

Sermon – February 4, 2024  
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Isaiah 40:21-31

In our reading today, the prophet Isaiah describes a familiar world, and a familiar feeling about that world. In Isaiah's time, the rulers of his *own* nation had failed the people again and again, leading them into pitfall after pitfall. And as for the rulers of *other* nations, they were waging wars of conquest, domination, and expulsion, leading to wave after wave of carnage and displacement. Like today, there was a massive gap between those with power... and those who lived their entire lives at the whims of people and systems they couldn't touch.

We all know how painful it can be to seeing some of the things that go on in this world. The invasion of Ukraine, human trafficking, wars and rumors of wars everywhere we turn, and of course, the conflict taking place in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. We bear witness daily to carnage, to collateral damage, to innocents of all nations dying because those with resources at their command care *more* about *achieving* their goals than they do about the people they've put in harm's way.

It's easy to feel hopeless in the face of all that suffering, and we all know what it's like to feel helpless. Like the people Isaiah spoke to and spoke for, we often find ourselves *powerless* in this world. Powerless against the misfortunes we face in our own lives, and powerless to make any impact on the decisions of the rulers whose actions affect so many.

What Isaiah is doing in this passage is giving voice to the grievances of the unheard, and sharing with them God's answer.

The people cry out, "I can do nothing. I can't see a path ahead. I am too small and too weak and the problems I face are too big, and it feels like God has abandoned me. I am alone." Have you ever felt that way? It's easy to feel that God's attention is elsewhere. I am so small and the ocean is so vast and there are far bigger, far more important fish for God to focus on. We feel that in our *lives* when things get tough for us, when we face hardship and suffering of our own... *and* we feel that in our world. But God does *not* ignore that cry. And God does not *belittle* that cry. God hears that cry and has an answer for it. You may feel helpless, but you are not without help. You may feel hopeless, but you are not alone.

When the struggles of our lives and our world make us feel small and lost, Isaiah reminds us that there is a special place in God's *heart* for the small and the lost. When all the evidence of our eyes tells us that God is *ignoring* us and giving attention and blessing only to those with power, wealth, and influence, while the rest are tossed aside... the words of Isaiah make it clear that we've got it backwards. Even the most powerful individuals—who have amassed such great resources, who can enact violence with impunity, and whose

whims shape the systems that govern the wellbeing of countless others—all their power and influence means *nothing* to God. But the people who bear the *brunt*, the people who suffer the fallout, the people who have-*not*... they mean *everything* to God. You, who face scarcity and inflation and injustice and have to contend with an uncertain future, *you* mean *everything* to God. You who are saddened and horrified at what you see done by elected officials and dictators and terrorist leaders and army generals all those who exploit and deprive... *you* mean everything to God.

These *rulers*, whose every decision brings about more suffering and graver injustice, these princes who take what belongs to the people and abuse it for their own selfish desires, they are *nothing*. Their small-minded visions for the world, and the industries of fear and scarcity that they create for its people, they are *nothing* in the face of God. The richest human with the greatest charisma and the largest army of sycophants gathered around is an *insect* to God. The lifespan of every dictator, all the generations of aristocracy and inherited wealth and power, every lasting scar carved onto this world and every last terrible footnote in the history books left behind by the proud and self-interested, they are forgotten in a blink of God's eye. Lost in a heartbeat of God's time.

And four years? How significant do you think a four-*year* term is to God?

The rulers of this world will gain no gold stickers from God for the influence they command. They will gain no looks of pride or admiration from God for the elections they win or the years of clout they cling to. God has no interest in how many levers of power a person has at their fingertips or how many followers they have falling in lockstep.

God doesn't *care* if you're the biggest grasshopper on the heap, *or* the one on the top of the pile.

Grains of sand below the tide-line. Dust in the wind. *None* of that status and accomplishment we put so much stock into in our world will make God proud of us.

But there are things that *do* matter to God. Things that God *is* proud of. Things that God *actually* cares about. Things that seem to be harder to live *into* the more power we wield. Christ came to this world to *free* us from the rat-race, the... grasshopper pile, whatever. To show us how much *more* there is that's *truly* important, and how much *harm* our selfishness and pride and tribalism are doing to God's children and God's *Creation*.

