

“More Than Meets the Eye”

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

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It is easy to feel lost, to feel alone in the universe. Therapists warn that it is time to speak with a professional if you consistently feel alone, even when you are in the middle of a great crowd of people. Given all that is going on in our world, it is easy to lose hope, to want to make a difference but not know where to begin. It is easy to feel insignificant among the millions and millions of inhabitants on this planet. It is easy for our children to feel irrelevant in a sea of hundreds of other students. Despite our sophistication and technology, we still can not prevent people from setting churches on fire or killing ones coworkers or opening fire in a crowded gay bar. In such circumstances, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, lost, disconnected, unsure, or doubtful. We come to mistrust our own power, the difference one person, one gesture, or one prayer can make. In the very midst of this hopelessness, God speaks.

Just when you may want to throw in the towel and mourn the state of our world today, Isaiah says: “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 [God] is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.” As you sit attached to the dialysis machine, God is there. As you travel into the city to mentor a young student, God is there. Whenever you give up the comfort of a warm bed to stand with our young people on a cold January night, God is there. In fact, we believe God is with those who are really homeless; opening a door, providing safety, offering a smile. Whenever we feel powerless or insignificant, the prophet reminds us again that God loves us and calls us by name. Even in our darkest moments, God is there.

This section in the first chapter of what is called Second Isaiah, exalts in the power of God our creator and sustainer. Even when we may feel like grasshoppers in the vast array of God’s creation, we are not lost in our frustrations and sadness. When we feel powerless and insignificant in the grand scheme of things, we are known and connected to God. Remember, the prophet Isaiah speaks to a people in the midst of the Babylonian exile, a people who had experienced significant doubts, despair, and frustrations. In

this state of physical and spiritual isolation, the prophet reminds them of the power and magnificence of their God.

Even today, the prophet speaks a word of hope to those who weep at the violence and racial hatred that still exists. It is good news to those who society deems unworthy; the unwed pregnant teenager, the drug addicted prostitute, the ex-convict searching for a new beginning. It is remarkable for any one of us to fathom that “not one (of us) is missing in the eyes of God.” Isaiah speaks a word of survival and sustenance, no matter what our captivity! That is the Good News to which we cling even in our darkest moments.

When you are enveloped by the deep, dark cloud of depression it seems as though nothing could possibly lift you from that place. However, it is precisely into such darkness that Isaiah speaks a word we long to hear. “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.” God will not allow us to languish in this despair. There is always hope as long as we trust in God.

The image most people love from this familiar text is that of the soaring eagle, majestic, powerful, even elegant. However, Isaiah mentions another creature in this passage. He likens the inhabitants of the earth to grasshoppers, small, insignificant, perhaps even easily overlooked. I imagine there are moments when we feel much more like the grasshopper than the eagle. Do you suppose Isaiah intentionally chose the grasshopper to teach us something or would any small animal been sufficient to make his point? If we explore the grasshopper a bit, we might come to understand why Isaiah may have chosen to juxtapose the grasshopper to the eagle.

I believe the grasshoppers have gotten a bad rap. In Aesop’s fables, they are the lazy, playful bug that has nothing for the winter and must beg the industrious ant for food and shelter. In the Disney movie, “Bugs Life” the grasshopper takes on a Mafioso quality tormenting the ants like a street gang. There are legends about grasshoppers taking over fields, devouring everything in site, until it looked more like a tornado had swept through.

So far, the grasshopper hardly seems like an appropriate metaphor for humanity. However, there is more to the grasshopper than meets the eye. Isaiah might not have known all the scientific nuances of the grasshopper,

but such details help us to understand why the grasshopper may in fact, be quite fitting. The truth is, the little grasshopper has wings too, just like eagles. While it may not soar like an eagle, it can leap 20 times more than its own body length. For humans, that would mean leaping over 40 yards. Grasshoppers are one of the most successful species on the planet, coming in 18,000 different varieties (who counts this stuff?) and a variety of colors. Apparently, the brighter colors warn birds that they are not good to eat.

There is something about the grasshopper that speaks of playful immaturity. Jumping here and there, sitting on its hind legs rubbing them like a fiddle, appearing to have its tongue perpetually sticking out. Grasshoppers not only have wings, and legs to help them make mighty leaps, they also have five eyes. Part of their adaptability and survival comes from their ability to see everything around them in a great panorama. Our ability to see the wide horizon can lift us beyond that which seems to keep us frozen, stuck, or immobile. The Rev. Todd Weir says, “If we only see the next blade of grass in front of us, we will not grow and thrive. As long as I remain down in the grass, content to only look in front of me, I quickly become weighed down by trivia—annoyed by the attitudes of other people, caught up in my own selfish struggles.” As long as I can see no further than the hand in front of my face, I will languish in this sense of isolation and despair. The grasshopper teaches me an important message about perspective. Isaiah tries to shake me from my depression saying, “have you not seen, have you not heard? Look at the big world. Behind it all is your Creator, who has the expansive power of life, a power that can make a small grasshopper soar like an eagle.”

We gain a whole new perspective when we move beyond our own four walls, when we not only recognize, but celebrate our connection to all people and all things. When we remember that even though we seem insignificant and lost in the vast expanse of the universe, God knows us by name. It is when we forget this, when we no longer recognize that we are the grasshopper in the grand scheme of things, that trouble begins and ends.

I believe Jesus was trying to get his disciples to see the bigger picture too. He understood that they were part of a larger plan. He understood how easy it is to get distracted from this. He knew how tempting it was to focus on today's success. Jesus' ministry consisted of many things; preaching and teaching and healing. Preaching and teaching don't yield immediate results, but one can hardly ignore a sick person rising miraculously from her sick

bed to feed her hungry guests. Word of this miracle travels fast. When people hear that Jesus has the power to heal, they come to him in droves.

Today's gospel lesson is more than a healing story. One could focus on the fact that Jesus touches and heals those that society would otherwise ignore. One could focus on the time Jesus spends that evening ministering to anyone who is in need. The disciples, grasshoppers though we may be, are content to focus on the healing. However, Jesus sees beyond this moment. He knows how easily we can get fixated on the blade of grass in front of us. He recognizes how quickly his disciples become sidetracked by their own sense of accomplishment. Jesus sees with the eyes of a grasshopper. After all, he knows his mission is more than heal people. As important as it is to be healed, there is a greater purpose. He has come not merely to be a miracle worker, but to preach and teach so that lives might be changed not only for the moment, but for a lifetime.

The prophet's amazing promise means nothing if we remain stuck in the darkness, lost in the forest, unable to see the vast horizon before us. However, when we are lifted up, when the demons depart, we can immediately appreciate the prophet's promise. As we learn to wait, something twenty first centuries North American humans find difficult, we then trust more fully in Isaiah's ancient promise.

Both the prophet Isaiah and Jesus urge us to keep the faith. Faith is a long haul and not a short-term activity. Faith is not about instant gratification, which tends to put us at odds with our culture. Faith sees the world with the eyes of a grasshopper. In due time and in God's time, God is faithful to those who wait upon the Lord. Even when we feel lost in the universe, as we so often do, we are never alone. For every day we are loved and held by God, filled with the power of our amazing Creator to do all things. May it always be so!! Amen

Source:

Rev. Todd Weir, "Grasshopper Eyes and Eagles Wings," sermon for Epiphany 5/B, February 5, 2006.