

Have You Not Heard?

Cycle #2 – Session #3

Have You Not Heard?

Text: Isaiah 40:21-31

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle as a reminder of God's presence. Light has always been a symbol for God's presence and appeared in even the earliest references to God's with us. It appears in prayer, in scripture, in ancient documents not only in our own faith tradition, but in others as well. Light this candle as a reminder not only of God with us, but of God's everlasting presence.

Song: *Open My Eyes, That I May See* -- #586 Chalice Hymnal

Litany (Psalm 121)

I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come?

My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in

from this time on and for evermore.

Prayer (unison)

Eternal God, the light of the minds that know you,

the joy of the hearts that love you,

the strength of the wills that serve you;

grant us to know you that we truly love you,

so to love you that we may fully serve you,

whom to serve is perfect freedom,

through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen

Augustine of Hippo @400CE

Welcome One Another. Share with one another something you have noticed in the world around you. It might have been someone or something in nature. It might have been a neighbor or a colleague, but something which touched you as being somehow special to your life or the life of others.

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Scripture

Isaiah 40:21-31 (NRSV)

- ²¹Have 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?
- ²²It 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;
- ²³who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
- ²⁴Scarcely 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.
- ²⁵To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
- ²⁶Lift 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.
- ²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?
- ²⁸Have 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.
- ²⁹He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
- ³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
- ³¹but 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.

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard.
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and
where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the Text

Being a prophet does not seem to come with a clear definition or be the kind of job most people want. One of my favorite episodes from Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* came at the time of the first Gulf War. Keillor said at one point early in his life, God had called him to be a prophet, but after considering it, he decided he'd become a liar instead. He then went on to say if he had become a prophet he'd have had to say some hard truths to people and gave a list of examples. They were truths most people wouldn't have wanted to hear. But since he had become a liar, he didn't have to say any of those things. Of course under the guise of being a liar, he had just fulfilled the role of the prophet, but in a way people could hear. Being a prophet has apparently never been an easy job and those who become prophets more often than not try to avoid the job, in either biblical or modern times.

Clearly prophets were a part of the scenery in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophetic books form a major part of the material included among the 18 of the 27 books. They carry the names of prophets and other prophets appeared in the two volumes of Samuel, as well as in the volumes of both Kings and Chronicles. From some of the best known ones we have stories and from some of their writings are an important part of the texts. But whether what we know of them is based on the stories about them or their own writings, who they were and what they did is what is important. Sometimes their words were pointed directly at a king, other times they were pointed toward the larger community. Either way, their message consistently pointed their hearers toward God. The message was not always the same. Sometimes they called people to accountability for their behavior either in relationship to God or to other people and pointed to particular sins. Sometimes they brought a word of condemnation and sometimes they brought a word of hope or reassurance, sometimes they brought a word of warning, other times they brought a word of direction or helped people carry out tasks to which God was calling them. While sometimes prophets have been regarded as those who foretell the future, more often than not the predictions for the future are based on the things which anyone with eyes and ears open can see. They were simply the truth tellers. Probably a more helpful way of thinking of the prophets is as "forth tellers" those who speak God's message to people.

While there have been volumes and volumes written about the book of Isaiah, and you can easily go to the scholars if you want to know more about this fascinating book of scripture, for the purpose of this study there are only a few things I will mention because I think they are the most relevant.

- 1) Most scholars would say there are at least two prophets whose writings appear in what appears to be a single book, some would say three and divide the writings into 1st, (ch 1-39) 2nd (approximately ch. 40-53), and even 3rd Isaiah (approximately 53-66). The books, however, have always seemed somehow so connected they've never been separated in this way.
- 2) Understanding that parts of the book were written by different hands at different times makes sense of how it is the book appears to have been written over a long period of time, part of it before and part of it after the exile.
- 3) With the perspective that it has been written by multiple hands and over a long period of time allows us to see the witness of these writers as providing a perspective for understanding something about the ongoing presence and action of God. Our lives are brief and yet have a place in this larger picture.
- 4) The prophet/writers point us toward God.
- 5) These writings, some of which probably date to the 8th century, and others that appear to come from the 6th century not only bridge the ages of the writing, the book of Isaiah spoke to the early church and continues to speak not only to Jewish people, but to us, 27 centuries later.
- 6) The particular passage chosen for this study comes from the time after the exile.

