

Sermon – “Power to the Faint”

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

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Our first reading today comes to us from near the beginning of the second section of Isaiah, a section which opens with words calling the hearers' attention to the greatness of God who is beyond compare, immeasurable, and sovereign over the full extent of all that is. Listen now to these words of scripture from the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 40, verses 21-31:

*21 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? 22 It is God 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; 23 who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. 24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when God blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. 25 To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. 26 Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? The One 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. 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. God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable. 29 God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 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.*

Our Gospel reading for the day immediately follows last week's story, where Jesus astounded with his teaching and healing at a synagogue in Capernaum. This places us still at the very beginning of the recorded story of Jesus in the fast-moving book of Mark, only just after calling the first of his disciples to come and follow him. Hear now the Word of God in this passage from Mark 1:29-39.

*29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. 32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured 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. 35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

The title of the sermon: "Power to the Faint"

*Text: "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." Mark 1:31*

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable and pleasing to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Ever since I was a child, I have been fascinated by the grandeur and expanse of the heavens. The majestic silence of the vast, starry sky from a truly dark place is breathtaking, and also fearsome. Some of my earliest memories include gazing up at the night from the shores of Rest Lake in far northern Wisconsin, searching for Halley's Comet with a little reflector telescope that wasn't quite up to the task, and sitting on a semi-wooded trail with my dad and my brother, eating cherries and watching a lunar eclipse. I am pleased, then, on arriving in this city, to find that one need not go far at all from the Springfield city limits before the sky begins to get far darker than it ever does in the near suburbs of Chicago from which we so recently moved.

If you have ever really looked at the night sky, then you know it speaks a strange and powerful word, one of endlessness, one of an unimaginable, humbling multitude of celestial bodies and also, simultaneously, of an alarming infinitude of emptiness. Its deepness expresses something profound, which the soul is not always quite prepared to understand.

This is why, when surveying the heavens from a quiet and dark place, one may find oneself having more than one reaction, maybe even at the same time.

A part of us may cry out, right along with the hymn writer Carl Boburg: "O Lord My God, when I in awesome wonder / Consider all the worlds thy hands have made / I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder / Thy power throughout the universe displayed / Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee: / How great thou art! How great thou art!"

And yet this awe in that circumstance we feel may be praise, and it may be something else, as well. It is not entirely by accident that we blanket ourselves everywhere in canopies of artificial light. There is a frightening loneliness to be found in the magnitude of the universe. How great, yes, but a greatness on this scale is one to fear, as well, one to be lost in.

It is not uncommon to hear someone express a certain kind of skepticism toward faith, one which goes something like this: We are but microscopic creatures living on a tiny dot that circles 1 average-sized star somewhere out near the edge of the at least 200 billion stars in the Milky Way Galaxy, 100,000 light years across, which is itself just one of at least 100 billion entire galaxies in the universe. Is it anything more than arrogant self-importance to believe that any God who is at the scale of this universe cares about our tiny little lives? Surely, by this view, if there is a God out there, expecting God to be concerned with our day-to-day hopes is just a holdover from an ancient, ignorant belief in a small universe in which we are at the center.

How fascinating, then, to hear this passage from Isaiah. These words, written at least two thousand, five hundred years ago, contain no delusions about the centrality or importance of humankind. People are as grasshoppers, the rulers of the earth mere stubble blown away in the

wind. Earlier in the same chapter, the prophet declares “the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales.” The fact that we, human beings, are no more than a speck in the vastness is apparently not something noticed and known only recently, and the tradition of faith handed down to us is apparently not rooted in an inflated conception of ourselves. No, we are reminded of our infinitesimal stature in the universe by the age-old scriptures themselves.

That should not be too surprising, if we give it any thought. Consider the splendor and size of the darkest night sky from the remotest place you have ever set foot. Now consider that this, or likely something more grand still, was the sky the ancestors of our faith saw *every night*. The ancients, unlike those of us who spend most of our time indoors under electric lights, could not so easily harbor illusions about their size or mastery of the universe, for the magnitude of the universe in which they lived was relentlessly visible before them, day after day, night after night.

