

Sermon – Illumination and Perspective

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31, I Corinthians 9:16-23

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Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 40:21-31. This chapter begins “Second Isaiah” which is also referred to as the “Book of Consolation to Israel.” Written during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, it is a time of utter despair for the Israelites who believe God has abandoned them. This lyrical poem is designed to refute the charge of God’s faithlessness, and to provide hope for Israel in its dismay. It does so by illuminating the glorious splendor and power of Yahweh who shapes the heavens and creates the stars. Giving further perspective, Isaiah reminds the Israelites that this same everlasting and majestic Creator will give power to the faint and strengthen the powerless. Hear now, God’s Holy 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? 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? God who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by names 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. Amen.

Our second reading is I Corinthians 9:16-23. The Apostle Paul understood the gospel which transformed his life, that God’s creative power which sets the stars and creates the flowers is equally committed to justice and compassion. When that power was incarnate and walked among us in Christ Jesus, we saw great healing in the midst of tremendous human pain. For this reason, Paul is willing to become all things to all people in the sharing of the gospel. He longed to understand the perspective of others in order to illuminate the love of God for them. Hear now what the spirit is saying.

16 If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim 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 entrusted with a commission. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel. 19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so 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 I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Illumination and Perspective

Text: 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? Isaiah 40:25-26

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for using your power not only to create the stars above, but also to empower, strengthen, and renew those who suffer below the stars. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight as we lift our eyes on high to see. Amen.

It is one of those moments that a parent never forgets. The summer of 2003, Peter, Paul and I accompanied my parents to the Netherlands, the home of my mother's ancestry. Among the highlights of our trip was a visit to the Van Gogh Museum featuring the art of Dutch painter, Vincent Van Gogh.

Paul was eight and it was the first time he really connected with art. We had bought him the children's book Vincent and Theo: Brothers in Art by Frank Goothuff in preparation for the trip, which he read with curiosity. Shortly after we arrived at the museum, it became apparent that Paul was enthralled. Slowly going from one canvas to another, he absorbed the bright, vibrant colors of each painting as he listened intently to the auditory guide. We spent the afternoon marveling at the prolific work of this gifted artist, who was also "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." In some ways, there seemed to be a disconnect between the joy in his artwork as he illuminated the beauty of God's creation with color, light, and perspective....and the sadness within his being as one who often felt like an outsider and who identified with those in our world who are weary and carrying heavy burdens.

Years later Paul's appreciation for Van Gogh surfaced again when he chose several Van Gogh prints to frame for his first apartment in New Orleans. As we were hanging those prints in Houston this past fall, we delighted once again in the paradox of this gifted, spiritual man, who struggled with depression and mental illness. We found ourselves listening to *Starry, Starry Night*, originally titled, *Vincent*, by Don McLean in 1971, and resonated with the minor notes that concluded this world was never meant for one as beautiful as Vincent.

Of Vincent's thirty-seven years of life, sixteen were with his parents and siblings in a Dutch Reformed parsonage, seven were as an art gallery clerk, three were in religious studies and ministry, one was as an unemployed wanderer, and the last ten were as a painter, never compensated or recognized for the genius of his post-impressionism.

Cliff Edwards, Professor of Religion and the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University and a respected Van Gogh Scholar, explores the relationship between spirituality and creativity in his book Van Gogh's Second Gift: A Spiritual Path to Deeper Creativity.

The written works Vincent left behind in the letters he wrote provide insight into his spiritual life and how he viewed his creativity as a source of comfort and strength to the downtrodden. As McLean put it, "the weathered faces lined in pain are soothed beneath the artist's loving hands."

One cannot help but see parallels with Isaiah's lyrical poem to the Israelites in exile whose weathered faces were lined with pain in a time of utter despair. They are called by the loving hand of their Creator to look up, to see the starry, starry night, and to remember that the One

who set the stars in the sky to give light to the world will not abandon them. God's creative work, and the art which captures it, are a source of comfort and strength to the downtrodden. When we lift our eyes in a moment of abandonment and perspective, we see that the heart of our Creator God is as beautiful and intricate as the art of Creation.

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. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

The power that set the stars in the sky and created the ends of the earth is the same power that is committed to justice and compassion. When that power became incarnate and walked among us in Christ Jesus, the strength of God's compassion became illuminated in a human perspective. We saw great healing in the midst of tremendous human pain and we witnessed the divine power that created the ends of the earth willing to embrace the joy and sorrow of our humanity. On the cross Jesus became the suffering servant about which Isaiah prophesied. *He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.*

Vincent's letters illuminate another spiritual dimension on how art can shed light on injustice and be a motivating factor in calling for social change. In a letter to his brother, Theo, he writes about a book by an American writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe, who also came from a family of pastors. He quotes Stowe who writes, "My vocation is simply that of a painter and my object will be to hold up in the most lifelike and graphic manner possible: Slavery and the character of those enslaved." Stowe's work was praised for demonstrating the power of art to move readers to empathy and to engage them in advocating on behalf of those who were marginalized. This book became a part of Vincent's understanding of the liberating role of art.

May we each find ways to use our creative powers to renew the strength of those who wait, to comfort those who mourn, and to become all things to all people as we strive for social change. When we are feeling downtrodden, may we lift our eyes on high to see the wonder and beauty of our Creator God, who raises us up on eagle's wings and who paints the starry, starry night. Amen.