

## Welcome

Probably my favorite TV show of last year was *Reservation Dogs*, a comedy about four Native kids growing up on a reservation in Oklahoma. The four kids are reeling from the death of their friend Daniel, who had dreamed of leaving the reservation to live in California. The show is hilarious and heartbreaking, a seamless representation of what reservation life looks like and the tensions between longing to stay and wanting to leave.

My favorite character is a young woman named Willie Jack (played by Paulina Alexis), and there's a moment in the episode that focuses on her that sort of haunts me. Willie Jack and her dad have gotten up before sunrise to go hunting - they're after a deer that has eluded them for seasons. As she drinks coffee, Willie Jack looks at a picture of Daniel hung on the wall. She begins talking to him, telling him she misses him and that they're going to go hunting. She asks him to help her bullet fly straight.

It hit me that she's praying.

And then, she underscores that prayer by glancing at a picture of Jesus (it's actually a painting called *Christ on the Mount of Olives* that has become a commonly available print). She takes another sip of coffee and says, "Sup, White Jesus?" before heading outside to begin the hunt.

When Willie Jack prays, she doesn't pray to Jesus. And why would she? The only Jesus she knows is this pasty, disinterested white man who looks down on her from his perch atop a mountain.

Is it possible, though, that Jesus is the God of Willie Jack, too? That the hurting teen growing up in the most marginal of spaces our country has, the grieving teen who feels most solidarity with a dead friend, that *she* might find comfort, power and hope in the God who became human?

I say yes, because Jesus looks a lot more like Willie Jack and Daniel than me. But to see how God is good news for someone like Willie Jack, we're going to have to confront some idolatrous images we have of God. Today, we're going to face the truth that God is not white, and God is not male. A white, male God has little in common with someone like Willie Jack. There's no reason *for her* to pray to someone like that. (And the truth is, it's bad for me, too!)

But when we see that the white, male image of God is a false image, an idol we created, we can discover the liberating truth - that God is good news for all of us - especially people like Willie Jack, Daniel and all those who live on the margins.

## Message

We're in probably my favorite season in the Church year, Lent. Lent is a season of transformation. In Epiphany, we asked who God is and saw that God is the one who lives in solidarity with us, calling and equipping us to be God's images in the world.

Lent is the chance for us to prepare for that calling. It's a way for us to take time together to look inside ourselves and do some careful introspection, to ask as a community where we are not prepared to embark on God's call together.

This year, our series is called "God is Not..." This is a technique to know God that originated with the theologian Thomas Aquinas. In his masterwork *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas wrote,

*"We cannot know what God is, only what [God] is not. We must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist rather than the ways in which [God] does." — Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae*

That sounds strange, I know, but it's Aquinas' attempt to take seriously the command not to create idols of God. God is infinite and beyond our comprehension - what theologians like Aquinas call a mystery. But we constantly create pictures of God - pictures that are false. Pictures that do more harm than good.

Like Michelangelo carving the David, we're carving away the things God is not as a way to see more clearly the divine mystery that is God. As we see what God is not, we are more clearly able to confess our participation in those things and turn from them.

We began by confessing that God is beyond us - unknowable except where God chooses to be known. We faced our own propensity to play God. Tim challenged us to refuse the god of money. And last week, Sonya invited us into a deep understanding of how God engages our past. Then last week, we looked at the idolatry of the family.

Today, we receive words of comfort and promise. But to receive them, we'll have to confront yet another of our most sacred idols: our image of God as a white man. On one level, I bet most of us here are well-aware that Jesus is not white. Ethnically, he is closer to contemporary Arabs than he is to Caucasians.

But on a deeper level, I think we all probably grew up with pictures of the blond hair, blue-eyed Jesus. Like Willie Jack, if we were asked to picture Jesus, that's who we see. Our image of God shapes us - that's why God is so adamant in the Torah that we don't create images of God.

How many of us still sort of accidentally picture God as an old white guy with a beard, sitting on a cloud throwing lightning bolts?

We know intellectually that that's a picture of Zeus, not Yahweh. But still... we just sort of picture God that way. The really strange part is when someone challenges that picture of God - as male, as white - we often feel threatened. A couple of months ago, the Evangelical community

erupted into a debate about the pronouns to use for God. A number of folks insisted that, since the Bible uses 'he/him' for God, we should continue to do that.

But a lot of others pointed out that a) God isn't actually male, so the pronouns are metaphors anyway and b) the Bible doesn't *only* talk about God as male. The Bible also depicts God as female, as a mother. Which makes sense - in [Genesis 1](#), God makes humans male *and* female, and then declares that *this* is God's image. God isn't just male, and God isn't just female. God is both.

I like to say that God is not genderless, but *genderfull*. No matter what your gender identity, you find yourself represented in God. (And that's why we work pretty hard here not to use only male pronouns for God).

Now, I know some of you are rolling your eyes and thinking, "Isn't this just semantics?" Does this really matter?

Turn with us to [Isaiah 40](#).

Scholars identify [Isaiah 40](#) as the beginning of the second book of Isaiah. What we see as one book is actually three separate books, written by different authors over a period of several hundred years. These authors all belong to the prophetic school Isaiah founded. It would be sort of like if there were a group of politicians called the 'Jeffersonians' who all tried to follow Thomas Jefferson, and all their political writings were collected into one big volume. You could tell roughly when various things were written by what kind of English was used, what issues were being discussed and more.

