

Scriptures and Sermon for February 8, 2015

**Isaiah 40:21-31**

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? 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 live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

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"? 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. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 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.

## **Mark 1: 29-39**

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Let us pray... Amen.

In our Hebrew Scripture this morning, the prophet Isaiah asks the children of God some rather pointed questions about the Sacred, about the Creator, about God. When the prophet asks 'Have you not known?', he's asking because he knows deep down inside that in fact, we have known. When he asks 'Have you not heard?', he knows full well that in fact, we *have heard*. When he asks 'Has it not been told you from the beginning?', the prophet knows quite well that we have been told from the beginning. When he asks 'Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?', Isaiah knows that in the deepest part of our spirits, whether we believe in God, or whether we don't believe in God, or whether we claim to not know if there is a God, that we understand there is a Sacred Creator.

Initially writing to the people of Israel, after their complaints over God's punishments, handed down after they disobeyed God, Isaiah was trying to get to the heart of the issue: God is at the heart of our very being, and, in spite of circumstances that look like God has abandoned us, or is absent, God is intimately involved in our every moment, and we know it.

We've all been there. In pain, or despair, wondering why God has left us to suffer alone, or why God has caused some thing to happen that hurts us.

But we know. We've heard. We've been told from the beginning, and we've understood from the foundations of our being, that God doesn't cause bad things to happen. Bad things happen, and God is there to help us through them.

God gives us the strength to survive some of the most devastating circumstances. In Isaiah's day, the people of Israel were in a tough cycle of disobedience, punishment, reconciliation, forgiveness, disobedience, punishment, reconciliation, and forgiveness. They were handed over to

some of the cruelest communities to be enslaved. And it's no wonder some of the people started to doubt whether God was really in control.

We know. We've heard. We've been told since the beginning. We understand from the foundations of the earth, and from the foundations of our own beginnings: God gives power to the faint, give strength to the powerless. But knowing these things doesn't always prevent us from wondering out loud, just how powerful is God, if such evil things can exist in the world?

It's a common question, but it is based on the false assumption that God created the universe so that it could be manipulated and controlled by God, like some kind of model train set. When God created the universe, created the world, created us, God set us free to live our lives on our own terms. To believe, or not believe. To question, or not question. The sacred spark is in all of us, but that doesn't prevent some of our sisters and brothers from believing there is no God, based on the presence of evil in the world.

When we worship together regularly, we expose ourselves to a form of the sacred that reinforces our belief in God. It might be in our prayer, it might be in the sermon, or in the hymns, or even in the silence. But there is something sacred about gathering to worship God that opens us up to God.

Of course we can experience the sacred alone, by ourselves, in prayer, or in study, but that takes effort, and insight, and discipline.

Isaiah is challenging us to acknowledge what we know on a spiritual level, even as our intellectual understanding fails us: that God is not only present, but is present in a caring and loving way.

Now, I don't like to be scolded any more than the next person. And I especially don't like to be told, 'You know better'. But Isaiah is trying to tell the children of God, and us, that we already know the truth about the Sacred, we already know the truth about God in the world, and in our lives.

Our Gospel lesson ties in nicely with what Isaiah is saying, even if at first glance it doesn't seem related at all. Jesus was proclaiming the message of God's love in the world, and all anybody wanted from him was healings and miracles. Jesus had an important message to tell the people, but what they thirsted for was evidence of God's presence in the form of miracles and healings.

After a busy night of healings and casting out demons, Jesus slipped away, early the next morning, for some quiet prayer. But the disciples found him, and told him that everyone was searching for him. He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

Have we not known the message? Have we not heard the message? Has it not been told to us from the beginning? Have we not understood the message from the foundations of the earth, from the foundations of our own being?

God can't prevent bad things from happening. God can't eradicate evil from our world. God can't stop our bodies from contracting diseases, or from aging, or from developing serious complications.

God *can* strengthen us for healing, *can* comfort us when we mourn, *can* walk with us on our journey, *can* embolden us to see the world as it really is, and not as we would have it.

God's only son, came to preach a message of repentance in forgiveness. And the people searched all over for him, so that he might heal their sicknesses and their diseases. The message got lost in the miracles. But all anyone wanted was the miracles.

Aren't we a little like that now? We've known the message, we've heard the message, we've understood the message, but we want the miracles.

But the miracle *is in the message*. The *healing is in the message*. And we have to face the message of God's unconditional love and forgiveness if we ever hope to receive the miracle...

We already know, we've already heard, we get it. But unless we intentionally listen to the message, purposefully open ourselves to the message, all we're doing is pursuing Jesus for a healing miracle. And the irony is that when we pursue the miracles, we're missing the message.

And another irony is that if you are here today, listening to this message, then you already know, you've already heard, you already understand from the foundations of the earth that the *message is the miracle*. Oh, we all have our worries, our doubts, our fears...but our strength comes from the message, the one we've always known.

God no longer punishes, the message is clear: our sins are forgiven, and Jesus died for our sins. The God of the New Testament is different from the God of the Old Testament.

When we are in touch with our faith, we can do anything, survive anything, triumph over the most difficult tasks. Out of touch with our faith, and we begin to desperately seek miracles, proof, anything that will make us feel better. We know, we hear, we understand. That doesn't make it any easier. Instead of chasing Jesus in the hope that he will bestow a miracle upon us, let us embrace the message that leads to the miracle,

that we are loved, just as we are, and that we are forgiven, just as we are. We aren't promised paradise, or freedom from pain and suffering, but we are promised unconditional love from the God that created us. And that's paradise enough for me. Amen.