If a ruler truly wants to *matter*, then I think they should take a page out of our reading for today and be mindful of what God *actually* pays attention to. In Isaiah 40, we hear that under God's attention princes are forgotten, rulers blown away by the winds of time... but the powerless? God has eyes for the powerless. God *strengthens* the powerless. *Gives* power to the faint.

The young, the tired, the weary, and those whose strength has been sapped from them by this world *and* the people who live only to *take* it... God has a special interest in them.

The way I see it—whether it’s through the words and actions of Jesus Christ, or through the Hebrew people’s encounters with the Divine in the Old Testament—God has a soft spot for those who have been brought low. God will judge those who abuse and oppress and deprive, but in the meantime... God has always paid special attention to... that much larger percentage of the human family:

The poor in spirit. Those who mourn. The meek. Those who yearn for righteousness. The merciful. The pure in heart. The peacemakers. The persecuted. Do any of those sound like you? And that’s just the list from the Sermon on the Mount. You want more? The hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the homeless, the sick, the prisoner. There is a special place in God’s heart for those in need.

And so to us, it may *look* like God’s eye is on the mighty and influential. The blessings they accumulate are manifold, and their joy knows *no* limit.

But it isn’t *God* who rewarded their selfishness and indifference, and time and again we see those so-called “blessings” are hollow and fragile.

To those of us who suffer, who are in great need—whether physically or emotionally, whether for an isolated moment or lasting *years*—it may *look* like God’s eye isn’t on us. It may *feel*—like it did to the people of Isaiah’s time—that God is *elsewhere*, or even *hiding* from us. How many of us have felt *forgotten*, or like we must *disgust* or *disappoint* God? How many of us have felt like we’re on our own?

If we put our hope and our faith and our future in *people* with *power*... again and again we will be disappointed. Year after year we watch so many we elect be *transformed* by the *vile* systems we elected them to *heal*. We watch people who swear they have our best interests at heart use the power we give them to slaughter and steal and secure the ability to do it again.

But if we put our hope and our faith and our future in God... if we wait upon the Lord, if we *hope* in the Lord, if we live out our faith in God and trust that our future is in God’s hands... well, Isaiah said it. We *shall* renew our strength. The faint and the weary and the exhausted, the powerless and the desperate... they shall mount up with wings like eagles.

God may not reach down and solve every one of our earthly problems in *all* the ways we want and in the *timing* that we think we need... but God has *not* forgotten about you.

At our lowest, if we can allow ourselves to believe and to feel that God actually cares about us, that God’s face is not hidden from us, that God is not inaccessible to us, that God

*is* paying attention to us and *feels* our pain as deeply as *we* do... if we can allow ourselves to believe that and to feel that *love* and that special care... it doesn't matter how long it'll take for God's timing to come to pass in a way that makes sense to *us*... because in the *meantime* we *will* find within ourselves—straight from God—exactly what it takes “to run and not be weary. To walk and not faint.” To stand tall even in the long shadows cast by lesser men.

The world we live in may be biased towards those who take all they can, who crush their enemies and see them driven before them. But *God* is biased too. You can't open the Bible and tell me God is dispassionate. That God is purely objective—unmovable—without heart or sympathy. When you suffer... God is biased toward *you*.

I want you to really hear that, and I want you to *remember* that the next time you feel like dirt. The next time you feel like nothing's on your side. The next time it's all come crashing down on you and it's too much to weight to bear. The next time you don't have what you need to make it through the next moment and it is *killing* you.

God is biased toward *you*. When you're in pain, you have *all* of God's attention. Everybody else? Dust in the wind. Raindrops on a windshield. There one moment, gone the next. But you? You've got the stage now. It's your time... and you *use* it. You tell God *exactly* what you're going through and *exactly* what it's making you feel... because what's listening? *Undivided* attention... and *infinite* love.

May that love fill you up like gasoline, because the road can be long. But however long that road may *be* for you... if you open your heart to the love God has for *you*, you will run and not be weary. You will walk and not faint. Thanks be to God. Amen.