

Isaiah 40:21-31 Pastor Bill Uetricht 5 Epiphany 2/7/21

I wonder if this sounds at all familiar to you? It had been one of the worst times in the nation's corporate memory. It had been for many a very lonely time. Later they called it a time of exile. Now that time seemed to be coming to an end. The light seemed to be at the end of the tunnel. But there was a lot of wondering about how light the light was going to be and how long it was going to take to get there. And the wondering produced a lot of questions . . . questions about life itself, about the nation's status and future, and yes, about God, God's presence, God's power, God's love.

Does this not at all sound familiar? Could we not be saying the same things? These have been some of the worst days I have known. I feel like I have been exiled from community for far too long. I see the light at the end of the tunnel, but as the old saying goes, I wonder if it might not be a train. Now truthfully, I do sense that we are turning the corner, but how long of a corner will this be? I do have lots of questions. You have lots of questions.

Our experience, in some ways, is very similar to the experience of the people of God as they are being addressed by what we call Second Isaiah. This portion of Isaiah was written after the Babylonian exile in 587 B.C.E. and probably right before the Babylonians were overtaken by the Persians.

The Persian Empire was much friendlier to Jewish religion and practice. Their arrival felt like the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. But the Jews wondered how light the light was going to be. They wondered how many people would really come home. After all, many of them had settled into Babylon and rather enjoyed it. And what's more, the Babylonians had done major damage to Israel—to its land, to its people, its hopes, its dreams. The Babylonians (like the pandemic) laid a wet blanket over everything that Israel knew.

Despair, then, could be a logical reaction. What's the point? Why work at rebuilding Jerusalem, the whole nation? Why not just give into the weariness? That was the real temptation for Israel. That is the real temptation for us as well.

Isaiah's reaction to all of this was to serve as a cheerleader. And the cheerleading he resorted to involved proclaiming the godness of God. Listen to how Eugene Peterson puts Isaiah's message:

Have you not been paying attention? Have you not been listening? Haven't you heard these stories all your life? Don't you understand the foundation of all things? God sits high above the round ball of earth. The people look like mere ants [or grasshoppers]. He stretches out the skies like a canvas—yes, like a tent canvas to live under. He ignores what all the princes say and do. The rulers of the earth count for nothing. Princes and rulers don't amount to much.

Isaiah is taking on the power that the Babylonians, and yes, even the future oppressive empires have over the imagination of the Jews. You are giving the Babylonian leaders too much control over your hoping, dreaming, and acting, Isaiah is saying. True hope, Second Isaiah is insisting, comes not from leaders or from empires, but from the God who is much bigger and much more eternal than human beings. Listen to Isaiah: "Like seeds barely rooted, just sprouted, earthly leaders shrivel when God blows on them. Like flecks of chaff, they are gone with the wind." Or how about listening to Kansas? "Dust in the wind. All we are is dust in the wind."

Now I must tell you that I am not always enamored by the godness-of-God arguments. In the midst of great trauma, people are known to say, "God is still in control. God is still on the throne." And I want to say, "It sure doesn't feel like it; it sure doesn't look like it." What's more, my big struggle with the godness-of-God arguments is

that they end up being a theological prescription for everything that occurs. God is big and in charge, and if it happens it must be God's doing. When you have been just been diagnosed with cancer or have just gone through a pandemic, that is not really helpful news.

Having said all of that, though, I suspect that Isaiah's godness of God approach is good news, not as a theological prescription for every malady and occurrence, but as an honest response to the limits of being human. Here is what we know for sure from real experience. Life is bigger and grander than us. Life is bigger and grander than any leader, any party, any ideology, and happening. We *are* like ants or grasshoppers from the perspective of eternity. True strength and courage will not come simply from our meager, dust-in-the-wind efforts. We are not God. As we deal with the multitude of challenges coming our way, as we lie on our dying bed, that becomes crystal clear. At that point, we will probably say something like, "Have we not been paying attention? Have we not been listening? Didn't we hear that story all of our lives?"

True strength and courage, while they reside within, come from outside of ourselves. Again, listen to Isaiah, "The Lord is the everlasting God. He does not grow weary. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even young people faint and become weary (something that has become quite apparent in our own day), but those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary."

We've been at this for a while. The pandemic has tested our resilience. It has led to many questions which I, unlike Isaiah, think need to be embraced. Isaiah seems to want to squelch the questions of Job. "Why would you ever complain, O Jacob, or whine, Israel, saying, 'God has lost track of me. He doesn't care what happens to me.'"?

These are the questions of Job. And it appears that Isaiah is trying to squelch them.

Now honestly, while whining and complaining sometimes get on my nerves, I don't think they are always bad. Asking the big questions, indulging what John Holbert calls our "inner Job," is not a bad thing. There's a reason why a book like Job ended up in the Bible. We have Biblical sanction for lamenting and complaining. You ought not to squelch the big questions of people by means of nice little Biblical cliches. Life is hard. There is no reason why we can't tell the truth.

And besides, sometimes a little unloading, a little honesty about life is just what we need to help us discover the resilience that is God's gift to us. God can handle our questions and our complaining, and so can we all. Sometimes our articulating them is what gets us back to work.

And getting Israel back to work is what Second Isaiah is primarily concerned about. He is telling his people that in God there is strength for the weary, that they will be able to run and not be weary so that they can be about the business of rebuilding Jerusalem and restoring their nation. Despair leads to inaction. God enlivens us so that we can go back at it.

The getting back at is what happens to Peter's mother-in-law in our gospel reading for today. Some people find this to be a comical portion of the story. After Jesus *raises* her up, and releases her fever from her body, we are told that right away "she began to serve him." She didn't even take time to get a little nap in. She was immediately serving him food.

I remember a time in the congregation I served in Toledo responding to the news that a much-loved man had died. When I arrived at the home, the family members in the living room were all seated and they were crying. I went into the bedroom where Bert's

wife was. She was on her knees at her bed, deeply sobbing. I reached over to touch her shoulders, and immediately she stood up and said, "Hi, Pastor, do you want a beer?" I found the question amusing. No, I didn't really. I want you to grieve for a little bit longer. But serving and being hospitable was what this woman knew.

When Simon Peter's mother-in-law got up to serve Jesus, she was doing that which she was called to do. She had been healed and thus was reconnected to community. Being able to serve him was good news for all of them and especially for her. Work and service are not incidental to our living, to our being in community. We need things to do. We need to contribute. Everybody needs to contribute.

The hope that we are given in God, the resilience which is God's gift to us, our ability to run and not be weary, our being raised up like eagles is not only for the sake of rejuvenating us, but for the sake of our service to the world.

This pandemic has taken a lot out of us. And it may have tempted us to throw in the towel. The questions may cripple us. But the hand of God is raising us up, putting us back on our feet, and enabling us to get back to work.