

Does God Really Care? Isaiah 40: 21-31 Mark 1: 29-39

Before I get into the message this morning, I came across a story used as an example in one of the resources I was using. At first, it may not seem relevant to the focus of this message but stick with me....

As the story goes- a vampire bat came flapping in from the night covered with fresh blood and parked himself on the cave's roof to get some sleep. Soon all the other bats smelled the fresh blood and began hassling him about where he had gotten it. He told them to shush and let him sleep, but they persisted until he finally gave in. "Okay, follow me." He flew out of the cave with hundreds of bats behind him. Down the valley he went, across the river, and into the forest. Finally, he slowed down, and all the other bats excitedly milled around him.

"Do you see that big oak tree over there?" he asked. "YES, YES, YES!! the other bats screamed in a bloody frenzy. "Well.... I didn't!"

Some days seem like that...big oak trees pop up in front of us and we slam into them. Sometimes it may seem more like there are many little oak trees that are so plentiful that they constantly trip us up. Or on those days when we may be excited and hopeful to get our "to do list" accomplished, we may find- like all the other vampire bats- our expectations were set too high. Sometimes it seems that anything that could go wrong does go wrong. Big "oak trees" like illness, death of loved ones, fear of COVID-19, situations in our nation's capital and smaller "oak trees" like burned dinner, or a day filled with interruptions- a whole range of events that can discourage and threaten to paralyze us. Sometimes it seems that we feel as if we are getting pulled down into a dark pit and we cannot see beyond ourselves and the pit.

It is at times like that when we ask, "Does God really care? Does anyone care about me?" We desperately want to know if there is anything or anyone beyond this mess on whom we can rely. These questions and feelings are not necessarily only those of unbelievers- they are the questions and feelings almost every human- asks at one time or another.

This “Does God really care about us?” was the feeling of the people of Israel when Isaiah the prophet worked in their midst. Isaiah had warned the people that their sin would result in captivity at the hands of Babylon- which is what ultimately happened. The people had been in exile for decades and they were beginning to lose hope. If you were to skim through the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah, you would find them filled with warnings and judgments. In verse six of chapter thirty-nine, Isaiah tells King Hezekiah, “Days are coming when all that is in your house and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left.” But beginning with chapter forty- our scripture for this morning, the tone changes. Chapters forty through the end of the book- chapter sixty-six- are often called the Second Isaiah and it is thought to have been written about the time the people were released from captivity and possibly written by someone other than Isaiah. Chapter forty begins with the familiar words, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” This is followed by several verses of promise and the future hope that “...the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” However, verse six and several more verses turn cynical- the “Does God really care?” attitude. “All people are grass.... the grass withers, the flower fades.....” Truly the people had given up hope that God still cared about them. The prophet, Isaiah, then gives a lengthy description of the sovereignty of God which is considered one of the major themes of Second Isaiah.

After numerous affirmations of the might and power of God, verse twenty-one asks the questions we are reminded to ask ourselves when we question God’s care for us, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?” Isaiah answers these questions in a colorful description of God’s might when compared to puny humans- inhabitants like grasshoppers. Most of us have never thought of ourselves as grasshoppers and probably would rather not do so. Still, it is a powerful image for the vulnerability and frailty of human life. Perhaps—in those moments when we are feeling absolutely powerless against life’s circumstances—when we slam into big oak trees that we didn’t see coming--- maybe at those times; the image of a grasshopper makes sense. God stands over all creation and there is nothing that is comparable to the divine power of God. Even mighty kings and princes are nothing at all when matched against God’s power.

In verse twenty-seven, Isaiah writes, “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?’” Isaiah is asking why they are so certain that God no longer cares. What is being questioned is not so much God’s power but God’s will and hope for them. It is a feeling similar to that which many Jews expressed during and after the Holocaust. It is a feeling that most of us, believers and non-believers alike can have at times. How does one maintain faith in God, and continue to believe that God cares, and God will provide when our experience or current situation appears to suggest otherwise? Isaiah asked the exiled people AND US- in light of who God is, how can we possibly think that God doesn’t know us inside and out? Isaiah asks in verse twenty-six that people- INCLUDING US- look up to stars in the sky and ask, “Who created these?” Would the Creator be entirely indifferent to the creation?

