

Isaiah 40:21-31 Pastor Bill Uetricht 5 Epiphany 2/04/12

I don't know about you, but there are times in my life when I really need to see the big picture. Sometimes, it seems, that I get lost in life's minutiae. Everything that comes at me seems so significant, so vital, so necessary for my attention. All of a sudden, all that I am seeing is life's tininess, all of the small challenges coming my way. Those challenges then often become larger than life. And when that occurs, I don't think I am at my best. I tend to be crabby, negative, suspicious, critical of others, anxious. I begin then to see life and even God through the lens of the minutiae, and that lens brings sight that frequently is distorted.

Now, don't get me wrong! I am not advocating for rose-colored glasses. I don't want to be a person who fails to come to grips with the realities of life. What I am speaking of is not just a matter of "accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative." Frankly, our tendency to want to eliminate the negative too often causes the negative to be buried, raising its ugly head at a later time. There are times when we have to face the minutiae, mourn our losses, admit the struggles, embrace the pain, deal with the tiny. And also, there are many times when we won't have it all together, which is perfectly fine. Yet I suspect that we all will do better in life when during those times and during all of the times of our lives we allow ourselves to grasp the big picture, or as I prefer to put it, we allow ourselves to be *grasped* by the big picture.

Now honesty, that grasping or being grasped doesn't always come easy or without a little violence. Sometimes we have to be slapped in the face or struck by the proverbial two by four. Sometimes I and we

are a little dense. It's as if life or God has to have a little controversy with us.

That seems to be what is going on in our first lesson for today. God is slapping his people in the face. Scholars like to call this portion of the second part of Isaiah "a controversy dialogue." God is having a controversy with his people, which is why he seems a little testy in the beginning: "Have you not been paying attention? Have you not been listening? Haven't you heard these stories all your life? Don't you understand the foundation of all things?"

God is hitting his people, the exiles of Israel, with the two by four. They are acting as if God has abandoned them, as if God doesn't care about them. Undoubtedly, they've been through some rough times. The Babylonians had come in and ruined their cities and temple and sent many of them off into a foreign land. And some of their prophets had said that the reason they had been forced to leave their home town was because God, too, had left their home town. He was so ticked with his people that he packed up his toys and took them elsewhere. And now these exiles are being invited back and some of them are not so sure that they want to go back. Others of them *have* gone home, only to discover piles of ruins there. What are they to think? What else can they do but get lost in the minutiae, be overwhelmed by the challenges and the grief?

Well, God says to these exiles that they need to be grasped by the big picture. They need to be taken to Him, the one who in Isaiah's picture language is said to be sitting high above the earth. From where God sits, people are like mere ants, or probably more appropriately, like grasshoppers. He is the creator of all things. He stretches out the skies like a canvas. And honestly, this big-picture God ignores all those

big boss princes, those Babylonian leaders who think they are something special or who cause us to think that they are something quite cool, rad, sick, who honestly bedazzle us with all their riches and power and control over us. Those princes and powers don't amount to much. God is saying. When God blows on them they shrivel. They are flecks of chaff; they're gone with the wind.

Oh, but we say. Those Babylonians are really powerful in our lives. They do bedazzle us. It's hard to get away from their control. I mean, what people think of us is hard to run away from. The advertisers—it's hard to escape from their control. That prince known as perfectionism is hard not to give into. Honestly, it's difficult not to be tyrannized by all the things that come at us—they all are so important. Even the challenges are hard to escape, not simply because they are all so pervasive and make life so hard—they are and they do. But let's face it: some of us depend on the challenges. They may make life miserable, but they make life predictable. We rather like living in the mud. The mud enables us sometimes to get some attention-- somebody has got to come and help us move the stuck vehicle out of the mud. The mud may make a mess, but it's a mess with which we are familiar and a mess that at least we feel brings us people who pay attention to us.

And what's more, where would we be without these challenges? We might have to move on in life. It's just more comfortable to stay where we are. To move on might mean that we have to let go of the person who died, for example. We are not so sure we want to do that, so we'll just hang on to the anger, allow ourselves to get further buried in the mud. The bedazzling Babylonians sometimes are really sweet to us, even if they are killing us.

And God slaps us with the two by four and says that to him these sweet and bitter things “are like flecks of chaff; they are gone with the wind! Who is like me?” God says. “Who can hold a candle to me?” the Holy One asks. “Look at the night skies: who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name—so magnificent! so powerful!—and never overlooks a single one.” The Babylonians were preoccupied with astrology, with stars and moons. They gave these bodies divine status. God here in Isaiah is telling his people and the Babylonians that *he* controls the stars, that *he* names them one by one.

Here is the big picture, people. “God doesn’t come or go. God lasts. **He** is the creator of all you can see or imagine. He doesn’t get tired out, doesn’t pause to catch his breath . . . He energizes those who get tired, gives fresh strength to dropouts.” He’s got a special place in his heart for tired people, for people who feel overwhelmed, people who are enslaved by Babylonian princes, people who get lost in the minutiae, people who are exiled and are afraid to come home or who are not so sure that they want to stay home. God hasn’t lost track of us. We are cared for. We are deeply loved.

It’s time to be grasped by the big picture, by that which is the foundation of all things, the ground of all things, the source of all things, the goal of all things. Those who are grasped by this One will spread their wings and soar like eagles. They will run and will not grow weary. They will walk and will not lag behind.