

SERMON
“A Mother’s Comfort”
Isaiah 66:13b
Sunday, May 13, 2018

A 4-year-old boy who is traveling with his mother. Like most kids his age, he is constantly badgering his mother with the same question: "When are we going to get there? When are we going to get there?"

Like many mothers of 4-year-olds, she gets irritated and says, "We still have 90 more miles to go. So, don't ask me again when we're going to get there."

The boy is silent for a long time. Then he asks, "Mom, will I still be 4 when we get there?"

It would seem that we go to our mothers for a whole host of things including asking nagging questions from the back seat of the car. I would venture a guess, however, that the most common thing we go to our mothers for is comfort. In Isaiah 66, there's a striking verse where God, using maternal imagery, speaks to the generation of Israelites who have returned from the Babylonian exile to the ruins of Jerusalem. Isaiah describing the God of Israel as being like a mother one can turn to writes: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem."

God's comfort is a strong theme throughout the Bible. Portions of two prophetic books -- Isaiah 40-55 and Jeremiah 30-31 -- are often described as "books of comfort," but the theme of God as comforter isn't limited to those texts. We hear it in many of the psalms, including Psalm 23: *"Your rod and your staff -- they comfort me."* In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians 1:3-4, Paul speaks of God as *"the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction."* And Revelation 21:4 foresees the day when: *"[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes"* and where death, mourning, crying and pain will be no more.

The imagery here in Isaiah 66, however, communicates to us what I believe to be the best description of God's comforting love: as a good mother comforting her child. Now, we know that fathers can also provide comfort -- and children need the tender love of a father every bit as much as a mother's. But we also know that when push comes to shove, when a knee is scraped or a hope dashed, children often will run first to their mother, sometimes holding back tears until they are in those arms.

Having said that, we should note that in the Isaiah 66 verse, God was speaking and promising comfort to *grown-ups*. The hurts of childhood are fleeting, and often a hug and a few tender words are sufficient to supply the comfort needed. But the hurts of adulthood -- the pain of loss, worry, illness, the realities of the human condition -- are another matter. And for those, we might long for comfort and help as effective as that which we found from our mothers in our early years.

This is why all mothers know that comforting a child doesn't end when they go off to high school or college or even when they marry and have children of their own.

But how exactly does God comfort us? For one, God comforts us through the presence, care and verbal encouragement of other Christians. While there are some Christians who are especially good at that -- who have good listening skills and sensitivity -- encouragement is something all of us can do.

One definition of comfort is *"to stand alongside to lend support and encouragement when the situation cannot be changed."* This is something most of us can do for others. And such "standing alongside" often helps those dealing with that which cannot be changed to cope with the situation as it is.

But, God also sometimes comforts us more directly. The psalmist in 94:19 says that when our anxieties multiply God's comfort calms us down.

How God delivers comfort will vary, but it sometimes comes while we are in prayer. It is sometimes transmitted through a verse or passage that jumps out at us while reading the Bible. Or it might come over us as inner assurance in the midst of grief or trouble.

British novelist William Makepeace Thackeray once said; *"Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children."*

But sometimes the things we do can harm how others see and experience God's comfort. I am reminded of the two mothers with small children who were going through the checkout counter in a supermarket. The first mom saw her son pick up a jar of mayonnaise and screamed at him, *"Put that jar down right now! You're going*

to drop it. You always drop things!” Then she turned to the clerk and said, *“He’s so clumsy! He’s always dropping something or knocking something over. He’s driving me out of my mind.”* Sure enough, there was a terrible crash, and mayonnaise was all over the floor. There were angry words, a spanking, a wail of a child as the mother cried out, *“Now look what you’ve done! Can’t you do anything right?”*

The second mother had a similar problem. Her 4-year-old picked up a bottle of catsup. She firmly but decisively took the bottle out of his hand, handed him a loaf of bread and said, *“Here, carry this. I really need your help.”* Then she turned to the clerk and said, *“He really likes to help. He helps me pick up things at home. He is my wonderful helper.”*

Many of us can remember our mother's comfort. On this day, some of us still have mothers we can call or mothers to whom we can send a card or bouquet of flowers. We are grateful for our mothers. We are thankful for their enduring and unconditional love. We are glad that when we were children we had mothers to whom we could run to for comfort.

But there are some who did not have such a mother, who lost a mother while young in life or whose experience does not align with God's description of a mother who comforts a child. Yet not even a loss as great as this can distract from fully experiencing the comforting arms of our loving God. Isaiah simply uses this metaphor of a mother's comfort to help us better understand how God relates to us. Therefore, on this Mother's Day, we can be thankful for our earthly mothers and grateful to God for the comfort she offers us.