

THE WAITING

Isaiah 40:21-31

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany (Series B)

February 4, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

On this Fifth Sunday after Epiphany we will be considering the Old Testament lesson. It comes from the prophet *Isaiah*, chapter 40, verses 21 through 31. You can find it on page 512 of the pew Bible. In this Old Testament lesson, God asserts his power, wisdom, and goodness in the midst of suffering. Please stand as you are able for the Old Testament lesson. From Isaiah 40, beginning at verse 21, we read in Jesus' name.

- 21 Do you not know? Do you not hear?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
- 22 It is he 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 dwell in;
- 23 who brings princes to nothing,
and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.
- 24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows on them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.
- 25 To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.
- 26 Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?
He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name;
by the greatness of his might
and because he is strong 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.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

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- 29 He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.
30 Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
31 but they 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.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

There's a lot of suffering in this world, too much to be exact. We don't have to look very far to see something that just doesn't make sense. You open the newspaper or turn on the news, and every day there is something that would send us all into mourning and despair ... if we weren't so desensitized to it all. There's always something there to make us ask, *Why, God, would you allow this to happen?*

And it's certainly not just in national or international news. There is intense suffering in our midst. Perhaps you experience it or witness it somewhere very close to you. And it just doesn't make sense. Perhaps your body is failing, or maybe you see it in someone close to you. You know God has the power to change things, and you have a list of reasons why you think he should, but he doesn't, and it just doesn't make sense. Then you read a gospel lesson like the one we had this morning, where Jesus basically goes on a healing spree, and it just makes you think, *Okay, I know you can fix this, but you're not. You did it for all those other people; why won't you do it for me?*

This is actually kind of similar to what the bystanders said to Jesus as he hung dying on the cross. "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" (Luke 23:35) And the soldiers said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!" (23:37) Basically, *If you can act—if you can change these circumstances—then why won't you?*

Now the attitude is certainly different, and that's a big difference. The bystanders and soldiers were mocking Jesus. That's not the same thing as complaining. Mocking Jesus is bad. Complaining is actually a pious act of worship. I know that sounds a little strange, but it's true. When you complain to God, you are confessing that he is both capable of fixing your situation and that he is merciful enough to listen, otherwise you wouldn't bother complaining.

It's kind of like when children complain to their parents. It might be annoying, but the reason children complain is because they know their parents are—one—capable of fixing the situation and—two—kind enough to listen. You never hear them say to the cat, "This is so unfair." So the next time your children complain to you, think of it as their confession of faith in you. They complain because they know you are powerful and good. But you still have the right to tell them to stop complaining, and you have the right to teach them how to complain in a less annoying manner.

So complaining to God is actually a pious act of worship. This is why God gives us psalms like, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps. 13:1), and, "My God, my God, why

have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1) If you're nervous about committing blasphemy when you complain, just use the psalms. God won't chastise you for praying his Word back to him.

So the attitude of complaining in faith is much different than mocking in unbelief. But the intellectual question is the same. *If you are capable of fixing this situation, why don't you? If you are capable of healing my body, why don't you? And if you are capable of sparing yourself this suffering, why don't you?* And the answer to both questions is really the same: It's not what Jesus came to do. He obviously did not come to save himself. And he also did not come to heal our diseases—at least not yet.

When we read the gospel lesson carefully, we learn that Jesus' mission was not actually to heal all those people. He did heal them, but that's not why he came. There was one evening when the whole city of Capernaum flocked to the house where Jesus was staying, and he healed many of the sick and cast out many demons (Mark 1:34). It was great. But then he skipped town. The next morning, before the sun came up, he snuck away (Mark 1:35). His disciples found him and said, "Everyone is looking for you" (Mark 1:37). And we can understand why. They were amazed at Jesus' power, and they probably had a whole bunch more people for Jesus to heal. But Jesus doesn't go back. Instead, he says, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out" (Mark 1:38).

It seems to us like Jesus had a good thing going in Capernaum. People were being healed, and the people actually wanted Jesus around. He didn't get that everywhere. But Jesus leaves to go preach elsewhere. He doesn't say he's going to go heal in other towns and cast out more demons, although he does end up doing that. But he specifically says he is going to go preach. And we see from this that preaching is more important than healing.

Now that sounds kind of strange. We see ambulances racing around town because people are sick or injured, but you don't see pastors with sirens on their cars racing around because someone committed a sin. But according to Jesus, preaching is more important than healing.

And I don't think we really get this. If we did understand this, no one would ever miss a Sunday.

Now I'm not going to complain about attendance on Sunday morning. I'm delighted every time I see each one of you. Even when you come in late, it actually makes me happy. I think to myself, *Ah! Another person who will hear God's Word.*

But if we healed people here on Sunday mornings—I mean totally healed them the way Jesus did—we would be busier than the hospital. We would be packed with people wanting to be healed and other people just wanting to see the miracles. And rightly so, because bodily healing is important. But Jesus treats preaching as more important.

