



Advent Reflection for Thursday, December 16

Kallen Tsikalas

You can listen to the reading and reflection by clicking [here](#).

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 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 first several times I read this passage, my mind was seized by the words "all people are grass." Nationally, the news had just broken of the terrible school shooting in Michigan, and all I could see were those young, beautiful lives mowed down like grass by a tragically inadequate response to mental illness and inane gun laws that we can't seem to fix in this country. More personally, we'd learned of the passing of a dear relative in Scott's family--a man who, this time last year, was hearty, vibrant, and full of ideas. But a little fall, followed by a significant brain hemorrhage, had mowed him down too.

For days, I felt mostly darkness and despair. After praying for a little light in this passage, it came: Tenderness.

"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem," Isaiah writes. "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."

I don't know about you, but I wasn't really taught to be tender or to speak tenderly. I was socialized to speak confidently, clearly, truthfully, perhaps authoritatively. These qualities, I was told, would bring me success.

But what power there is in tenderness. The power to comfort, to soothe, to connect, to mend, to heal. Exactly what we need at this moment in history as we stand polarized and raw, with our wounds exposed and are hearts prepared for (but oh so weary of) battle.

As I meditated upon tenderness, a memory welled up in me. The memory was of my father in his final days. As it became clear he was dying, the Greek Orthodox priest from his smaller town church traveled to St. Louis where my dad was hospitalized. This priest was dogmatic, strict, and severe, and my father did not care for him. Indeed, Dad had been quite outspoken in his discontent and had even reached out to the archbishop with an outline of the congregation's grievances. Yet, that day, at my father's bedside, the priest was present. He didn't speak, he sang—very softly, very tenderly—ancient words blessing my father's soul in the low, sweet cadence of Dad's native tongue. As I stood in the shadows of the room, I heard my father's breath steady and saw his heart rate slow on the monitor. And I understood, though I often fail to remember, that God works powerfully through tenderness. Perhaps we can too.

Kallen Tsikalas is a research psychologist who loves wandering (especially amongst trees and in deserts), making things with her hands and mind, and being surprised by the profound insights of children. She and her family—Scott, Halcy and Lulu the dog—have attended Holy Apostles for about 7 years and are grateful for the spiritual support of this community.