And so Isaiah speaks of such things not as a challenge to faith but as the opposite. To the person who asks, dismissively, how in this enormous cosmos God could possibly have the slightest care for the everyday concerns of human beings, Isaiah speaks directly. As this passage puts the question, “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?’” To this question Isaiah has an answer, and his answer is a reminder of the size of things. “The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth,” we are told.

How is this an answer to our tininess in the void? Let us return for a moment to the modern skepticism that is so tempting at times. The urge we may have is to believe that in such an enormous reality of space and time, God could not possibly be concerned with us. This objection sounds like an impulse driven by realism and humility, which is why it can seem convincing. It sounds like a correction against self-inflation, against the inability to imagine a universe without ourselves at the center. Which is why it is ironic that built into this way of thinking is a surprisingly human-centered conceit, that is, the inability to imagine God as anything other than a really big human, having the same limitations of comprehension and attention that any one of us has.

Indeed, you or I, as people who must surely and unfortunately admit to inattentiveness to the needs of even just the few people known personally to us, can scarcely envision living at the scale of billions of galaxies, each containing billions of stars, and still being able to be bothered with the moment-to-moment needs of every tiny little creature in every nook and cranny of the universe. But Isaiah seeks to break us out of that anthropocentric failure of vision, by reminding us: this God does not live within the limits we live within.

“To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? Says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? The one 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.” We are told, in no uncertain terms, to look around us and take note of the sheer immensity of creation, and to recognize the fact that a God who is the creator of every molecule of the universe is certainly capable of knowing the persons within it.

We are told of a God with authority over every bit of the universe. We are told of a God whose authority is both fearsome and to be trusted in for strength, for it tears down *and* it builds up. It

“brings princes to naught” and “makes the rulers of the earth as nothing,” withered and blown away by the breath of God the instant they are set in place. And yet this is also the authority that “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.”

Dr. Kieffer spoke last week about the one who speaks with authority and is the source of authority such as this, and we meet that authority again in droves this week, not only in Isaiah, but in our Gospel reading, to which we now turn. Again, here, the power of Jesus over all the forces in the world is demonstrated; the sick are cured, demons are cast out and silenced. And in one, more personal case, the family member of an apostle is made well. As we recall, “[T]hey entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”

So very succinct, this episode, and yet so interesting. Your son-in-law and his brother bring home guests, unexpectedly, while you are sick, and the reaction of one of those guests is to find you, take you by the hand, and instantaneously, mysteriously cure you, apparently so you can immediately get to the business of waiting on these unannounced folks who have just walked in on you. We read this and might be startled at how brash this Jesus seems.

And yet, we also might consider: is it any different for you and me, when Jesus walks into our own lives unexpectedly? When we are met in *our* weakness with a strength that takes *us* by the hand and lifts us up, are we not also set on a course of service? Whatever strength we are given, whatever power or authority is handed us, what is it meant for? It, too, is meant to serve the Lord and one another, is it not?

Remembering again the promise of Isaiah’s words to us, we read, “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 be faint,” a wonderful and heartening assurance, but note that this prophecy of renewal does not end with simply *being strong*—it has those with refreshed strength going somewhere with it, doing something with it: walking, running, flying.

The apostle Paul speaks in more than one place of the Christian life as “running a race.” Where shall we find the strength to run this race, when our feverish afflictions keep us from our tasks, and our weakness makes us falter? Let us not fear that it is arrogance to ask the Lord of all creation to find us and to give us power and strength, for the one who created the innumerable stars populating the vast universe, and yet knows every single one of them, the one who “stretches out the heavens like a curtain” is also the one who “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.” It is this God of everything who, astonishingly, showed up at a particular household in Galilee around two thousand years ago and sent one particular woman’s fever fleeing, lifting her up to go on. We then wait, and pray, in the confident hope that God will likewise show up here in our own lives, and lift us up to go on today. Amen.