The answer is that we cannot limit God to our own human experience- our daily slamming into large oak trees or stumbling over many little ones. Isaiah reminds us that God is timeless and eternal, creator of all things and never grows weary or faint. God is beyond our human understanding as Psalm 147 stated in our Invocation. The final verses of this 40th chapter of Isaiah states what this God can do for us: power to the faint and strength to the powerless. We are told those who, “wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.” This is not the kind of waiting in which one sits with folded or wringing hands. It is a patient expectation and trust that God will act. Those who tap into the divine power spiritually fly like eagles and never grow weary- maybe in body, but not in soul. If we question God’s knowing and caring about us, we are doomed to hop like vulnerable grasshoppers through life. If, on the other hand, we trust God to strengthen us, even the sky isn’t the limit! This assurance of the care of a God- mighty and strong beyond our understanding- what a concept on which to build an openness to whatever God has in mind for us AND the future of First Presbyterian Church in Canby.

Our gospel passage for this morning gives us another dimension of God’s care for us. Right after Jesus called his disciples- one of the first actions in his ministry- we find three instances in these few verses of Jesus’ care for the physical selves of those around him. He heals Peter’s mother-in-law who was in bed with a fever, he

cured other sick or demon possessed who came to him and then he went throughout Galilee healing others. When he was questioned why- he said, "It is what I came out to do." These healing stories express Jesus' first ministry concerns was for those who are oppressed by illness and held captive by demons. In other words, the Gospel story portrays God's radical care for the human condition. Jesus' healing ministry- as Jesus said, "it is what I came to do" is an expression of God's care for our physical condition. Too often we are inclined to believe that God brings illness and affliction on us as some sort of test of our faith. What we fail to acknowledge is that when we suffer, God suffers much as a parent suffers when their child suffers. When we are depressed and feel hopeless, through Christ, God identifies with us. Christ models for us a divine care that can give us a confidence and peace that moves us beyond all of this so that we might "mount up with wings as eagles." However, when we focus only on our human physical selves, we cannot see beyond the big oak trees and are doomed to remain muddled there. When we "wait for the Lord" -deeply trusting that the Lord will act in love on our behalf, we will find our inner, spiritual selves no longer feeling weak and weary and exhausted. The Lord will renew our strength and by faith, we will feel ourselves lifted up as on wings of eagles. We can also be assured that we will be given the power and strength to run the race that is set before us, steadily moving toward God's goal for our lives AND the life of this congregation.

We are not exiles in Babylon, but each of us likely knows some captivity to forces over which we have no control- to human frailty, situations of sorrow and anxiety and ultimately death. It is at these times we find ourselves like the exiled Israel- where is God? Our own physical efforts do us little good- we cannot save ourselves AND praise God- we don't have to!!

So perhaps what we need to do is start where Second Isaiah started- not with human schemes and self-help and complaining, but by remaining confident in the awesome God who loves and cares for us. Think of who God is....really is...and then stand in awe of the promises of, "I will be with you always!" With the reminders from Isaiah still ringing in our ears these centuries later- "Have you not

known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?" can we really question- does God hold the future of this congregation in God's hand? Then trust- trust God's promise given us by the prophet Isaiah and by the example of Jesus Christ- a promise that God does care for every part of our human lives- aches and pains and all! But we must look beyond our human selves and open ourselves to wait for God to work within our lives sometimes in ways we cannot understand. Fully opening our hearts and our very selves to confidence in God's care enables us to move beyond our daily human struggles (navel gazing, I think they call it) and focus on the only ultimate goal that brings us true peace and eternal life- that of fulfilling God's call in our lives.

If we find ourselves questioning God's presence in this world of ours, may we take Isaiah's advice and look to the skies- the sun, moon, stars, planets all in order. If we question God's hope for us- we only need to look into the eyes of a child to find an example of that trust. As a congregation, we stand at the beginning of a human process to help determine just what our future ministry may be. If we allow ourselves to focus only on what has been, we will likely be limited to "rearranging the furniture" until there is no one left to do it. However, as Isaiah reminds us- we have the care and power of the God who created us under our wings allowing us to "fly like eagles." Our only limit is in ourselves. Confident that "God does really care," may we fully open ourselves to trust God's direction into the exciting future ahead. God does really care!!! Thanks be to God for this unbelievable gift!

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