

Pastor's Message – 2/4/24  
Isaiah 40:21-31  
Mark 1:29-39

Wishing to encourage her young son's progress on the piano, a mother took her boy to a concert by the great piano virtuoso Ignacy Paderewski. After they were seated, the mother spotted a friend in the audience and walked down the aisle to greet her. Seizing the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall, the little boy rose and eventually explored his way through a door marked "NO ADMITTANCE."

When the houselights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, the mother returned to her seat and discovered that her child was missing. Suddenly, the curtains parted and the spotlights focused on the impressive Steinway grand piano on stage. In horror, the mother saw here little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*.

At that moment, the great piano master made his entrance, quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy's ear, "Don't quit. Keep playing." Then, leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child and he added a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice transformed a frightening situation into a wonderfully creative experience. The audience was mesmerized and the boy didn't know enough to be afraid or embarrassed.

Our reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah today talks about a great God who is Creator of all the earth who has great power and incomparable strength. The LORD is the everlasting God who gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless and those who trust in Him will never grow weary or faint but will instead soar high on wings like eagles.

The prophet writes these words when, in the sixth century B.C., the people of Judah were living in exile following the Babylonian conquest. The temple and Jerusalem had been destroyed. It is easy to imagine the people's discouragement and weariness and hopelessness in the face of an uncertain future in which it would seem that they would never go back home and their future as a nation was at an end.

In this first chapter of Second Isaiah, the prophet begins by offering a word of hope to an exiled, hopeless people. The prophet knows the situation of the people, may have even lived through the trials of exile and destruction of a society that was part and parcel of their capture by

foreign powers. Not only has their society and culture been taken hostage and destroyed, but they have also forgotten the history that enabled the people of Israel to claim their identity as the chosen of God. Babylon had not only destroyed their community, but with the destruction of their temple, their place of worship, the location that represented their connection to God, the God of their ancestors, their captors had put the first nail into the coffin that would bury their faith. For these exiled people, their reality had led them to doubt both the presence and the power of YHWH.

To their minds, the gods of Babylon have prevailed, and in fact YHWH has withdrawn from them and at best sits at a distance, unconcerned with the reality of their situation – one of destruction, devaluation, decay, and death – of life, as they once knew it and also of their hopes and dreams.

I want to believe in an “almighty” God, but events in our present world make that difficult to do. In the face of terrorism, shootings, war, starvation, and threats from nations, fighting without and fighting within, where is this “almighty” God when we need Him? Why won't He do something? And evil is not just far off, there are ills and misfortune and disappointments right here in our nation, our community and in our families.

Our life is full of brokenness – broken relationships, broken promises, broken expectations. How can we live in that brokenness without becoming bitter and resentful except by returning again and again to God's faithful presence in our lives? Without this “place of return,” our life journey can easily lead to darkness and despair.

People in our Church and in our families experience much the same brokenness and despair that the Israelites faced. When unemployment strikes or cancer reoccurs, how can we believe in a God who has no equal? How do people hear stories of healing and restoration when they haven't been healed themselves? What's the difference between healing and curing? Does healing always mean that you walk and never faint? What do you do with an incredibly faithful person who waits on the LORD, whose strength isn't renewed, who doesn't fly on eagles' wings, who can barely crawl? Where is God?

“O Israel,” Isaiah writes, “how can you say God ignores your rights?” In the life and teachings of Jesus, God with us, God reaches out to us in life's joys and struggles and Isaiah invites us to place our trust in the assurance of God's presence and faithfulness. When we become the

people who place our hope in YHWH and “wait for the LORD,” then we too will be lifted up from the downtrodden places in life. Remember those times in your life when you have felt your burdens, grief, or pain, lifted up by a sense of God's presence with you.

There is a theme of restoration that runs like a thread through both of our readings today. It is made visible in the gospel text as Jesus cures many who demonstrated physical, mental, or spiritual representations of diseases. Given that such people were sidelined or separated from their culture and community, Jesus' action of healing meant their restoration to community and perhaps more importantly to its worship life.

The healing power of God in Jesus is experienced by “all who were sick. . .” All of our needs and hurts and struggles – as well as our triumphs – matter to God. Whether we are grieving a loss of some kind or simply yearning to mend our brokenness, the redeeming power of Christ will touch us and bring healing.

The last four verses of the Isaiah passage are an encouragement to the grief-stricken to believe in God's sustaining power as a source of comfort. But the thrust of the passage also has to do with restating or even reframing the substance of our faith. Who is this God that we serve? Why is God worthy of our faith? In the midst of life that seems hopeless, one where our dreams continue to be unrealized or have been destroyed, how do we trust in divine care when God seems absent? As spoken earlier, within memory, there is hope. The text makes clear that God is far beyond humanity with respect to both power and presence. God is the creator of all things “great in strength, mighty in power.” God is the everlasting source of power, omnipotent, omniscient, and above all, to the benefit of humanity, compassionate and caring of God's creation.

It is this all-powerful God who not only gives life to the people to whom Isaiah writes but who is a God worthy of worship and faith. The prophet Isaiah reminds Israel and us that there is no comparison between the God of creation and the gods of the earth. That message is as true today as it was for those exiled people of Israel. The gods of the earth deal in oppression and injustice as their source of power, but YHWH, the God of creation, our God of redemption empowers those who are weak.

Our God comes with the promise of freedom for those in captivity to the powers of this world, whether as oppressors or as oppressed. God gives strength to the faint, the faint-hearted, the downtrodden and those who tread on others as a way of proving their invulnerability. The strength that God gives trumps whatever the world has to offer so that there can

be greatness that depends on the true source, God and God alone. And that is the good news that is worthy of being preached from this text.

What struck me were the first two lines that we read today from Isaiah 40 "Haven't you heard? Don't you understand?" and the way, in Mark, the good news spread so that the whole town heard about it. Maybe it's the power of "word of mouth," how good news spreads, and how each of us today can have a part in that.

"Have you never heard? Have you never understood? ... He [the LORD] gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless" (Isaiah 40:28-29). This line from Isaiah connects with today's gospel reading from Mark. It is exactly what we see Jesus doing as he continues to inaugurate the kingdom of God in the midst of the people in Capernaum and, in the process, trains his disciples (and us!) to be ready to do the same.

This week, our readings focus on evangelism (getting the word out that God's kingdom has come near) and healing (offering others the healing power unleashed because God's kingdom has drawn near). In both Isaiah and in Mark, we learn about restoration and healing as a transfer of power. Those who are weak are made strong for service, and all are encouraged by Isaiah's assurance: "[But] those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles."

So in the difficult times, how do you seek the strength not only to keep going and doing all that needs to be done, but also to deepen the purpose of your lives through acts of service? The reading from Isaiah speaks of the transcendent power of God our Creator. How do you experience the transcendence of God? What in your life brings exhaustion and a sense of powerlessness? What brings renewal and restoration and vitality? How do you experience God in that renewal?

Trusting in the LORD and giving our lives to Him leads to restoration and wholeness. Believing that everything is about us continues and deepens fear and exhaustion. God offers physical, emotional, and social healing through belief in Jesus. The majesty of a God who heals is revealed in Jesus. That kind of news cannot be kept secret. That word cannot be contained. And when it is shared, when you share what you believe and who you believe in, the power of healing is unleashed. The power that sustains you is power transferred to sustain and lift up others.

God can transform the worst of situations into experiences of wonder. As we wait and watch, see and hear, believe and act, God comes to us to offer hope and promise, evident in times past and the promise of still yet to come.