

Mark 1:29-39
Isaiah 40:21-31

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
Sunday, February 8, 2009, 5th Sun. in Ord.

“God: The Re-Energizer”

If you asked me to choose one favorite passage from the Bible, I would have much difficulty. Today’s Old Testament lesson is another one of my favorites. It has a great deal of meaning to me; and I think of it, especially verses 28-31, in times of difficulty and/or uncertainty. When my husband and I resigned from being Co-Superintendents of Sunday School soon after my father’s death and knowing my best girlfriend from college was facing death, the Sunday School department gave us a framed version of these verses as a going away gift. I find it comforting and uplifting. So I welcome the opportunity to explore it further.

This rich and complex text shows Yahweh in all of God’s glorious splendor and power as the Creator and Giver of Life. I will use the name Yahweh and God interchangeably, one being the Old Testament name for God because in the Old Testament the people of Israel are forbidden to use the name “God” since it is considered sacred and unspeakable. They can use “Lord” but not God. Israel in exile perceives itself to be abandoned by God. Isaiah’s lyrical poem seems designed to disprove the charge of God’s faithlessness, and to provide hope for Israel in its time of sorrow in exile.

While Israel is in exile, they live in Babylon. In connection with their fear of the power of Babylon, the children of Israel may also dread the dictatorial style of the Babylonian rulers. These rulers have a reputation for ruthless slaughter and meaningless decrees, many of which have come into being as a result of drunken parties like the one held by Belshazzar which is

described in Daniel 5. All this creates an air of uncertainty about the prospect of Israel's ability to return to Jerusalem anytime in the future. Their Eastern tyrant enjoys his absolute power with no moral guilt. In the opening verses, Isaiah relates God's superiority over other earthly rulers.

God addresses Israel's fears with His sets of questions. God is becoming impatient with the Israelites with their complaining. He asks open questions of recall for the children of Judah. Isaiah describes Yahweh sitting on a throne high above the earth and seeing the inhabitants of earth as "grasshoppers," seemingly very tiny.

Yahweh's four rhetorical questions seem to have the tone of a reprimand or a scolding. It seems as if God is asking, how stupid and unaware can you be not to notice, because it is perfectly obvious! These rhetorical, or not-to-be-answered, questions set up the answer which is a sweeping claim for Yahweh as the powerful Creator. The words describe God's actions and seem to indicate these actions are characteristic of God. Yahweh sits, stretches, spreads, brings, and makes. These are God's regular powerful, sovereign, magisterial acts, removing any ground for Israel to doubt or have self-pity. God is in charge. They have nothing to worry about!

Yahweh's image is described as a God who sits on top of the dome of heaven, that is, on top of the earth, in royal splendor, so high and lifted up, so elevated that the human inhabitants of the earth are seen only at a distance, as small as insects. In this position, Yahweh engages in creation activity, forming and shaping the heavens, which exist only through God's enormous power. The God who governs the heavens is also the One who

intrudes on the political process, especially to the unlawful political authorities of which Yahweh no longer approves. As Yahweh can summon the heavens, so this same God can destroy the nations of the earth. In this way, the text moves quickly from orderly concerns to the specific political issues of the exiles. Kings are established; but when God rejects them, they are displaced and rulers become helpless. No ruler can withstand the force of God's destructive wind. Therefore, the seemingly hopeless situation of the exiles is not permanent, because the oppressive powers only serve until Yahweh begins to blow a changing and transforming wind.

From His elevated position, Yahweh controls and sees all human affairs. The princes and rulers, whom the children of Judah fear, can be brought down to nothing, or rendered useless by the power of His will. At best, their reign is as temporary as vegetation whose lifespan is limited to the season between planting, sowing, growing, and reaping, after which they wither and become the stubble blown away by the winds. The exiles are asked to remember what they know, hear, and understand. All rulers are under God's control; He will determine how long they rule and when they die. Because the power of the rulers are limited and transitory, the children of Israel are assured that if God blows on them, "they will wither, and the whirlwind will take them away."

According to Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament expert, Isaiah asks us, the readers, who made the stars? Isaiah tells us they are creatures which are authorized by Yahweh and are by nature responsive and obedient to the will of Yahweh. It is Yahweh who creates the stars, makes them, knows them, and possesses them. The stars are a measure of Yahweh's enormous royal

power. It is because of Yahweh's strength, power, and authority that all the stars are in their places. None are absent; none are displaced. All are in order.

Verse 28 indicates if exiled Israel does not know and has not heard of God's newness, then exiled Israel is the only one who does not know. Christopher Seitz, a Biblical scholar, says that this final unit offers the closest formal parallel to Israel's actual complaint against God. Up until this point we have no idea about Israel's specific state of mind or being.

In these verses, it seems to be made clear that the host of heaven is fully under the control of the One God, the Holy One, the Creator of heaven and earth. God calls them, being the One who first gave them a name. This emphasis on God's total grasp of stars in the sky – not one missing – is meant to anticipate the concern of Israel, which somehow God disregards or forgets about the way of the people. The One who calls each of the host of heaven by name and who can tell if just one is missing gives an understanding which is unsearchable. But the issue is not God's grasp. The issue is Israel's weariness and exhaustion. These verses allow Yahweh to get the true issue on the table, addressing the real underlying problem: Israel's exhaustion and weariness, which have been wrongly interpreted as disregard by Yahweh. In reality, God's fullest plan is to address Israel's concern in the context of a big trial before all nations. This deals with how Israel understands itself within the larger creation and how it understands God's supervision of Creation, which people have somehow misinterpreted along the way.

Isaiah moves away from Creation and closer to the actual political situation concerning the exiles. Our God is tireless. Yahweh never grows faint or weak, never lacks energy or vitality. In these verses, the poem repeats the word “faint” three times and the word “weary” twice. Our non-fainting God gives life and energy to us His weary Creatures. The words, Mr. Brueggemann explains, establish a contrast between God and the exiles and all of Creation. The exiles are faint, weary, powerless, and exhausted. But Yahweh is none of these. Quite the opposite: Yahweh has the power to stand in contradiction to the feelings of the weakening, dying condition of Creation. Yahweh is exactly the antidote the exiles need. The best and only hope of the exiles is to stay close to Yahweh, who can not only do for them what is needed but also do that which they are unable to do for themselves.

The faint, weary, powerless, exhausted exiles are to wait. They are to hope and expect, to remain silent and passive, and allow Yahweh to take the initiative which leads to a liberated future. This waiting by Israel becomes an act of confident faith, a willingness to accept authority, resilience of spirit, and their support. Those who wait so energetically will have their lives transformed, for our Creator God will do for the exiles what He does for Creation. Our God will give life where there seems to be none.

David McKenna reminds us that earlier in the passage God asks the exiles about worshipping Babylonian idols. Yahweh asks, “To whom then will you compare me, or who is My equal?” The same argument dispels the children of Israel’s fears of these idols. God asks the Israelite exiles to look up at the stars and realize that by God’s power He created the stars, named them, and perfected them in a system where none is missing.

Astrology continues to seem to be an attractive substitute for the Lord of the universe. New age followers mix astrology with the ingredients of world religions, and everyone is curious to read their horoscopes and share the sayings of fortune cookies. There is a fascination with the stars which is a natural impulse; but if the creation is worshiped rather than the Creator, then astrology can be considered idolatry. God lets the exiles know He is the transcendent or essential and “Holy One” who creates, controls, and cares for the stars, the universe, and all of Creation.

Distributing the facts of His transcendence over all the nations, idols, and rulers, the Lord asks one more question of the exiles: “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?” Once again, Yahweh seems to be asking the exiles to remember what they have heard and what they have known. He seems to be reminding them, the Lord of Jacob and the Holy One of Israel is also the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth. They are one and the same.

God’s power never weakens or grows weary, and His understanding is perfect. With this declaration of His omnipotence and omniscience, God offers to the exiles the final resolution of their fears about returning to Jerusalem. God indicates He will exchange His power for their weakness and His strength for their weariness. When God accomplishes this, the energy of the exiles will exceed the vigor of youth. If the exiles are willing to trust God for the timing and the strength to fulfill His promise, “they shall

mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

The prophet relies on traditions, rather than on the law, and prophetic genius consists of adapting a former theme or concept rooted in all of Israel’s memory and kept alive within a religious setting. The appeal made in Isaiah seems to be something more formal than simply traditions. The repetition of same questions of “Have you not seen? Have you not heard?” consists of an appeal to a public record whose difference from records of other cultures is beginning to be felt strongly. What Israel knows is not necessarily public religious meditation, but is a quite specific account of how the world is made, how God chooses people, and how God was and is God.

In Isaiah Chapter 40, a new generation is appealed to in the strongest possible terms: to listen and see and know again, because God’s word does not require agreement to remain true and abiding. It is not that an entire generation does not have God’s word present and alive around them; they do, and Isaiah continues to bear witness even as the word seems to go unnoticed. It is that the word is not heard, received, or paid attention to in the manner God intends. It is true in this Biblical account; and it is true today in our own society. By not hearing, receiving, or paying attention to God’s words, then and now, we unfortunately turn ourselves away from God’s joy to judgment.

It is a strange, but accurate, perception that our ears must be opened to hear correctly. Learning is more than sound waves bouncing off our inner ear; seeing is more than light refracting off the printed page. Each generation is

to be taught to hear and see, by God. This reality stands at the absolute center of the book of Isaiah. It gives us pause to realize it is more than possessing the right text or simply nearness to the word of God. A switch may have to be flipped, which no human hand can touch. Isaiah lives with this reality day and night. We do too!

It may be difficult, but it is an essential discipline to learn how to assess and evaluate our own degree of weariness and exhaustion in our walks of faith, which Israel is unable to do. Sometimes those qualities are directly responsible for our inability to hear God, and for misunderstanding how God is actively at work in us and others. The final appeal in Isaiah 40 acknowledges Israel is convicted by a sense that Yahweh has abandoned Israel and no longer understands the ways of the exiles. God addresses the charge by strengthening and encouraging Israel and by insisting weakness and powerlessness are never roadblocks to God's grace. Before working on other problems Israel may have, God plans to concentrate on grounding and stabilizing Israel at its most basic level. He does the same for us.

The Old Testament records the cry of Yahweh's people, honest, anguished, and bold. It records Yahweh's people as they set their outrage and complaints before God as the One who is the source both of anguish and of hope. It records that God answers Israel also with divine freedom and wisdom. It is on all these terms and levels we also deal with the Holy One of Israel, whose faithfulness is displayed before all the world in the raising of Christ. There can be no place of discouragement because all are seen, loved, and redeemed in the Son of God, to the glory of the Father. This means we know where our hopes lie eternally.

By God's great exchange, Israel's weakness and ours is renewed through God's omnipotent strength. Their fears and ours are relieved by God's infinite understanding. The Israelites are now ready for their 700 mile walk home to Jerusalem. We are ready to move forward in our faith journeys and our walks with Christ.

May we remember God is always with us to strengthen us when we feel weak or faint or tired, and to call upon God in His infinite wisdom to help us in ways only God can know. Amen.