Observation

This is a well known, much loved passage, but you may not have thought of it as having to do with transformation. You've probably heard it said that transformation is hard work and it doesn't just happen. I suspect the returning exiles were in fact engaged in the work of transformation even if they would not have described it as such and they would have probably been aware of the challenge of making deep changes. Think about them for a few moments. They have been freed and allowed to return to their homeland. Because of the length of the Exile some of them had never seen their homeland, but knew it only from the stories, songs, remembering of their elders. You may have had the experience of hearing about wonderful places from others and then found the reality differed from the memory. The returning exiles may also have found a disconnect from the memories of the community and the reality of their homeland. Some of them may have been very young when they were taken into exile and they had to make a life for themselves in Babylon. The people who'd been left behind had also made a life for themselves minus those who'd been taken into exile. The group coming back from exile and the people who'd never left probably had a hard time making room for each other. In that situation we hear God's voice in the opening of Isaiah 40, *Comfort, Comfort my people says our God.*

Consider

Do you see some parallels between where you find yourself and where you see your congregation at this particular time in history? What are some of the major changes you face? What are some of the shifts going on which make where the church was during much of the past century not unlike having to move into new and unknown territory in this century? What do you long for? What troubles you? What would be a word of comfort in this time and place?

Observation

This poem from which our text is taken is offered as that word of comfort to the people. It may seem odd comfort, but the prophets don't always see the world and speak in the usual ways. The prophet begins with a word... *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?* In one sense these words come as a reminder to people to again look at what they already knew and have heard, perhaps their whole lives. Certainly the early prophets had tried to warn the people that if they were not faithful to God, there would be consequences. There were and they were taken into exile. Now there is a new generation. They are called to pay attention. It is also a reminder that these truths were built into the very foundations of the earth.

In terms of transformation there may be another message for us in this passage. As humans we are sometimes forgetful and overlook important things that we may have known forever. This is perhaps especially true when we are in a time of high stress when we don't usually do our best thinking or problem solving. Sometimes when we really need to pause, look and listen for what we may not have heard before, failed to recognize or simply forgotten. Sometimes something can be right in front of us and we miss it. Transformation is about looking with fresh eyes and fresh understanding at the reality in which we find ourselves. We are all creatures of habit so it is easy to slide into looking at the world in certain ways or doing things the way we've always done them. When that happens we may miss the gifts, the opportunities, God is putting in front of us. There may be hope and we never find it.

Consider

What have you seen and heard which seems to you to be essential to your faith? What are the things on which you base your life? When you live in a changing world where as one writer says life is a lot like living on whitewater all the time because change comes so quickly, what do you see as the changeless values? Can those changeless values be expressed in new ways without losing what is essential?

Observation

This entire passage invites us to get life in perspective and look at reality from God's point of view. The Ancients "three layer world" with God above no longer works except as a metaphor. As our perspective of the universe has changed, our understanding of God has also had to change. God is no longer up there, but it isn't hard for us to grasp the idea that God is far greater than we are. The universe we look upon has no ending and our knowledge of it continues to expand. Compared to God we are no bigger than grasshoppers. This image of the heavens as a tent, a dwelling place for God has the potential to remind us that one way of seeing God is through the creation. It is a long time from this passage to the time of the gospel writer of John who in my favorite translation of John 1:14 says God *pitched a tent among us*, but both are a reminder of God with us. Isaiah reminds us that even the greatest princes and rulers are really tiny when compared to God and that in God's time the span of human life or even of human history, everything is brief. The kingdoms of Judah and Israel had fallen, the Assyrian

Empire too had fallen and the Babylonian Empire would fall. Powers rose and fell - only God's remains.

Consider

In a world that is so different from that of Isaiah what might this passage say to you? If you were writing now how might you describe the immensity of God and our place? Does this perspective in any way speak to you a word of hope? Where do you see kingdoms that have come and gone?

Observation

The writer at this point makes a switch and goes to a direct quote from God and a rhetorical question. To who or what can God be compared? Who or what is God's equal? The invitation then comes to look up and see and to recognize the creator in the creation. The advice of my eye doctor is that every so often when I am doing a lot of close work, I pause and look at the horizon... see what is far away. It will rest the eyes. But I also find it rests the soul. When I am working on something right in front of me my vision can get narrowed down, not only literally, but figuratively. If I stop and recognize that in the over all picture of things I have a part, but only part. Looking up and reminding ourselves of who God is releases us to be who we are, but God is still in charge.

