

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

February 7, 2021

Psalm 147:1–11 (ESV):

He Heals the Brokenhearted

147 Praise the LORD!

For it is good to sing praises to our God;
for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.

2 The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.

3 He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.

4 He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.

5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.

6 The LORD lifts up the humble;
he casts the wicked to the ground.

7 Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre!

8 He covers the heavens with clouds;
he prepares rain for the earth;
he makes grass grow on the hills.

9 He gives to the beasts their food,
and to the young ravens that cry.

10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,

11 but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

First Reading: Isaiah 40:21–31 (ESV):

21 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?

22 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;
23 who brings princes to nothing,
and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.

24 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.

25 To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.

26 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.

27 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”?

28 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.

29 He gives power to the faint,

and to him who has no might he increases strength.

30 Even youths shall faint and be weary,

and young men shall fall exhausted;

31 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.

EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 9:16–27 (ESV):

16 For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. 18 What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. 25 Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. 27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 1:29–39 (ESV):

Jesus Heals Many

29 And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately

they told him about her. **31** And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. **33** And the whole city was gathered together at the door. **34** And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

Jesus Preaches in Galilee

35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. **36** And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, **37** and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” **38** And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” **39** And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Sermon 6 – Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

“The Strength Of Faith”

Isaiah 40:21-31

Dear friends,

Comparisons are sometimes helpful, and the comparisons the Bible makes are intended to be so even if they don't always come across as such. We have one of these in our Old Testament lesson today, an invitation of comfort and hope, but the way that Isaiah chooses to do it means that mileage may vary. I'm going to talk about why that is, whether that reaction is appropriate or not, and maybe what comfort and hope we might take from this. God is God, and that means a lot, but it has a lot of implications for us sinners who are constantly aspiring to be God, or at least to be able to dictate to God the hows and whys of situations that are important to us. Thankfully, God is God, and what that means is great for us.

Isaiah spends this whole chapter trying to get Israel to see what is not obvious, and that is why he takes the tone and track he does. He is trying to get them to trust words and not their senses, which as I said last week is very difficult when the impact of what

we see, what we feel, and most importantly what we fear is so more immediate and visceral. There was a lot happening in Israel at the time, but the thing I want you to take away is how inconsistent and untrustworthy their situation seemed. Israel wasn't powerful anymore, they were now just pawns for the real powers of the Middle-East, Egypt, Assyria, and eventually Babylon. There was still wealth and power in Israel, it seemed... shaky. Uncertain. There was still safety and all the indications of society, but there was an edge to it, that it was fragile. The throne was changing hands often, and even when you had a king on the throne for a while, those kings could never get ahead of the problems and bring true stability, consistency, and safety. There's nothing *wrong*, but there is so much potential for everything to go wrong.

Sound familiar? It should. Israel is a nation as we are, and for all nations, things fluctuate unpredictably and often dangerously. For us, the fluctuations have been violent and fraught, and the safety we trust is a fragile thing, it seems like all the things that have gone right have no permanence, no stability. Did we fix the problems, or did we push them out of sight? I genuinely don't know, and they didn't either. I'm saying this to you not just for solidarity, but a reminder of these in-between times. This wasn't Israel getting invaded or apocalyptically destroyed. This wasn't Israel awash in wealth and influence. This wasn't the top of the game or the bottom of the ninth, it was bouncing like a rollercoaster in-between. Those times come, and they yield God's will, and that is Isaiah's message to Israel today.

“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? 22 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; 23 who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.” Isaiah does something here that I often hear you folks do in Bible study. He calls upon God's people to stand in the face of the beauty of God's creation. He tells you what you often tell me,

which is that, when you look at this land, its beauty, its melancholy, its charms, and its massive scale and bottomless complexity, how can you ignore God? All of this testifies to a creator, a mind, a mind that understands beauty and brutality equally. That's what Isaiah says here, and in the next verses. He calls you to remember the sheer weight of the word "almighty." We are like grasshoppers to God, the heavens a curtain, the vastness of space is like a tent. The powers of men, armies, guns, tanks, bombs, the powers of law and influence, are nothing compared to God. He brings them down to nothing, and shows them as empty. Isaiah will later tell the Israelites to look to the stars, that numberless expanse of burning light, and marvel that God controls all this effortlessly.

