

Power and the Powerless

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Isaiah 40:21-31

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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? ²²It 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; ²³who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. ²⁴Scarcely 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. ²⁵To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. ²⁶Lift 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. ²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God”? ²⁸Have 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. ²⁹He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. ³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; ³¹but 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.



They were done. Beaten down. Run over and over and over. Destroyed and decimated almost beyond recognition. Dragged from their homes, from their homeland, from all that was precious and reverent to their fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, their forbears back to the very beginning of life itself.

The Jews. In the late 7th Century BCE, Judah the southern portion of the divided nation that we know as Israel, was a province under the control of the Assyrians whose empire was vast and powerful.

In the last decades of the century Assyria was overthrown by Babylon, an province with a history of former glory in its own right and in 609 BCE, Judah became a Babylonian client when King Josiah was killed. In 599 BCE, Judah revolted against Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem. Jerusalem fell on March 16, 597 BCE, and Nebuchadnezzar pillaged Jerusalem and its Temple and took King Jeconiah and his court and other prominent citizens (including the prophet Ezekiel) back to Babylon. From then, 597 BCE until about 538 BCE, Jews were deported and exiled to Babylon – their beautiful seat of religious and political power was no more, their Temple built by Solomon razed. There was no hope. Can you imagine? No way to get home. No homeland to get to even if you could figure a way. If ever a people felt powerless, this was one of those times.

Who can speak power to these who feel this kind of powerlessness? Isaiah.

The Prophet reminds those in exile, those who feel powerless, that YHWH, their God, is beyond all and more powerful than anything that has ever existed. “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand” – an anthropomorphized God whose hand is so large that in its hollow fits all the oceans of the world. For Isaiah that oceanic image is the small portion of the Mediterranean that he could see, that his compatriots could sail and use for commerce – one very tiny part of what we now know as the oceans of this globe. We know what he never knew. We know that there are 66 ocean systems in the world. There is the mighty Pacific and great icy Atlantic. There is the Mediterranean and the Indian and the Black and the Caspian and the Arctic and the Antarctic and sixty others. When we think of the dimensions of the oceans, they are staggering. The Atlantic Ocean alone is 41 million square miles of

water. The Pacific is 69 million square miles. All of the oceans in the earth are 329 million cubic miles of water at an average depth of 12,400 feet. In 2010, I stood on Table Mountain in Cape Town, South Africa, where you can see in one panoramic view the South Atlantic Ocean, the Southern Ocean, and the Indian Ocean – truly one of the most majestic sights I have ever seen yet only a tiny drop of water compared with what fits in the hollow of God’s hand.

The God of Israel holds all of in God’s hand like a woman would hold water in a cup in the hollow of her hand. Isaiah knows a God for whom nothing is too big to handle. The God who holds the water of the sea in a cup in the hollow of the hand is the God who is more than sufficient to handle any of our problems.

It is this God, says Isaiah, “who can mark off the heavens with a span, and enclose the dust of the earth in a measure.” Have you ever walked through an open field or along the beach where no streetlights interrupt your gaze, where very little if any human generated light invades the twinkle of the stars and the glow of the moon? To me it is perhaps the most magnificent of all of God’s creation. Surrounded by the darkness – enlightened by the stars and moon. Isaiah sat there like all those other Hebrew prophets before there was night time television, and after dinner, he looked up at those firefly-like dots against the vaulted heaven and wondered. But we know something that Isaiah could never imagine. The earth is a globe with a 2600 mile circumference. If you could harness a beam of light and ride 186,000 miles a second, it would take you 100,000 years just to get across the Milky Way. If you started at the beginning of our recorded history, you would not even be 1/10th of the way across our galaxy. Yet we are one of a cluster of twenty such galaxies and one corner of the universe where astronomers have lost count of the millions of galaxies. But God measured it all with the span of the hand. That God, Isaiah could imagine; that God we can imagine; that God is power above all other power.

