

Isaiah 40:21-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

God in HD

We're in the fifth week of our Rise Up worship series, a series that focuses on Epiphany, on how God manifests himself through word and deed. We began by emphasizing that God's most important message to us is that he loves us, and we followed up by examining how that love is shown to us. Last week we took a detour and looked at how we ought to respond to God's love through heartfelt worship, but I didn't really talk too much about how we cultivate a heart that longs to worship God. A number of people have told me stories of how church leadership teams have pressured their worship leaders to limit worship to one hour or less, how some churches install large clocks on in the back of the sanctuary so the pastor can't miss it. It seems we're in a culture that only wants to pay limited respect to God then go back to life as usual, or we're doing something terribly wrong in the church that makes people want to leave. How do we get to the point where we look forward to worship in community and stop watching the clock? How do we "change our hearts" to make us want to join together in true worship?

The answer is focus. Sustained focus on God will lead to a transformation in our hearts that will bring us to the point where we will want to worship God 24/7, in community and as individuals. And that really is the goal; when you look at the scenes that John of Patmos describes in the book of Revelation, heaven is the multitude worshipping God day and night, and I imagine if we were raised to a level where our love for God equaled his love for us, that kind of sustained worship would bring us such joy as it would God. But sustained focus is not easy; not only do we have the normal distractions of everyday life – the leaky radiator, the phone call from the school saying that your child is sick, the recorded telephone solicitation that begins by declaring "this is not a solicitation" – but you have more sinister distractions as well – the kind that Jesus faced in the wilderness, the temptations to be rich and powerful and comfortable in ways that draw us away from God and our neighbors.

There is the third kind of distraction that can draw our attention away from God, and that is despair, the feeling that the world is against you and God seems to be absent. This is the kind of distraction that causes us to cry out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" It's the kind of distraction we feel when we're living in a war zone. That's the kind of distraction that our scripture passage is addressing. Isaiah is writing to a community that is having its doubts about God. Their nation has fallen. Jerusalem has fallen. Their holy Temple has been destroyed, and the people have lost land and freedom and security. It's a time of religious crisis when many would be tempted to say, "There is no God." That's the sentiment expressed in that third stanza, where Isaiah writes: (slide)

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?

The people think that God doesn't hear or doesn't care. This is a crisis that people often experience, when things get so bad and the thought goes through our mind, "Is there a God?" (slide) And a lot of folks come to the conclusion that no, there is no God.

But God, speaking through Isaiah, offers up a different answer, saying in essence, “Look at me! See me for who I am. I am God; I was here before you, and I’ll be here a long time after you” (slide) God wants his people to see things in the right perspective; first he brings up the point that he created the universe, and the princes and rulers of the earth are mere grasshoppers. They’re like plants that blossom once and wither and die. God on the other hand is eternal. To a people who are being oppressed this is an important reminder. No, God hasn’t forgotten you, and God is a hell of a lot bigger and more powerful than the king or the emperor or the president, and God’s going to outlast all of them.

Let that thought settle in your mind for a minute. Think about how huge God is. Time does not constrain him. Space does not contain him. He is bigger and stronger and wiser and longer-lasting than anything we can imagine in our realm. We need to let that sink into our consciousness, because in our ego-driven lives we all too often diminish God to the size of genie, who fits in a bottle and who we call out from time to time to grant us our ego-driven wishes. God’s wisdom is so far beyond us that we can hardly know what to pray for except, “Thy will be done.” Isaiah is writing to a whole nation that has lost its autonomy, lost its land and its possessions, lost its livelihood, and these are legitimate concerns that create legitimate fears. But God is saying, “Focus on me. See me in high definition. See me as one who outlasts empires and kingdoms and who is more than an emergency road service guy who changes your tire and sends you on your way. I created all of this. And those rulers who treating you so badly are like shrubs that grow and wither in a season.”

(slide) And God goes on to promise that those who *wait on the Lord* will not grow weary but have renewed strength. Those who wait on the Lord will rise up with wings like eagles. When I think of waiting I don’t think about sitting around doing nothing; I think more about being a *waiter*, about actively focusing on the one I serve as a good waiter knows when your water glass needs to be filled. Waiting means paying attention to the one on whom you wait, being there to assist as needed. And when we do that, we become active players in human history, in partnership with God as he moves us ever closer to that perfect kingdom where love and justice rule the day.

And that’s why a crisis can be a very good thing, because a crisis is generally something that forces you to focus on God - the saying goes, *there are no atheists in the foxhole*. When things are blowing up around you and your very life is in danger, *you pray!* Going through a crisis can force us to focus on God and give him our sustained attention, because there seems to be no human answer to the problem we confront: your husband is leaving you after 25 years; you live in a place where there are no jobs, no healthcare, and hardly enough food to feed your family; there are bombs exploding on your street; you have a health condition that makes you unemployable or threatens your life (I’ll always remember what my father said to me before went into the operating room for major heart surgery. He said, “I made my peace with God”); Perhaps you are denied a voice in your government because of the color of your skin – we are reminded that this is Black History Month, and so much of black history in this nation involves a struggle to overcome discrimination, and one of the reasons the black church is thriving in our country is that the black community has experienced the kind of crisis where only God could deliver them, and so many in the black community have put their faith and trust in God who in turn empowers them to advocate for the changes that they so long for.

It is so important to focus on God, on the eternal, and the Creator of all things, who was around long before we were in will be around long after we're gone. People may build empires and armies and own half of the world's wealth, but the power and the glory that they hold is nothing compared to God, and the time that they hold it is like a grain of sand in an hourglass. Focusing on God enables us to see our lives in relation to God and to be amazed that we do actually matter to God, and to place our trust in the promise that those who wait on the Lord *will* rise up like eagles and will run and not grow weary. Life is full of distractions; some are legitimate but many are simply temptations designed to pull our attention completely away from God. For your own sake and the sake of this world give God your attention whenever possible that you may see him in all his glory and be so inspired to worship him in all you say and all you do. Amen.