

August 30 2020 – Defying Gravity**Isaiah 40:21-31**

Do you not know? Do you not hear?

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 dwell in;

who brings princes to nothing,

and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,

scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,

when he blows on them, and they wither,

and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me,

that I should be like him? says the Holy One.

Lift up your eyes on high and see:

who created these?

He who brings out their host by number,

calling them all by name;

by the greatness of his might

and because he is strong 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 to him who has no might he increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they 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.

Message: “Defying Gravity”

Imagine that you had, oh let’s say,
a sore shoulder or a pulled muscle in your back.
One of those times, we’ve all done it, I’m sure,
when you didn’t lift with your knees
or twisted at just the wrong moment.
So there you are, in pain.
You can take a muscle relaxant and put some heat on it
and feel better immediately.

But you know that, at least for a while,
 every time the ibuprofen wears off, it's going to hurt again.
 So you go to a physiotherapist, maybe,
 and you buckle down for the long haul
 of weeks or months
 of careful stretching and training
 that'll make your back better,
 and maybe even stop it
 from getting a pulled muscle again.

But wouldn't it be nice if we could have all of that
 – the permanent fix and the instant relief –
 right off the bat?
 A painkiller plus months of physio pill?

Given the choice between a source of relief that is slow-acting,
 but guaranteed to work for good,
 and the one that is nearby, instant...
 ...but not really healing what needs to be healed,
 well, I'm not a medical professional,
 but I've pulled enough muscles to know that
 most of us would
 choose the relief that is close at hand.

That's just the choice that was facing the people of God, too.
 Not whether to take a painkiller or do physiotherapy for a sore back...
 ...but whether to accept the instant relief of rejecting God,
 or hang in there, carrying on
 worshipping and following God,
 even though the healing
 they needed was going
 to be long time coming.
 This part of Isaiah was written while God's people were in exile.
 Over the course of a few generations,
 all of God's people had been invaded, conquered and dragged off
 into a distant, foreign country to work and live there,
 like it or not.

Israel and Judah, the places where they had lived,
became a province
of the Babylonian empire.
Home was...thousands of kilometers away,
the Temple – the place of worship and seat of God's power –
was destroyed,
and they had neither the freedom
nor the resources
to get back there.

Generations passed...
...and maybe they didn't really want to go home anymore, anyway.
God's people had begun to settle in,
become part of Babylonian society,
subject to Babylon's kings,
perhaps, even, tempted by Babylon's gods.
Those gods, after all, must be
far more powerful than theirs.

Babylon had an empire
and Israel and Judah were nothing more
than a distant outpost
and stories of an ineffective God told by their elders.

God's people in exile were adrift.
They didn't understand what had happened to them,
why it happened;
how God could still be God,
and they could still be in exile.
They couldn't see God present in their history
or at work in current events,
and their certainty and faith
were shaken.

And then it got worse.

Babylon's empire was attacked.
Repeated military campaigns by Cyrus, king of the Persian empire,
shook Babylon to the core.
Both captive Israel and the Babylonians themselves
were reeling, wondering and fearing and worrying
about what would happen
if their great empire fell.

And it did fall.

The words from God recorded in Isaiah that we read today
speak from around that time of transition:
from being captives of Babylon
to being captives, alongside Babylon,
of King Cyrus and the Persian Empire.
Where could their God be,
in all of this danger, uncertainty
and fear for the future?

Danger, uncertainty and fear for the future...
...that kinds of sums up the year 2020, doesn't it?
Even as we're starting to make the first tentative steps
back into the world,
we're still reeling from the one-two punch
of COVID-19 itself and the economic crisis
that's followed it,
all the while still hurting
from the grief and the loss
and the emotional fallout
of everything that's happened.

Although the historical moment is different,
the circumstances of God's people in trouble then
and God's people in trouble now are not alike...
...our faith, our doubts, our fears,

and our need for hope are just the same.
Where is God in all of this?

Our Scripture passage today starts out by telling us
about God's creative and in-charge-of-everything power:
his greatness, and our smallness;
that he is infinite
and that we have a fast-approaching expiry date;
the breadth of his power,
extending past the creation of earth
and into the endless universe itself,
and our powerlessness.

And that's all true and nice;
we find it uplifting when we are praising and worshipping God,
humbling when we feel God's presence in our lives...
...but it doesn't do much for us right now, does it?
God is telling his people then and us now
that he is everywhere,
but the very problem
is that we are struggling to see him
anywhere at all.

