

“A Weary Future” – Isaiah 40:21-31 – February 7, 2021

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In chapter 40 of Isaiah, the prophet is speaking to a people who are weary and wondering if their situation is ever going to change. They are Jews living away from their homeland, far from Jerusalem and the temple, they are a generation that has grown up in exile. Their lives are not horrible. They are able to live and work and raise families in their Babylonian homes. But they are separated from their land and their God.

As the years of exile have continued on, the people have begun to wonder if God will ever take notice of them as God had done with their parents, grandparents and older generations. They wonder if the stories about God were merely the tales of their ancestors. If they were true, would the God of Israel have left them alone for so long?

And even for those Israelites who had lived in Israel before the exile. They had the memories, but time had passed, and the memories did not match their current reality. It was a foggy image of a once bright scene.

So the prophet Isaiah had come to remind them of who their God is. Isaiah turns to poetry in order to express the wonder of God’s creative majesty. Isaiah proclaims God’s sovereignty and immensity, describing God as one having no equal. He compares the creative God next to smallness and fragility of God’s creation, including humans. Even those who are powerful and mighty are fleeting next to God’s transcendent nature. But the prophet reminds them, too, that God has concern for Israel – God has neither abandoned nor forgotten them. Though the people have forgotten, and in their forgetting, they have given up hope.

It doesn’t at all make sense to us. Why would God care about us, even give us a thought, let alone a second thought? Who are we that God is mindful of us? This truth defies human logic and understanding. It is only through faith that we can trust in God’s immanent concern.

In those oh-so-familiar words of Isaiah, even youths will faint and be weary and the young will fall exhausted, but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. This is what he is talking about. When things are going well, we often rely on our own strength. We don’t need God – at least that is how it seems on the surface. It’s okay that God is far away, because we’re doing fine on our own. But those times will not last. They were not designed to last. We need God, because everything has its origins in God. In the moments of weakness, the times when we stumble, that is when we realize that we need God. We become vulnerable and weak.

If we have forgotten the nature of God’s care and concern for us, then that is when we falter. When we remember, when we trust, when we believe – strength comes to us from God on the wings of hope. When our memory is foggy, it is hard to trust. When the time of God’s silence drags on, it is hard to believe. Like Israel, we need to be reminded. We need to hear

the stories again. We need to look out upon the immensity of this created world that God has given to us, to become engulfed again in the awe and wonder that comes when we experience God as Creator, and then allow the paradox of God's care and concern to have meaning for us. To accept God also as Shepherd.

Indeed, when I ponder these very things, I find myself looking for poetic turns of phrase rather than prose. And I can understand why the prophets so often spoke in verse. Our minds simply cannot grasp the paradox of God. So faith takes over.

As we near the first anniversary of our lock-down due to the coronavirus, I wonder how many of us can somewhat relate to the Israelites in exile. We lament the loss of all that we once perhaps took for granted – hugs, smiling faces, in person conversations and laughter, singing together, worshiping in the sanctuary, holding a hymnal, seeing the light stream through the stained glass, serving our Community Supper guests in the Fellowship Hall, teaching Sunday School in the 2nd floor classrooms.

As we remember these things we wonder when we will be able to safely return. We feel frustration and impatience. We want this pandemic to be over. We are tired and we are restless. We are anxious and we are lonely. We miss our friends, we miss our families, we miss simply being together in the same space. We mourn those who have died and the families who loved them. The toll is great, more so on those who are already marginalized. We worry about the long-term impact on our children.

We are in a time of waiting. But we can always choose how to respond to this waiting. Are we frustrated, fearful, impatient, worried? Does our uncertainty about the future negatively impact our present state of mind? Or can we open ourselves to trusting in God? Mindful of God's majesty and allowing ourselves to rely on God's goodness and care?

Will we listen to the poetry of the prophet Isaiah and remember the stories of God's providence and rest in the hope that our Creator is able to bring new life and new possibilities from whatever hardship we currently endure. In our weariness of this ongoing pandemic and its powerful impact on our lives, we can live in fear or frustration of what the future might bring? Or instead, will we live into hope, trusting in the creative goodness of God, believing not only that good can come from our experiences during this pandemic, but out of any hardship we encounter throughout our lives.