

Eagle Wings and Grasshopper Eyes

Isaiah 40: 21 – 31

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Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you from the beginning of time?!

Ah...can't you just feel it? In the midst of what looks like six more weeks of winter, we are given the promise of Spring with a whiff of warmth from Isaiah, chapter 40! Toward the end of this season of Epiphany, this season of the church when we are called to shine our lights bright, and maybe this light shining stuff is proving to be a bit hard, we're tired at times, enthusiasm sometimes dwindles but oh thank you, thank you, choosers of the lectionary texts for this time, this time when the both literal and metaphorical winters of our lives sometimes seem like they will go on forever, we are given to read this Sunday Isaiah, chapter 40.

Isaiah 40. Quick bible study: the book of Isaiah is actually thought to be 3 books; the first, chapters 1 – 39 written by the prophet Isaiah during the 8th century BC. (Long time ago!) Chapters 40 – 55 were written 200 years later by one who carried on the earlier theme of 1st Isaiah. These 15 chapters, beginning with chapter 40, are sometimes referred to as the book of Consolation; no judgment or condemnation but only a message of trust and confident hope for God's people. A message that God's people needed to hear because it seemed as if they were in a winter with no promise of spring. First exile. And then return. Enthusiasm quickly gave way to despair for everything was ruined. Now was the time to rebuild but oh, why? They were so tired! The struggle seemed endless! This is not what they had counted on!

Isaiah 40 begins with the words we read during Advent, "Comfort, comfort, my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low;" – God promises a new day, a reversal of things as they are now! And the writer's congregation just look at him with blank stares when the words are read, "Yeah, right! Full of promises! How are we supposed to trust in God? Our way is hidden from God. God does not care!"

The writer of Second Isaiah continues with words that have a familiar ring. Have you not known? Have you not heard? The last verses of today's reading hold that favorite and powerful imagery. If we had screens I would cue up that memorable scene from Chariots of Fire, when Eric Liddel, runner in the 1924 Olympics disqualifies himself because he will not run on 'The Lord's Day', stands in the pulpit and reads "Those who wait upon the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." And then from there we could play another movie snippet, from The Lord of the Rings, almost the end, when Frodo and Sam wise have destroyed the ring causing the mountain to erupt and find themselves on a rock surrounded by burning lava. All seems lost. Frodo hugs Sam wise and says, "I'm glad to be with you, here at the end of all things. Then the screen goes dark. When the picture comes back on our two heroes are laying on the rock, surrounded by fire and lava and all seems lost and hopeless. But then the eagles come! Large eagles, swoop down, pick them up and carry them to

safety. And as I think I've mentioned before, I've always thought the sound track to that point in the movie should begin to play the hymn, "And they shall lift you up on Eagle's wings!"

So, at the end of chapter 40 we have this wonderful, rich imagery for those who put their trust in God, 'they shall mount up like wings of eagles'! But before we get ourselves too puffed up thinking of ourselves as mighty, soaring eagles, there is another image used in today's Isaiah passage. Not as mighty, not as cool. First, the people of God are compared to grasshoppers.

I don't like grasshoppers. They're ugly. I remember when I was about 7 or 8 years old, when we would go visit my great aunt and uncle on their farm after the corn had been harvested. My brother and I walked together down the dry rows with corn stalk stubs sticking out of the ground. As we walked, grasshoppers were hopping/flying all around us, sometimes even landing on us. When we got back to the farmhouse, I told my uncle about all of the grasshoppers and he said, "Oh, yeah, we harvest them too!" "What, really?" "Sure thing. If you stay for breakfast tomorrow, we'll have grasshopper legs on toast." We never stayed overnight, always a day visit, so I never had to try those grasshopper legs on toast. Took me years to figure out that he wasn't pulling the grasshopper legs but mine!

I don't like grasshoppers. And I would much rather have eagle wings than grasshopper wings. But since the writer of Second Isaiah is so good with imagery, maybe it would behoove us to go back and look at the grasshopper reference.

'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 God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. Have you not known? Have you not heard? It seems that the people of Israel had what could be diagnosed as 'theological amnesia'. In the midst of their despair, they had forgotten their story, who they were in that story and to whom they belonged. So, this first part of our reading is to give them some memory recall. It reminds them of, 'as the popular hymn goes' how great is our God! A God that created all and is over all, even the rulers of the earth who with time fade away. The author of Second Isaiah puts the people in their place with the comparison of being grasshoppers; so many scattered upon the earth, fragile creatures, not to be compared to God. At the same time, even with these words of God's grandeur and might come words of comfort; for the God who created the stars calls them all by name and not one is missing and perhaps the author is referring to even the lowly grasshoppers as well, to even us, that God knows us by name and not one is missing.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Yes, the people have theological amnesia. They have forgotten their story and therefore forgotten their God.

I didn't think much about being compared to a grasshopper until I read a recent blog post about this scripture. I learned a lot from that post. Like, for instance, they can leap 20 times more than their own body length. Wow, I bet my son who does triple jump in college would love to live up to this grasshopper comparison! But there's something else that I learned about the grasshopper that perhaps we can expand a bit to help with the diagnosis of theological amnesia. Did you know that grasshoppers have 5 eyes? Three of the eyes are small and known as 'simple' eyes. The function of these eyes is basically to distinguish light from dark. But it's the other two eyes,

the ones that we can most easily see on a grasshopper, that caught my attention. The two larger eyes are called ‘compound’ eyes and allow the grasshopper to be able to see all around. Without the two compound eyes, the grasshopper would only be able to see that blade of grass right in front of them.

Okay, so this may be a stretch for some but hang in there with me. I’m not inferring that the writer of second Isaiah back in 500 something B.C. knew about simple and compound eye structure of the grasshopper! But since we have that knowledge, can we imagine a bit as the author of the blog did? (I would like to take credit for this insight but have to give credit to Rev. Todd Weir, writer of the aforementioned blog. ‘Blooming Cactus, 2006) He writes that ‘part of their adaptability and survival comes from their ability to see everything around them in a great panorama.’

It seems to me that the people of Israel to whom Isaiah was addressing were stuck with limited vision. They forgot that they were grasshoppers, able to ‘see’ the wonders of creation all around. Instead, they were just focusing on that one blade of grass obstacle right in front of them. They forgot the bigger picture, their foundational stories of a Mystery bigger than themselves, that blew ruah or breath over the waters, creating and naming all good. They were only able to see their struggles of the moment, without the perspective of past or hope of future for their sight and insight was limited. They lost the capacity to stand, take it all in, instead of getting bogged down in the difficulty of the moment.

But Isaiah calls them, and since this is the living bible into which we read our own stories, calls us as well, grasshoppers! Not all that bad, for we have the capacity to shed those moments of theological amnesia when we can only see what is right in front of us and take another look, a more expansive look, to admit the struggles yes, but to recall the times of growth as well, to remember how God’s promise of love has been lived out in our lives and in the lives of others throughout the ages, to look up on a clear night at the starry sky and down on a sunny day and see the expanse of creation all around us, to see those who walk in front of us showing us the way, those walking behind us giving us a shove, those walking beside us as equals lending a hand. Oh, how very easy it is to get stuck in the proverbial winter with theological amnesia, forgetting, not seeing that God’s promise of Spring.

So, may we go from here on this winter’s day