

Isaiah 40: 21-31

21 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? 22 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; 23 who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. 24 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. 25 To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. 26 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. 27 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"? 28 **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. 29 He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 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.

Where is God? Is God evident in your life? How do we mark God's activity in our lives?

The passage from Isaiah offers something of a litany of the wondrous attributes of God. It is cosmic in scope and universal in significance. *Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is bigger, and stronger, and more impossible to comprehend than you can possibly imagine!* God, as described here seems to embody absolute power. This is the way most of us imagine God: as BIG.

By contrast, Mark's focus seems nearly miniscule. As Isaiah paints the story of God's nature and work on the largest of canvases, Mark instead focuses on a simple, single detail. Mark tells the story of the healing of a woman, unnamed except that she is identified as Peter's mother-in-law. The story is more intimate, almost private.

So, we have BIG God described by Isaiah; and little, small intimate actions done by God in the flesh of Jesus.

We need to consider two elements that are helpful to understand the nature of God's work in the world and our lives. A life in which God ... BIG God participates.

First, the VERY LARGE God Isaiah describes is not above caring for us as individuals, just as Jesus does not *only* announce the coming kingdom (1:15), call together his disciples (1:17), and cast out demons (1:25 – but he also slows down to care for a woman suffering a fever. Our (relatively) small problems are not insignificant to the God who tends the cosmos.

Second, the MIGHTY God is indeed at work, unrelentingly and indefatigably, to sustain the cosmos, strengthen the weak, and restoring those who have fallen. *And the most frequent way God does this is by working through those all around us.*

When this woman serves after she is healed, she is not being dismissed as somehow inferior to those she serves nor constrained to a lesser role. Jesus has not only healed her but given her back her vocation which is, ultimately, a picture of discipleship.

Indeed, *the* picture of discipleship: **service**.

So where do we look to trace the actions of God who "sits above the circles of the earth...and stretches out the heavens like a curtain"?



We look to the everyday acts of service, care, and sacrifice we see all around us.

Which means that our seemingly ordinary life can become at any given moment the arena for the activity of the Holy One of Israel; as God continues to love and bless the world... through us!

“Have you not seen? Have you not heard? The Lord God almighty is at work in you, with you, and through you to care for the people and world God loves so much.”

So, where do we see God?

We live in an age in which we have the promise that God is and will continue to work through us – all of us, women and men, young and old, of sound mind and body as well as those who struggle with illness or disability – God will do marvelous things through us.

God is still at work,

That is the lesson we need to see in the contrast/comparison of the stories in Isaiah and Mark.

It is widely recognized that Isaiah 40 and following speaks to a different historical situation than chapters 1-39.

After fifty or more years in exile, most of those returning would have hardly known the place. Exile was hard, but returning was difficult, too.

God intervenes in this situation, not unlike his intervention at the Exodus (to which this return is compared in Isaiah 51:9–11).

The focus of the passage shines light upon the ability of God to deliver another movement in God's ongoing history with the world.

Second Isaiah sets out to show the unrivaled supremacy of God as compared with Babylonian deities.

But, the people ask: “why should I go back?” “How do I know God is in this experience, after decades of wondering if God had lost a cosmic battle, or had just abandoned us?” Using every rhetorical/poetic tool from soothing tones (Isaiah 40:1) to sarcasm (46:5-7), the prophet seeks to convince the Judeans that they are still the people of God.

Here in this part of Isaiah 40, the prophet adopts almost a pleading tone, as he invites the people to reflect on the understandings of God that initially brought them together and initially drew them into a relationship with God. The insistent tone of the questions seems perhaps designed to shake up the people, to force them to consider the questions the prophet asks.

God sits above the dome that forms heaven and holds back the waters of chaos (see Genesis 1:6). God is transcendent and “other” enough that people seem like insects.



The heavens form God's "tent," suggesting that God **acted creatively** and feels at home in the creation. The creation is God's abode.

God exercises sovereignty over political and military authorities. Even though they seem powerful now, God has real power.

God's power and creativity mean that God has no earthly or heavenly equal. God stands alone.

This powerful, creative God, sitting up above the heavens, cares about the Judeans. The God who exercises authority over the most powerful of people sees them. The people cannot hide from the deity.

This powerful, **caring deity will provide the energy** the people need for their journey back to Jerusalem. If their experiences have sapped their strength, they can draw on God's strength for renewal. Isaiah 40:30-31 often appears on inspirational poster and shirts. Youth who run track often consider it a motivational word. These popular uses should not distract us from the deeper purpose. When life has worn us down, when the spiritual battle seems too fearsome, when we feel as though we cannot go on, the prophet offers us spiritual energy from the powerful, creative, but engaged God. The New Revised Standard Version does not quite capture the image of the second phrase from verse 31. The verse does not depict an eagle spreading its wings to soar and mount up, *but rather a molting eagle who exchanges old wings for new.*

In one sense, the prophet offers encouragement to go back.

In reality, though, they do not go back. They go forward.

They accept a new adventure. The thesis sentence of this part of Isaiah comes in 43:19, that God does a "new thing." The people will go back, but in reality, everything has changed. **They cannot go back, they can only move into God's new future.**

The contemporary church cannot go "back" to anything. The church can only move forward into an uncertain world.

Where would we start with the problems the church faces? Declining numbers and influence. A divided society that cannot seem to communicate. Threats both international and homegrown. What does the church need moving into that future? This passage offers a call to harken back to the faith that formed the church. That faith includes God's power and creativity as well as the affirmation that God sees and knows



us. God cares for us. God can give the church the **energy** it needs to move into an uncertain future. Although these words originally spoke to people whose faith might have faded nearly away, they can speak persuasively to people whose faith is shaky and tentative. They can speak a word of courage to those who see reason for fear in what the church faces.

I cannot promise that the problems of the world will go away. But I can promise that our strong, creative God will give energy for whatever the church faces.

This passage lets us proclaim a God both transcendent, **above** the fray, **and engaged** with the world and the church. This powerful, creative God moves with the church as it goes forward into this uncertain and dangerous world.

“You believe this, don’t you? You trust God, don’t you?”

For “Have you not known? Have you not heard?”

