

# When God Is

Isaiah 40.21-31

February 8, 2009

A man born blind can easily deny the magnificence of a vast landscape. He can easily deny all the wonders that he cannot touch, smell, taste, or hear. But one day the wind will show its kindness and remove the tiny patches that cover your eyes, and you will see God more clearly than you have ever seen yourself.

- Meister Eckhart

## The Reading

<sup>21</sup>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? <sup>22</sup>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; <sup>23</sup>who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. <sup>26</sup>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. <sup>27</sup>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?' <sup>28</sup>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. <sup>29</sup>He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. <sup>30</sup>Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; <sup>31</sup>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.

## Isaiah's Challenge

Early in the sixth century BCE, the brightest and best of Israel were taken into captivity, and force marched some eight hundred miles to Babylon where - as the psalmist expressed it - they sat by the waters of Babylon and wept. How could they worship their God in such a strange, foreign land, and under such circumstances? A generation later, dejected and disillusioned, Israel's brightest and best sat still by the waters of Babylon weeping, having concluded that God no longer saw them; that God no longer cared about them. Where is God's steadfast love? They cried in despair. Where is God's covenant faithfulness?

Enter Isaiah – the prophet of God – who heard Israel’s cry, and responded like a voice in the wilderness, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” I’m not sure if Isaiah cried out in frustration at Israel’s lack of faith, or in compassion, seeking to apply balm to an open wound; but he cried out, assuring Israel that their God sees and cares, and challenging them to trust him. “He does not faint or grow weary,” Isaiah promised, “He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.”

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” Isaiah’s challenge didn’t die with the past; it is as pointed and powerful in our day as it was in his own; but now the challenge falls on our ears. “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” God sees, God cares; and we, too, can trust him. Or can we? This is the question to which we all must respond; and this is the question on which I would like to meditate this morning. Can we trust God? Please pray with me:

Gracious One, in this hour, in these minutes, we pray that we will see you high and lifted up. We pray that we will know you not simply by sight or by name, but that we will know you in the depths of our hearts as the One who has come near to us as love and courage, healing and hope. In the name of the living Christ we pray. Amen.

## The God Behind It All

Glancing at my sermon title for this morning you might conclude that grammar ain’t exactly my strong suit. When God is ...this makes no sense; what’s this all about? When God is what? But that’s exactly the point; with God, no *what* is needed. If we understand anything of God’s nature all we ever need to know, all we ever need to say, all we ever need to experience is that God is. Enough said. End of story. This knowledge is enough to fulfill our wildest dreams, and provide courage and hope through the darkest passages.

For several weeks we have examined many aspects of God’s nature, God’s relationship with the creation, and God’s loving care and concern for us. We’ve reflected on the God who speaks; the God whose Word itself is creative. When God speaks, things happen. A universe springs into being; lives are transformed and made whole. We’ve examined the God who calls, and discovered that God has but one call for you; for me; or for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for that matter. God invites us to give all that we have and all that we are. We’ve also examined the God who sends, and learned that our mission is always *out there* somewhere, beyond ourselves, because God always entices us beyond ourselves to share who we are and what we have with others in community. God’s love, God’s good news, God’s compassion is never content to rest in one heart alone, but

always spills over into the lives of others. Last week we meditated on the God who heals, and concluded that while we don't always receive the healing we most desire, healing in some form is always available. More times than not we prefer God to be a divine candy dispenser, as Joan Chittister has said; simply deposit a few prayer coins and choose the healing we want. God doesn't work this way. We may not get the healing that we desire, but God yearns to be healing and wholeness in our lives. Sometimes we don't know what we really need; sometimes we aren't willing to cooperate with God in our own healing, and if we aren't willing to participate in our healing, what can God do for us? Sometimes our motives are less than pure or our expectations too high. Nevertheless, healing in some form is always available if we will cooperate with God.

The God who speaks, the God who calls, the God who sends, the God who heals; and today ...today we consider the God who is. Who is the God, behind all the speaking, calling, sending, and healing? Is God capable of loving us? Does God want to love us ...does God even care? Dare we trust God? These are questions that the ancient Hebrews posed in their despair, and they remain valid for us today.

Thomas Aquinas ranks as one of the most prolific and profound thinkers in Christian history. He spent a considerable amount of time on the philosophical attempt to prove the existence of God, and his cosmological arguments are classic. He was satisfied, to make a long story short, that it is possible to prove *that* God exists. Reason, he said, can establish *that* God is ...it is possible to use our God-given reason to know that there is a God. O, but to be *touched* by God, to be blest, challenged, empowered and transformed; to know God intimately ...this is a feat beyond reason altogether. A living, vital relationship with God requires that God come near to us. Is God capable of loving us? Does God want to love us? Does God yearn to come near to us and be healing and wholeness in our lives?

Isaiah's eloquent statement responded to such questions; a less eloquent but truly modern translation of his response might be, Well, Duh! Is God capable of loving us? God is the origin and source of all that is; God stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in. God is above and beyond ...the origin of all things; this God is capable of loving us.

The history of our faith offers examples not only of God's ability to love, but of God's tireless efforts to do so. There have been hints all along that God wants nothing more than to love his own, and to be healing and wholeness in their lives and in the world. The ancient Hebrews often talked about God's covenant loyalty; that is to say, even when God had every reason and provocation to walk away from his commitment to Israel, he chose to remain loyal. Israel might fail

to honor the covenant – and did, time and again – but God was consistently loyal; God remained faithful.

God's love remained constant, and this love was perfected, and became perfectly clear, in the life and message of Jesus of Nazareth. What is the Word made flesh if not God coming near to us in love? What is the incarnation of God in Christ – God's becoming truly human – if not an expression of God's concern for the creation, God giving himself to share a love that animates, invigorates, and empowers life in its fullness? God's love runs so deep, Paul informs us in his letter to the Philippians, that Christ was willing to stop being God if that's what it would take to bring light and love to the world. He humbled himself – that is, emptied himself of all things divine – to make this love known among humankind. Is God capable of loving us? Yes. Does God want to love us? With a passion.

## One Last Question

There is another question, however, that makes the first two moot; a question that has everything to do with the actual quality of our lives; will we let God love us? Will we let go and put our trust in God? Will we pray to God to be within us, to work through us, to make of us what he would, to use us as he would?

This question concerns our image of God, our vision of who God is and how he wants to relate to us. It's not enough, Aquinas said, to have a notion of God; God has to come near to us, to touch us. But God can't come near to us if our image of him scares us away. For example, if you think of God as distant, as far away, as removed or aloof, you might be reluctant to pray to God or to commit yourself to this God; what would be the use? Again, if you think of God as a judge watching from a distance, holding over you a threat of punishment, you might find yourself withdrawing from this God, hiding from this God. If, however, you understand God as seen through Jesus of Nazareth - a God of love, a God of faithfulness, a God near to us, present within us, present among us, and present through us - if you envision God this way you can say, 'Take me God, use me; I put my trust in you.'

That's all God wants from us, to put our trust in him, to live our lives in his presence, and in the presence of each other in the community of faith. Have you not known? Have you not heard? God is fully capable of loving and caring for you, for all of your needs, for all of your life. We simply have to open our hearts to this God in faith. Amen.