Consider

When was the last time you looked at the sky? What are the things which remind you of the creator? Where do you go or what do you do when you need to be reminded of who God is?

Observation

Our writer offers us a metaphor as he describes God as bringing out the "hosts" of heaven, the sun, the moon, the stars, and that not only is God in charge of them, but God even knows them all by name. This is possible because of God's great power. The heavenly "court" is the witness and offers the proof of who God is. Surely if God knows the names of even the tiniest star flickering in the heavens, God knows every one of us and calls us also by name. This is a response to the mutterings of people who are wondering if God has forgotten them, people who are struggling to find their way.

Consider

This comes as an assurance it is not God who has forgotten the people of Israel, but the people of Israel who are tired, who are a bit "*fractious*." You may have seen this in children who sometimes get it into their heads that their parents don't love them or that they love another child better and don't really care what is happening to this one tired, discouraged child. Sometimes churches can get into this place as well. When it seems like we work and work and nothing does any good or changes, we get short tempered, often with each other and sometimes with God. Like the children who need reassuring

and a goodnight's sleep to recover, the church also needs something which offers them reassurance, helps them get things in perspective and reassures them that even in difficult times Jesus' message, *"Come to me and rest. For my yoke is light."*

As you think about your own life, where do you find rest and reassurance when you need it? How do you see your church? Is the energy low? Are people impatient, discouraged, and uncertain?

Observation

The last stanza of our poem is one which offers assurance. Even the young get tired and when the road is long and hard, they can fall exhausted. But no matter how difficult, those who stop, who listen, who seek the way God is calling them, their strength will be renewed. Several years ago because of the theme of a retreat I was leading I had reason to do some study of eagles. The image in this last stanza seems well chosen. Young eagles do not reach full adulthood until they are four or five years old. On the way they molt several times, but when they have their adult feathers they quite easily keep their splendor through a life of perhaps fifty years.

We all get weary. At various times in the course of history people have been forced to travel long distances, sometimes on foot. On those journeys the ones most at risk were the very young and the very old. Exhaustion was the enemy, particularly when there was no time to stop and rest. In this passage the prophet/poet tells us to rest, to wait for God who never grows weary, who understands all that is, who protects the weak and restores us so that once again we are strong enough for whatever is ahead.

Consider

What wearies you? Have there been times you've experienced exhaustion, if not physical, perhaps mental? Have you ever experienced burnout? If so, what helped you? How would you describe the energy of your congregation? Is there so much going on there is no time to wait for God? Where in your life is there room for God?

Activity (Optional)

As individuals make a list of all the things you do, perhaps each day or each week or if you choose, over a longer period. Make a list of all the activities at your church. Are there too many meetings? Not enough people to do all the jobs? What of the activities are most helpful? Are there some that could be let go in order to do some new things?

Practicing the Presence

Scripture: Isaiah 40 21-31

- 1) Again, in order to continue to connect with the scripture used during the session or that the group used this time, consider offering your day to God when you arise. This does not have to be lengthy. It may be as simple as looking out of the window and giving a word of thanks for the morning light or a prayer of thanksgiving over a bowl of cereal or hugging a child, a spouse, a friend, or simply sitting for a moment before you begin work and allow God to be present to you.
- 2) For your reflection time, the next scripture for the next session will be Isaiah 42:1-12.

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it in as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation –“evening and morning” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read, “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent will enrich your experience and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Prayer

As you prepare to leave look at the person on your left and on your right. Pray for them through this week. If there are other prayer concerns or particular joys, share them with each other so that those may be a part of each person’s prayers this week.

Prayer of Blessing (unison)

We believe, O God of all gods that you are the eternal Maker of life.

We believe, O God of all gods, that you are the eternal maker of love.

We believe, O Lord and God of all people

that you are the creator of the high heavens (*Celtic for universe*)

that you are the Creator of the skies above

that you are the creator of the oceans below.

We believe, O Lord and God of all people

that you are the one who created our souls and set their course

**that you are the one who created our bodies from earth
that you gave to our bodies breath and to our souls their possession.**

**God, bless to us our bodies
God, bless to us our souls
God, bless to us our living
God, bless to us our goals.
Amen**

*A Celtic prayer from the **Holy Island Prayer Book**
Ray Simpson, Morehouse Publishing*

Song: *Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal*