

DATE: July 19, 2026
TEXT: Isaiah 44:6-8
THEME: Telling our story is a way to heal from trauma.
SUBJECT: Healing
TITLE: Reconstructing our Lives

Main question: How can story heal us from trauma?

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

The book of Isaiah is often broken up into three sections—1-39, 40-55, 56-66—that are titled (creatively) 1st, 2nd and 3rd Isaiah. The “Deutero-Isaiah” theory supposes that First Isaiah was written when Jerusalem was being threatened by the Assyrian Empire, that Second Isaiah was written after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the wealthiest in that city were taken captive to the city of Babylon, and that Third Isaiah was written after they had returned to rebuild Jerusalem. Three distinct parts. But don’t think that there were only three authors. In fact, there were likely dozens who contributed to the whole book of Isaiah. The passage we read today (Isaiah 44:6-8) is part of that Second Isaiah section. Imagine a people whose city has been destroyed. Many of them were forced to live in a city that was 900 miles away by foot - longer than the state of California. Babylon had different foods, different customs, different gods. The thousands who died recently in Caracas, Venezuela have experienced that trauma when an earthquake toppled buildings a few weeks ago. Families wondered for days if they still had fathers, mothers or children. Many, even if they themselves survived, may be wondering if survival was really a good thing in the face of their tragic losses. How might these words from Second Isaiah sound to them:

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly [to the city] and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed” (40:1-2a); “Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you ... When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned” (43:1b-2).

But Jerusalem, unlike Caracas, was not destroyed by a natural disaster. It was attacked, and in the ancient world it was believed that when nations fought, their region-based gods were involved. This belief may have offered extra inspiration to fight hard. But if a nation lost a battle, their god also lost. Despite the innovative belief brought forth by Abraham hundreds of years earlier that God is one - that one God controls the light and the darkness, the sky, the waters, the land, the living creatures that team on land and in the water and all the people of the earth - despite that ancestral belief, the Hebrew people may have continued to hold onto a belief in the existence of many heavenly beings, some stronger than others - their strength proven in battle. But which one was strongest? Until they were conquered, the people of Jerusalem believed Yahweh - the name of their god - was the strongest.

In Second Isaiah, however, the author seems to be speaking to a people who were questioning that belief because Yahweh had lost the battle. The evidence lay in the burned ruins of the once great city of David. The people of Babylon, for their part, surely celebrated the power of their god - Marduk - whom they also believed created the whole world and all of humanity and who particularly watched over and protected the city of Babylon. Now the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were wondering if Marduk really was supreme.

Whether or not the people of Jerusalem wrestled with that thought, they were devastated. Make no mistake: their trauma was real. Those who have experienced devastating loss can probably relate. Those who have lost a loved one to disease or violence, those who have been uprooted by natural or political disaster, those who imagined life unfurling in a certain way but whose life has unraveled in a very different way are kin to the people of Jerusalem. These may be asking the same questions that the ancients asked: Is God on my side? If I can't count on divine protection, what can I count on? Is the God I believe in really in charge?

A big theme in Second Isaiah—the answer to people's question “is my God really in charge”—is basically: “My God is the biggest god around.” Three times in today's passage, we hear Second Isaiah say as much: “**I am** the first and **I am** the last; apart from me there is no God” (44:6), “Who then is like me?” (44:7), “Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one” (44:8).

I don't know how that felt to people in trauma thousands of years ago. Isaiah never says anything like, “And the people were greatly comforted by these words as they dwelled in a foreign land.” I suspect that the opposite was true; that they continued to live in grief, even after they were allowed to return to Jerusalem half a century later. And yet, Second Isaiah is the most quoted section of the book of Isaiah in the New Testament. In the midst of trauma that is regularly part of the human experience, there is something deeply comforting in the words we find within chapters 40 - 55: “A voice of one calling, in the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God” (40:3). “I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (49:6). Come back around Christmastime and

you'll hear these words again. Think about what we need to hear in the bleak midwinter: darkness is at its deepest and we yearn for light; some feel much grief, in the season of celebration, as they mourn the loss of those they've loved. Each year we are reminded that God came to us in humility and lowliness, a message of hope for all who have no voice, no status, no power, no visibility.

In Second Isaiah, whether in December or April or July, we are reminded that in the midst of grief and trauma, there is salvation - in the 6th century BCE as now: "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (41:10). "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth, making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out of my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace" (55:10-12a).

Trauma experts today tell us that one of the essential steps for trauma victims on the road to healing is to repair their narrative identity - to reconstruct fragments of their pre-trauma selves into a life narrative that makes sense. (Storytelling and Complex Trauma Healing: The Power of Narrative in Recovery, Center for Trauma and Embodiment, Feb. 5, 2025). Those who are able to find a measure of peace after a traumatic event may have learned to do this. That does not mean the aching feeling has gone away. It may simply mean the difference between standing still and taking one single step forward, but that single step may make all the difference. For the exiled people of Jerusalem, one step forward may have meant letting go of the fragmented

belief in a God who would never let anything bad happen to them or that God would lead them to victory if they just believed hard enough. A contributing author to Second Isaiah tried to add to the storyline that Yahweh was the biggest god around. Who knows if that helped? Perhaps many find it comforting today.

It strikes me that at the center of the Christian faith are four stories. They were also written after a traumatic event - decades after. They tell the same basic story, though the fragments change and vary. Perhaps the gospel writers were working out their own trauma as each constructed a life narrative that made sense to them. Matthew emphasizes Jesus' connection to Hebrew prophecy. Mark's original story leaves three women trembling and bewildered at the empty tomb. Luke spends much time recounting Jesus' birth. And John spends many chapters in the Upper Room as Jesus imparts his final words to the disciples. In all these accounts, there is only one God named "I Am" who is at the center of existence. All four stories acknowledge that bones and hearts still break in this world and they all affirm that hope lies not in earthly power, wealth, prestige or temporary victory in battle, but in the understanding that we are all part of the story of creation that testifies that life emerges from death over and over and over again.

Stories help us understand; revisions can help us heal. We may take out fragments and insert new vignettes, but each of us is an author of a story that gets rewritten and rewritten and, in those revisions, we continue to seek healing and hope in our world. Perhaps knowing that God is bigger than every other god is an important part of your healing story. Maybe affirming a single unifying force in the universe is your

balm. However you write - however you tell and retell your story - I pray that God will guide you as you in that process.

Let us keep praying: Great I Am, help us to construct a story that is true and life-giving. May the fragments we add and take out not become digressions that lead us astray into despair, but may they embellish the hope we have in you. Help us to grieve well as we love fully, and to continue the journey of faith that you have set out for us with courage and with faith. We attend to that story now. Amen.

Pray for these people, who were killed by ICE last week, and for their families:

- Lorenzo Salgado Araujo (Texas)
- Johan Sebastián Durán (Maine)