

Today's second reading comes from the book of Isaiah, Chapter 40, verses 21-31.

Listen for God's word to you this day:

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?

<sup>22</sup> It is God, the creator, who sits above the circle of the earth,  
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;

It is God who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
and spreads them like a tent to live in;

<sup>23</sup> who brings princes to naught,  
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

<sup>26</sup> Lift up your eyes on high and see:

Who created these?

God 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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”?

<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> God gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.

<sup>30</sup> Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;

<sup>31</sup> 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.

This is the word of God for the people of God...Thanks be to God.

The section of Isaiah we are reading from today is often referred to as Second Isaiah, it's believed that it was written while the people were still in exile from Jerusalem, while they were still in the midst of their suffering, and in a long period of perceived separation from God. This particular section of Isaiah 40 gives us a startling reminder of God's omnipotence and God's desire to use God's people in God's continued work in the world, even in the middle of exile.

This text begins with asking us to remember what it is we have known to be true about God from our beginnings. It is an invitation to look back over our lives, and the lives of the generations before us, to recall what we have been taught about God's faithfulness and God's power. Hear the invitation and reminder again:

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?

<sup>22</sup> It is God, the creator, 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;

<sup>23</sup> who brings princes to naught,

and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

As the listener recalls all they've been told to be true about God, what they have been taught about God while being in exile, away from the Temple in Jerusalem the writer goes on, maybe just in case they've forgotten, or can't recall the details, and reminds them of God's power and God's abilities to create and restore out of nothing. It is God who gives life and gives significance to all that is, we the people of God, are but grasshoppers in the vast scope of God's creation.

These verses remind us of that distant God figure many of us imagine as children, that oversees creation, and this text tells us while that is true, that God reigns above the earth it is only for the benefit of the whole. Not one part of creation is left unattended.

Verse 23 speaks to the void that is left when rulers try to create what is against God. It says princes are brought to naught and rulers of the earth are made as nothing. These are powerful words to a people in exile, to a people longing to return to what they knew before. As the Reverend Dr. Kristin Wendland notes: "Whatever void occurs from the loss of these rulers, God will fill this void with something new. Creation is not a one-time act but ongoing, sustaining activity that includes fostering societies that operate in life-giving ways."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wendland, Kristin, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-isaiah-4021-31-5>, February 2021.

The God and creator of all fills the void with new creation, the God and creator of all experiences all that has been created in fullness, ensuring those who have been in exile, those who have felt abandoned by God, that God is still present.

And, even as the text highlights this distant God, the text quickly shifts as it moves into the next section, ensuring us of a personal God.

<sup>25</sup> To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

<sup>26</sup> Lift up your eyes on high and see:

Who created these?

God 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.

The creator who is distant in the first few verses is now personal, in direct relationship with creation, calling all that has been created by name. The intimacy that is lacking in establishing God's power, is now transmitted to every single thing that has been created, transforming the distant, lurking God to now a personal, connected God.

God who was left in the temple in Israel, is now with the people in exile. The writer of Isaiah is telling the listener: God was not left behind, God is all around, and not just out there hovering, but embodied in each person.

The writer ends with a rousing poetic climax:

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.

<sup>29</sup> God gives power to the faint,

and strengthens the powerless.

<sup>30</sup> Even youths will faint and be weary,

and the young will fall exhausted;

<sup>31</sup> 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.

The people are tired the writer tells us, but God is not. God did all of this creating, and is still at work. No it may not make sense to us, it rarely does make sense when we're in the middle of any sort of exile. But, God promises to empower, embolden, and enliven those in exile for the journey ahead. There is no promise that the journey back to Jerusalem will be easy, or that it will lead them to the Jerusalem they once knew. They will be confounded with exhaustion as they work to rebuild, once again, their lives in their homeland. It will not be "normal" and it will not be a return to what they had left behind, but with God, it will be possible.

By trusting in God, and relying on God's wisdom they will be lifted up to accomplish the task, it will be something new, creation will continue through them. That is the same promise we see lived out in Jesus and experience with the presence of the Holy Spirit in and through us over generations. Creation continues, God continues, even when we feel like we are separated from God, even when we do not sense God's presence. When we are in exile and we assume God is still in the temple.

It is easy for us to exhaust ourselves; we can run around trying to figure things out on our own, doing everything ourselves, creating more voids in our lives, and forgetting that we have a God who already has it all in view, who sees from the cosmos the best order for abundant life for all of creation. A God who will renew us time and time again when we would run ourselves into a hole in the ground. A God who will ensure that we can take the long journey home, and live with great joy, even when the hard work of restoration is still before us, even as creation is renewed.

Friends, God is doing a new thing, God is filling the voids we've created with new creation and we are invited to be part of that creating, that restoration, and renewal. The task may not be easy, but it is worthy. So I wonder: How is God inviting you to stop exhausting yourself, how is God showing you the voids you are creating in your life, and where is God inviting you to join in this new creation?

And, when it's hard to imagine how God is at work, remember what you have been told from the beginning. Remember the omnipotent and caring creator of all is always with you.