Why am I saying this to you? You already know it. Part of this is the necessity of echoing Isaiah, but this is how Isaiah introduces his next point.

"24 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. 25 To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One." God is not like us. We wither, He endures. We die, He lives forever. We have sin, He has none. The funny thing is Isaiah seems to be undermining his own point. God is saying that nothing can compare with Him, yet He's doing just that. Comparing mankind with him. **"27 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"? 28 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."** This was the part that stuck out to me the most. If God is so far beyond us, His understanding, His judgment of what is right and wrong, is just as far beyond us. Yet we continue, in our sin, to make these comparisons. We continue to judge God by our own standards. We say this isn't right, this shouldn't be this way. That's what Israel was saying in Isaiah's time. God wasn't doing right by them. It is as plain as that. Israel thought that God was mistreating them, or that God didn't understand them, couldn't see them. When you put it in those kinds of bald-

faced terms it sounds almost comedically absurd. The all-knowing God, the all-powerful God, doesn't get it. He doesn't understand what He's doing to us, and if He does understand it, then He's wrong.

This is sin, perhaps in one of its purest forms. We are so small, so limited in what we know, what we can see, and what we can appreciate, but we somehow think ourselves clearer and more reliable than we actually are. We see but a fraction of what God sees, and when we judge right and wrong, we're doing it on that limited data. Even more so, we are judging by our own blinkered standards. By the things we think are right or wrong. And it looks like it, it seems like it, I cannot emphasize that enough. When every fiber of your being is telling you in no uncertain terms what the right thing to do is, and God isn't doing it, this is what happens. You end up telling God that He either doesn't understand, doesn't care, or if He does, then He is quite simply wrong.

That is what idolatry is, that is what it means, that is where it starts. It is placing what we know, what we can see, what seems so eye-wateringly obvious to us, above God. It is placing our understanding above God's, even for just one particular situation. That is exactly what Adam and Eve did in the Garden. They wanted to know good and evil like God, they second-guessed God's exceedingly clear and simple command: Do Not Eat. They did so on the basis of what made sense to them. They did so on the basis of what they wanted and felt they needed, the aspirations they had. And it killed them. And it kills you and me.

Submitting to God's will when it directly and painfully contradicts your own is one of the more difficult things that God asks of us some days. You can see the right thing, the good thing, it's right there, and God just won't let you over there. That's where the First Commandment, and our commitment to it, gets tested, and it is a test we often fail. You shall have no other gods before me, God rather reasonably asks of us, and we place ourselves first and foremost out of instinct, fear, and genetic inevitability.

All of this is tragic, frustrating perhaps. Look at what God says next in the reading, though. **“29 He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. 30 Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; 31 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.”** This is the use that God puts His power to, something I talk about a fair lot. God's power and knowledge are there for you when you are faint, they are there to buoy you up, strengthen you. But how? I can dictate to you a whole host of ways that God can renew my strength. I've got a list. It's an extensive one, highly detailed. There is no ambiguity. I can tell God exactly how to help me and when. Isaiah talks about increasing strength, he talks about those who wait for the Lord renewing strength, banishing faintness, but what does that mean?

The key is found at the end. They shall run and not be weary, walk and not faint. What God gives you is not just the strength to continue waiting. It is not just the strength to continue suffering, or watching those you love suffer. It is the strength and depth of faith that God offers to you continually, and that is bottomless. It has no end. It isn't the kind of strength we want, not me at least, and it is far from the kind of strength I think I need. My faith is fine, thank you God, I want you to help me in these other ways. And He may, but He may not, and the strength that God gives you is the faith to accept either outcome with your head held high and your helplessness intact. I just wrote a whole bunch of nonsense and deleted it before finally zeroing in on how I want to say this: God gives you the strength to trust Him. He gives you the strength to have faith in Him, no matter what happens or how things go. You may not like that kind of strength. I don't. We want the strength to not need God anymore, the strength to change who we are and what's going on. God doesn't offer that. He offers the strength to carry on believing and trusting that He knows best. God offers strength of heart, to endure what the world

throws at you, to endure what you yourself mess up, and to keep saying. Thy Kingdom
Come, Thy Will Be Done.

Amen.