God, continues Isaiah, “weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance.” God can weigh the mountains of the earth like a jeweler weighs fine gem stones? We know things that Isaiah could never know. Isaiah never saw Mt. Everest at 29,029 feet. He never saw Mount Lenin at 24,000 feet or Mt. Rainier towering at 14,000 feet. Isaiah never imagined any of that. In fact, humanity, in our puny, mortal, finite nature, struggled until 1953 to stand on top of the world’s highest mountain. We have stood on the moon and looked back at the fullness of this blue and green globe floating in space and time – we have seen the extent of this world and can imagine its weight and its density. Isaiah says that God weighed the mountains as if the mountains were tiny pieces of gems. An amazing powerful God, is this God who Isaiah knows and claims for the powerless. We who may be weighed down with problems—problems at work, problems at home with the family, personal problems that seem to be bigger than any mountain. However, the word of Isaiah is that the God who is able to weigh the mountains is the same God who is sufficient to fix any human problem. “[God] is great in strength, mighty in power.” (v.26).

So remember, you who are in captivity, you who are in exile from your homeland, you who have seen the house of your God crushed as if a sand castle, this God is your power and your source. “Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales; see, he takes up the isles like fine dust ... All the nations are as nothing before [God]; they are accounted by [God] as less than nothing and emptiness.” (vv. 16-18) Even Babylon your oppressor for the moment is less than the God of your forebears. No power in this world can keep you down, says Isaiah.

All the power of all the nations that you can imagine are so tiny compared with God’s sovereign power. The American empire plus China, Russia, Japan, and all of Europe – they are nothing. Iran with all its saber rattling nonsense, present-day Israel, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Afghanistan. Even you, ancient Judah and Israel, a tiny weak nation hardly larger than the state of Vermont – a nation that spent all of its history to that point caught between the super

powers—Syria in the north and east Egypt at the south and west – Isaiah brought this word to them. He said you can put together all of the nations of history in their greatness, but to God they’re like a speck of dust on the scales. They’re like a drop from a bucket. The thirty dynasties of Ancient Egypt with the pyramids raising their heads up to heaven and with the greatness of the reign of the Pharaohs – Isaiah says they are like a drop of water that hangs on the edge of a bucket about to fall in the sand and disappear.

That God, my embattled and often doubting friends, is your God; that God, says Isaiah in arguably one of the most resonant pieces of all of Hebrew scripture, “does not faint or grow weary; [God whose] understanding is unsearchable ... 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.”

What word do the powerless hear today?

Mitt Romney: “I’m in this race because I care about Americans. I’m not concerned about the very poor. We have a safety net there. If it needs repair I’ll fix it. I’m not concerned about the very rich. They’re doing just fine. I’m concerned about the very heart of America.”

This is not a political statement on my part – please hear that plainly – most of you know my political leanings and that I try not to preach election politics from the pulpit so that’s not my point here. We know Governor Romney didn’t quite mean it the way we might hear it – but there is a coded message and a knowing nod in there that could come from any American politician’s campaign. That coded message is – the poor are not part of “the very heart of America.”

If the poor were considered at the heart of America, there would have been no need for a meeting this past summer, in the midst of the debate about the national budget and the debt ceiling, when a group of clergy met with President Obama for 40-minutes (that’s a long time!) to talk exactly about this issue – the plight of the powerless. After more than 5,000 faith leaders sent the president and congressional leaders a letter telling them the “moral measure of the debate is how the most poor and vulnerable fare” representatives from some of the nation’s largest religious denominations and organizations, including the Roman Catholic Church, the National Council of Churches, the National Association of Evangelicals and the United Methodist Church, as well as representatives from social service groups such as the Salvation Army and Bread for the World.

Barbara Williams-Skinner, co-facilitator of the National African American Clergy Network opened with prayer and said that she told the President “there are over 2,000 verses of scripture [that apply to the fiscal debate]” and that “As a Christian, he, too, knows that is the word of God.” I can’t help but believe that Isaiah’s words filled that room as well. God lifts the powerless from their despair – “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless” ... renews their strength, lifts them up with wings like eagles, gives them strength run without being weary, even allows them the basic task of walking without fainting.

“We came here not to advance a particular plan, but a fundamental moral principle: put the needs of the poor first in allocating scarce resources,” said Bishop Ricardo Ramirez speaking on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “As religious leaders, our concern is not which party wins the current political battles. But we know if we don’t speak up who is likely to lose: the families trying to feed their kids, the jobless looking for work, the children who need health care, the hungry and sick and hopeless around the world.”

