! She tried to keep going though, so I very gently applied pressure and slowly pushed her back until she was off the map.

Well, she wasn't giving up yet. Claire's lower lip began to quiver, her eyes filled with tears; and she began to make the most pitiful, heart-rending sobbing sounds that I'd ever heard!

Now Pam had been observing all this from across the room; and finally she could stand it no longer. She informed me that the reason Claire was sobbing was not because she wasn't allowed to walk on the map; but instead, because she was coming to see her daddy—as she often did—but this time, she felt rejected.

Well, I knew she was right—just this once. I felt terrible; so I looked up from my map. I smiled at Claire, and held out my arms. There was just a moment of hesitation... but then she scampered across the map and into her Daddy's arms.

I held her for a few moments; and the big sobs became little sobs; and finally... they went away. Then came the kiss on the cheek to let me know everything was okay.

I set her back down, and she toddled happily away to do something else; and I went back to studying my map.

Now, I soon came to see this as a kind of parable. There're lots of people who feel God is too busy to be concerned about their lives. Surely he's too preoccupied with the "big picture," the map of the world, if you will--too caught up in all that--to be interested in them. That's what they think.

But not so. His Book tells us that He is a God of love. His arms are always reaching out to us, waiting for some response from us, so that He might gather us in His arms and embrace us with love and mercy, with grace, and guidance, and peace.

God sees all of us as persons of infinite worth. It's this faith that makes life meaningful, and fills our hearts with that calm assurance that says we don't need to worry.

God is with us. And when we need Him most, He's always ready to gather us into His arms and get real close—close enough to fix the hurts and dry our tears.

Mothers, you're good at this too. God made you this way, and we thank God for you. God bless you!