

Have You Heard?

Text Isaiah 40:21-31

The first time that Sue and I travelled to Arizona, a chain reaction of delays, missed connections, and further delays led to an 11:30 PM arrival in Phoenix, instead of our original 2:00 in the afternoon ETA. From there it was another two hours of night-time driving up I-17 North to reach Sedona. Let me tell you, once outside the bright lights of Phoenix, there is no such thing as light pollution on I-17. The headlights of our rental car illuminated the road in front of us, but not much else. Until we approached Sedona, where they lit up a green and white roadside sign which cheerily informed us that we were entering “Red Rock” country.

The greeting was pretty meaningless in the pitch black that concealed our surroundings. But when the sun rose, we opened the blinds in our condo, revealing one of the most majestic landscapes either of us had ever seen. Rust red mountains and rock formations stretched as far as the eye could see. In the deep, deep darkness of our journey, it was as if they didn't exist. In reality, though, it was only an absence of the light needed to see them that prevented us from knowing that they had actually been there all along the way.

Life is like that, at times. There can be many sources of darkness in our lives. They may range from the very personal: a physical illness or emotional malaise, grief over the loss of loved one or the disintegration of a relationship, guilt over something we have done in the past or fear about an uncertain future. Or the darkness can stem from a general sense of despair and hopelessness about the state of the world.

The prophet Isaiah wrote the stirring words of hope that we read this morning, to a people who were enveloped in darkness. It was a time of great trial for the nation of Israel, many of whom were living in exile in Babylon. They lamented that their way was hidden from the Lord. In other words, they felt that God was not paying attention to their circumstances, and so, to coin a phrase apropos to Arizona, the calvary would not be coming to rescue them. Doubts had also settled over them about whether God even still cared enough to act on their behalf.

Aren't those two of the fundamental doubts that we have during times of intense or prolonged adversity?

The deep darkness of our circumstances can obscure the reality of God's compassionate companionship as absolutely as the Arizona night concealed the majestic Red Rock canyons from our sight, even as we drove through the heart of them.

When bad things happen and when no resolution is in sight, the two universal questions people ask are the same as those voiced by the Hebrew exiles.

Are my problems too great for even God to solve?

Or does God just not care enough about me to act?

Isaiah's words are a reminder that God is greater than all of our difficulties. God possesses both the power and the will to save us. As to whether God is great enough to "fix" our world and our lives, Isaiah reminds us that, even the power of princes and rulers is insignificant in comparison to God's sovereignty. The circumstances that seem insurmountable to us are, from God's perspective, as fleeting as the grass that comes and goes, while the presence of the Lord is everlasting.

Even though even the hardest of us can be exhausted by life's challenges, God does not faint or grow weary. "To whom then, will you compare me, or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. God, in other words, is greater than our problems.

Neither does God cease to care about our predicaments. Isaiah directed people's attention to the canopy of stars. God knows each of them by name. Such is the depth of God's understanding. Such is the degree to which God is concerned about our needs. And not one of the stars is missing. If God watches over and preserves the infinite stars, cannot God be relied upon to watch over us?

These were not new concepts that Isaiah was introducing. All he was doing was reminding the people of what they had always been taught. What their own experiences as God's people should have taught them. Their own traditions held the answers that they were seeking.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?”

Our tendency is frequently to forget what we’ve been taught about God when in the dark midst of desperation. We want immediate action, not the trust and hope to wait on the Lord. But waiting on the Lord is not a passive acceptance of whatever comes our way. It is a hopeful expectancy of God’s goodness in spite of present problems.

The immediate effect of waiting on the Lord is that problems lose their power to dominate and define us. Waiting on the Lord is not only an expectancy of future deliverance; it produces a change in our present experiences.

Our strength is renewed.

We are able to mount up with wings of eagles and rise above our troubles.

We are able to run and not grow weary.

We are given the strength to walk and not faint.

Perhaps we have heard the message of God’s power and compassion so many times that we have closed our ears to it. Sue and I worshipped at the Church of the Red Rocks in Sedona. The pastor opened the service, as we do here, by reading aloud some of the announcements that were printed in the bulletin. He explained why he did this. It was so that people wouldn’t read the announcements themselves while he was preaching and miss the message of his sermon!

Have we not heard of God’s steadfast love for us?

Have we not known what it is too be sustained by God’s presence, the way an eagle is held aloft as it rides the air currents?

Has it not been told to us from the beginning that God can be trusted?

Let us open our eyes and our ears, and our hearts to the presence of God that surrounds us.

We do not need to pretend that the darkness isn't there, or that it isn't real.

Neither must we allow the darkness to blot out the reality of God's care.

We can remember that God's dawn penetrates the darkness allowing us to be aware of the presence of God that sustains us.

God's ways may sometimes seem hidden to us.

But our ways are never hidden from God, who is infinite in understanding and unconditional in love.

Or haven't we heard?

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