It's not a political position. It is a moral and spiritual requirement. We worship a God who is more powerful than anyone or anything that we could imagine, a God who cares about the powerless, who gives the powerless power, who brings us – all of us who receive the word as truth – from the lowest places to the greatest heights.

In 1985, Christopher deVinck wrote an article for the Wall Street Journal titled *Power of the Powerless: A Brother's Lesson*. It was later expanded into a short book which I read in 1989 shortly after my daughter Lindsay was born.

“I grew up in the house where my brother was on his back in his bed for almost 33 years, in the same corner of his room, under the same window, beside the same yellow walls. Oliver was blind, mute. His legs were twisted. He didn't have the strength to lift his head nor the intelligence to learn anything,” DeVinck begins the story. His brother Oliver was born after his mother while pregnant with him was overcome by fumes from a leaking coal-burning stove, rescued by her husband who dragged them from the house.

Even now, five years after his death from pneumonia on March 12, 1980, Oliver still remains the weakest, most helpless human being I ever met, and yet he was one of the most powerful human beings I ever met. He could do absolutely nothing except breathe, sleep, eat, and yet he was responsible for action, love, courage, insight. When I was small my mother would say, "Isn't it wonderful that you can see?" And once she said, "When you go to heaven, Oliver will run to you, embrace you, and the first thing he will say is 'Thank you.'" I remember, too, my mother explaining to me that we were blessed with Oliver in ways that were not clear to her at first.”

The power of the powerless is greater than the pretentiousness of those who claim power is God's gift to only them.

When I was in my early 20s, I met a girl and fell in love. After a few months I brought her home to meet my family. When my mother went to the kitchen to prepare dinner, I asked the girl, "Would you like to see Oliver?" for I had told her about my brother. "No," she answered.

Soon after, I met Roe, a lovely girl. She asked me the names of my brothers and sisters. She loved children. I thought she was wonderful. I brought her home after a few months to meet my family. Soon it was time for me to feed Oliver. I remember sheepishly asking Roe if she'd like to see him. "Sure," she said. I sat at Oliver's bedside as Roe watched over my shoulder. I gave him his first spoonful, his second. "Can I do that?" Roe asked with ease, with freedom, with compassion, so I gave her the bowl and she fed Oliver one spoonful at a time.

The power of the powerless. Which girl would you marry? Today Roe and I have three children.

On one level, we read Isaiah's message as if it speaks to each of us individually and give us strength. That's okay. One on-line contributor summarized it in this way (www.faithandhealthconnection.org):

Are you weak? Do you need more energy to run your race? Is your strength depleted? God can help. “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.... But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength.” ...What a reassuring message! Life can make us weary... it can deplete us from the strength we need to get out of bed and do the things we are required to do. Yes, we can work out by lifting weights and taking our fitness walk. Those activities can provide us a level of fitness that enable our bodies to function physically, yet we also need additional inner strength to be able to

function well. Since our mind, body and spirit are interconnected, how we feel spiritually or emotionally can effect or physical energy level. That's where God can help. A meaningful and personal relationship with God can give us inner energy and strength that can sustain us.

It's okay to receive Isaiah's message in that personalized way as long as we also remember the broader meaning of what he is telling us – that God is a God who cares about the powerless, who gives strength to those whom the powerful tell they have no power. And that is not about individuals, is it? It is about the power and politics of this world compared to the power and presence of God's reality.

Did the Babylonian exile last forever? No. Babylon fell. Did the Roman oppression of Israel, during which Jesus (remember him?) was preaching this very same message of power for the powerless, last forever? No. Did the attempt by Nazi power in the 1930s and 40s to eliminate these very same people prevail? No. it did not. The God of Abraham and Hagar and Sarah, of Isaac and Leah and Rebecca, of Jacob and Jeremiah and Isaiah, of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, of Peter and Paul and the Magdalene – that God of the powerless has prevailed against anything the world has ever proposed was more powerful.

So also is Isaiah's prophetic reminder for us as well all these generations later. God – YHWH – the God of the Hebrews – the God who we worship even today – is a god who is more powerful than anything else, yet is a god who cares even for the most powerless among us.

That, says Isaiah, should not only lift your spirits and give you wings to sail on but it should lift your life and make you cry out to the pretense of power in this world.

“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?” Enough! Youths will faint and be weary, the young will fall exhausted; but the powerless shall renew their strength in the hands of this God, “they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Amen.