So Second Isaiah was written after the Exile, when Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem and taken God's people into Exile. It was a very different time from the original Isaiah's. Isaiah lived in the 'good ole days'. The kingdom of Judah was strong. The people prospered. Isaiah's problems were a people who wasn't faithful to God. You might remember from Epiphany when we explored Isaiah's throne room vision, when he confessed he was among a people of unclean lips. The prophet was purified and then sent out to the people to announce repentance.

Second Isaiah opens with a parallel scene. God once again speaks to the heavenly court, announcing God's newest royal decree: "Comfort, comfort my people." To this people living in the wake of devastation, this people wondering if the future has any hope, God decrees 'Comfort'. Much like the first Isaiah was charged as God's representative in announce and enact repentance, this latter-day prophet is enacting comfort on behalf of God's divine court.

What's most fascinating (to me, at least) is that the nouns and verbs used in the Hebrew text for this prophet are female, and that presses us toward reading our passage for today with the divine feminine in mind. In light of that, I'm using Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney's translation. Let's read together verses 9-11:

Climb a high mountain,  
O woman of Zion, who proclaims good news!

Raise your voice with power,  
O woman of Jerusalem who proclaims good news!

Raise it daughter! Fear not daughter!  
Say to the cities of Judah daughter,  
“Here is your God!”  
See, the Sovereign Redeemer comes with might,  
whose arm rules for God;  
whose reward is with God,  
and God’s reparation comes before.

She will feed her flock like a shepherd;  
she will gather the lambs in her arms,  
and carry them in her bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep. — [Isaiah 40:9-11](#)

Walter Bruggemann says of this passage that the prophet is charged to make God visible where had been seemingly exorcized:

The gospel makes the God of Israel visible and effective in a setting from which Yahweh had seemed to be expelled. Certainly the Babylonians, in their arrogance, construed a world without Yahweh. Equally certain, the exiles in their despair construed a world without Yahweh. Now both imperial arrogance and exilic despair are countered. Yahweh is present, powerful, active.  
— Walter Bruggemann.

The goal of Babylon’s policy of Exile was to destroy the conquered culture. And here’s the thing - it actually worked most of the time. The other cultures Babylon conquered didn’t survive. God’s people wouldn’t have either - with no capitol city and no temple, worship of Yahweh should have vanished from the Earth. Yahweh should be just another God we read about in the history books.

Except that Yahweh was present with the exiles. Yahweh was on the throne of the heavenly court and Yahweh sent this woman to announce, “Comfort”. That’s God’s new policy. Relief from exile. Hope for the future.

Not good news for the imperial power, but fresh hope for those crushed under imperial boots. Yahweh is on the move.

And in that regard, it matters that the prophet is female (a reality most translations obscure, by the way). It matters that the prophet imagines God not as a warlord, but as a shepherd, caring for the people as sheep, leading them back home. In times of great crisis, in times when it feels like the world has fallen apart, God’s royal decree is not “Violence” or “Vengeance” but “Comfort”.

**BREAK**

I couldn't help but think of Willie Jack as I read Isaiah's words. Because Willie Jack grew up in a world where God looks nothing like her. The White Jesus she greets looks more like Marduk of Babylon than Yahweh of Scripture. And in fact, the imperial policies of the European and American powers has been one of genocide, of cultural destruction.

The white patriarchy of Euro-American culture has taught us that unless we look like white Jesus, God is not with us. And let's be ruthlessly clear: God is not only male. God is male and female and everything in between. God is genderful, not only male.

God is not white. Jesus is not white. And God has no particular vested interest in whiteness or white cultures. When the American government kidnapped Native kids - like Willie Jack - from their parents and forced them into Boarding Schools run by Christian Churches, those kids had to dress Christian (which meant white). And they had to take 'Christian' names. Names like Yeshua, Miriam, Iakov and Yonah? Don't be silly. Names like James, Mary and David. White names.

Friends, for far too long, we've wrapped God up in white patriarchy and told the world that unless you become white and male, you can't be of God.

No wonder we've then vilified non-white peoples as barbarians, brutes, thugs, savages. No wonder we've vilified women as temptresses, Jezebels and Delilahs.

And, more to the point, we've communicated that non-white males have no place with God. We've imagined that God cannot be found among them.

Thank God, then, for female prophets like Second Isaiah, who come announcing God as a champion of the exiles, a good shepherd caring for all those like Willie Jack who've been told God is not like them.

That's a demonic lie. God stands with and for all victims of imperial oppression, whether that empire is Babylon or Rome or America or white patriarchy.

Whatever your gender, God loves you and knows you and welcomes you.

Whatever your culture, God sees you and marvels at you and welcomes you.

## Communion + Examen

In the face of our uncertainty, Jesus offers us a place at his table.

Where does faith invite you to be most fully who God created you to be?

Where does faith keep you from being fully who God created you to be?

How is God calling you to resist those space?

How is God inviting you toward liberation this week?

## Assignment + Blessing

Spend time with a counter image of God this week - Mother God book