Now it's not that Jesus doesn't care about people's bodies. He certainly does. That's why he assumed a body of his own, and that's why he did heal diseases. The body matters. But if all Jesus does is heal the body, then eventually that body is just going to get sick again and die. And that's not good enough for Jesus. Jesus wants to do more. So he preaches. And, specifically, we know Jesus was preaching "the gospel of God" (1:14). He was preaching the good news about himself—that he had come to be crucified and to rise again. He was preaching the forgiveness of sins. So by preaching, Jesus was healing souls. And that's the key. If you heal a body, that body will be healed ... temporarily. But if you heal a soul, that soul will be healed

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forever, and the body will too at the resurrection on the Last Day. And that is why preaching is better than bodily healing. In the end, it accomplishes both.

So when you find yourself complaining to God about a physical condition or any other kind of injustice, that's okay. He welcomes our complaints as pleas for mercy. But remember, too, that God has already given you a "yes." He has already promised you that,

they 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 (40:31).

When the bystanders mocked Jesus, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" they didn't expect that Jesus actually would. But he did save himself ... just not that day. He waited ... for three days. He did come down from the cross, not alive, but dead. And he was laid in a tomb. And his body came out of that tomb again, not dead, but alive.

As he hung on the cross, he could have saved himself, but he chose not to. He made that choice in order to save us, so that, after he emerged from the tomb on the third day, he could give that resurrection life to you and me as well.

So when you pray for healing or justice or whatever it is you need, know that God has already answered that prayer with a resounding "yes!" And if the realization of this prayer does not come sooner, it will at least come at the resurrection on the Last Day. And even if it does come sooner, that is just an appetizer for the redemption that will come in full on the Last Day.

Now, knowing that this redemption is coming certainly helps. It gives us cause to rejoice in the midst of the suffering. But if you've ever been in the midst of it, you know the suffering doesn't go away. Yes, something better is coming, but as one late theologian taught us, "The waiting is the hardest part" (Tom Petty). Nobody likes waiting. When it's the day before your birthday and you're watching your mom bake a cake, you don't want your birthday to be tomorrow. You say, "I want cake now." And when you're lying in a hospital bed, all you can do is lie there and think about your pain. In little things and in big things, the waiting is the hardest part.

But we don't get it our way. We get it God's way, and that's just going to have to be okay, at least for now. So we wait for our redemption. And as we wait, God reminds us that he sees us, he knows us, and our redemption is coming. So preaching is for the waiting. Like a parent who tells a child to "Wait 'til your birthday for cake," God reminds us who we are dealing with. We're dealing with the creator of heaven and earth. He set every star in its exact location, and he knows every detail of our lives. He cares intimately about us, and he is strong enough to take care of us.

So in the prophet Isaiah, when the people of Israel think God has abandoned them, and they start looking to other gods, Yahweh says,

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,

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“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”? (40:27)

They think God has abandoned them. They think he’s not paying attention anymore. They think he no longer looks and sees. This is our natural reaction when God doesn’t come down and do what we think he should do. We know all the reasons why our situation is unjust, and we can’t understand why God would be silent. So we start to question whether or not God is really there. And if he is there, we wonder whether or not he really cares. We start to question if he really sees us. But he does. So he reminds us who he is. He says,

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable. (40:28)

Who do we think God is that he would forget about us? This is the same God who created the heavens and the earth. He knows every star in the sky and every speck of dust on the ground. He knows every care and worry in your heart. So God reminds us who he is, and he makes a promise:

He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they 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 (40:29-31).

God sees. God knows. God speaks. And he does more than that. God acts. We ask, *Why, God, would you allow this to happen?* And God answers. He really does. God answers.

This question of how a good God could allow such suffering and evil in the world has captivated philosophers for as long as they’ve been philosophizing. And they have a name for this question. It’s called “The Problem of Evil.” Every atheist loves the problem of evil because they think Christians can’t answer it. But we can. In fact, this is right in our wheelhouse. This is the question we should want every single one of our friends and neighbors to ask us. *How can a good God allow such evil?* This is the pitch we should hit for a homerun every time, because every word of Christian doctrine exists for the purpose of answering the problem of evil. We have the answer to the problem of evil, and you all know what it is. We have God’s answer to the problem of evil, and you all know what it is. It’s the cross. The cross is God’s answer. God’s answer is not an *explanation*. He does better. God’s answer is the *solution*.

How can a good God allow such evil? He doesn’t. He does not tolerate it. God is so intolerant of evil and death and suffering that he takes on our dying flesh. He marches straight into the mouth of death. He allows death to swallow him, divinity and all, so that he can slay death from the inside. He does this to solve the problem of evil. This is God’s answer.

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Jesus Christ, true God in human flesh, offers himself for us. And he gives himself to us, today in the forms of bread and wine, so that we might share in his triumph over death. As surely as he has been crucified and has risen from the dead, we too will be raised like him.

Today we wait.

But they 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 (40:31).

Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.