God's people then struggled to see God's power
while bearing the full weight of Babylon's power and Persia's aggression;
God's people now...
...well, we may be struggling to perceive God's power
in our own history-making circumstances today, too.
The point of recalling God's creating and limitless power,
even using the very same Genesis creation-story words,
was to tell Israel that nothing that happens
is outside the power of God.

Not that God causes everything to happen, good and bad;
that has implications for our free will and God's character
that are inaccurate and troubling,

and it would be a very different statement to make.

God does not necessarily cause everything that happens;
but nothing that has ever happened,
anywhere, any-when,
falls outside of the power of God.

That is still a huge claim to make,
and not an easy one to convince his people of.
It'd be far easier to put a few limits on what God can do,
so that awful experiences
like exile and conquest and suffering
can be hand-waved away
as outside of God's control.

It would be an instant relief, like a painkiller for a sore back,
To make God a little smaller,
to just stop believing that God's in charge,
to stop hoping that he will act for our good.

But no.
Isaiah declares and demands
that Israel believe
that God is God
over all things and all reality,
and in every moment.

Looking back at this moment in Israel's history,
captive in Babylon,
Cyrus and the Persian conquest happening all around them,
looking back, we know that God was indeed acting
incredibly powerfully for his people
in that very moment.

It's the beginning of freedom,

the beginning of the end of their exile.
 God will work in the heart of Cyrus of Persia,
 and Cyrus will, in a few short years,
 allow the first wave of exiles to return home to Israel
 and to Jerusalem.
 And that resituates Israel back in their land
 for another king
 to be born in a stable and killed on a Cross,
 centuries down the road.
 A king that will act to heal
 and to save all God's people,
 permanently.

But all that's a little further down the road,
 out of sight over their horizon.
 And right then, they can't see God much at all.
 So, through his prophet, God responds to them directly.

"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."

God's people believe that they and their needs are hidden,
 unseen and unacknowledged by God.
 And it might seem like God is just giving them
 more of the same as comfort,
 more claims about his creating, inexhaustible power.
 I wonder if that sounded
 a little cold and remote to them.

But there's more to it than that,
 even though we have
 – or at least I have – sort of misread this passage in the past:

“God’s understanding is unsearchable.”

God’s understanding.

God’s understanding of what?

I’ve always taken this to mean more along the lines of

“God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, his ways are not our ways,”

which is further on in Isaiah.

But this “understanding” doesn’t really refer to God’s all-knowingness,

or his bird’s-eye view of history,

or the elevated character of his thinking.

If I told you about something that was bothering me,

you might respond with the words “I understand.”

And I would know that that you sympathized with me,

that you understood what I was going through

and that it mattered.

God...understands;

he knows about what Israel was going through,

and he felt it, right along with them.

And yet, more deeply, unsearchably deeply,

than another human being could,

because he’s God.

There is a wealth of love and care and compassion for his people

in this same God who named the stars and creates even reality itself.

That’s a pretty good start for a response to his people

who think he can’t see them and what they’re going through.

God understands.

And from there, we hear how God acts in us, transforms us,

in one of the most hopeful and beautiful passages

in Scripture:

“He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.

Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;

but they 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.”

Eagles fly into view a few times in Scripture,
always as an image of spiritual experience and transformation.
There’s a certain mystique about an eagle,
an elegance and sense of restrained power:
the ease of its gravity-defying flight,
diving at speeds as fast as 190km/hr,
soaring high above the clouds;
the grandeur of its stature and wingspan;
the cunning skill of its hunting.

And when we trust God,
we discover the enormous lifting power of faith and hope.
More than sympathy and understanding
and even more than simple compassion and love,
God is promising to transform us,
into these empowered, soaring, tireless,
grace-filled new creations.

Neither what I’m saying today
or what was written in the book of Isaiah all those centuries ago
is meant to be a motivational speech,
or some sort of judgement-laden challenge
to believe hard enough
so you can soar over trouble.
It’s more like, we will experience trouble,
but God understands,
and he is still in charge,
and he will see us through
to the other side of it.

God acts in history, has the capacity to dismantle empires,
and he's acting in the present.

But if we look at current events alone,
we may, like Israel, struggle to see him.

Our collective history as God's people tells us
that God is always present and working, in every moment.
We might not get the instant relief from trouble
we'd all secretly like,
but from creation to Cross,
God is acting for our long-term,
permanent good.

Our transformation, our eagle-like upward soar, powered by God,
can happen only because God really is the power behind creation.
And as we wait and persist in faith,
God transforms us so we can cope and hope
through the terrain
of new and challenging circumstances.
Thanks be to God. Amen.