

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 7, 2021
 “Have You Not Heard?” (Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39)

Have you ever had one of those days when nothing seems to go right? A day where from beginning to end, everything seems to be against you? Perhaps you have an early morning meeting, and you oversleep. You jump in the shower to find there is no hot water. Chilled and dressing frantically, you discover a stain on your shirt and have to change. You grab a cup of coffee on the way out the door, only to discover it is filled with coffee grounds. A mile or two down the road, you realize you have forgotten your phone and have to return home to retrieve it. Thinking you’re finally on your way, your fuel light comes on and you must stop for gas.

Ever had a day like that? A day when every stoplight is red and every task is a drudgery? And on top of that, your arthritis or allergies choose that day to flare up? I imagine we’ve all had days like that. It’s part of our human frailty. Even the best of Christians can have one of those days. But sometimes one of those days spills over into the next day. Soon we are having one of those weeks, or one of those months, or even one of those years. When that happens, there seems to be no relief. We wonder if there is a light at the end of this long dark tunnel, and praying that it’s not a train. At times like these, it’s easy to lose hope.

Israel had had one of those days. In fact, they’d had several of those generations. They had become morally corrupt and idolatrous. They had begun to trust in themselves, in their own strength and knowledge. So God allowed them to be conquered by the Babylonians and taken into captivity. There they were, exiled to a strange land, separated from their home, their temple, and seemingly, their God. There seemed to be no end to the long, dark tunnel their nation was in and they were beginning to lose all hope.

That’s when God sent the prophet Isaiah with a message. You can almost hear a tone of exasperation recorded in God’s word from today’s text: *Have you not heard... after all these years, after all these generations, after all I have done? Have you not heard that the Lord your God, who is unique and who created all things, will continue to abide with you through all things? Have you not yet heard and do you not yet understand, that I will help you now and always? Your God is One of power and might who does not grow weary. He observes the earth from such a lofty perspective that people look like grasshoppers. And God has the power to wipe out people, just like a child who steps on an insect. God is also able to bless his people beyond belief. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even though you feel abandoned now, if you wait for the Lord, he will strengthen you and give you wings just like eagles. You will run this long race and never grow weary.*

This is a call to a people living in bondage to take heart. It is a call to remember who God is and how God has helped them in the past. It is a call to wait upon the Lord, to listen to God as well as speak to God, so God can raise them up; so God can restore them to health and wholeness; so God can unfold his plan for them – a plan in which their freedom is to be restored, their nation rebuilt, and their cup of suffering replaced with the cup of eternal joy. This message is designed to help the children of Israel and us see that no matter how great the problem seems, no matter how bad the day has been, it is nothing when compared to the incomparable God who is enthroned beyond the stars and galaxies and who knows the place and purpose of each.

Even though our great and awesome God is beyond comparison, that great and awesome God still takes notice of us. We are just a speck in this vast universe – just one among eight billion people on the third planet orbiting a star we call the sun in the Milky Way Galaxy among thousands of other galaxies. Yet God knows each of us intimately. Have you not heard that this awesome God – who created all things and is capable of all things – wants us to bring our troubles and worries to him, trusting him to strengthen us and help us so that our hope might be restored?

But the problem so often is us. We stand between God and our troubles, with our backs to God and our focus on our troubles. When we do this we completely lose sight of God's ongoing intimacy with us and his continuing power in our lives. We fail to see the forest of God's love for the trees of all our difficulties. So God calls us to put things in perspective, to remember that God is greater than any of our problems and can handle them easily. All we need to do is give them to him and trust him to act in his way and time to bring us through them.

Isaiah tells us to remember all that God has done and to trust him with every moment of our lives. For when we do, our lives will soar as if on eagle's wings. But often we would rather spend our time trusting in ourselves or looking for something else to bring fulfillment to our lives. *If my hair was a different color, I might be happier. If I had someone to love me, life would be more meaningful. If I weren't in this relationship I would have the freedom to enjoy the things I like. If I could only find a new job I would be content. If I weren't so far in debt I could sleep much better at night. If my spouse respected me more, our marriage would be so much better.*

You see, when we focus on our problems or what we feel is missing in our lives, that gives us nothing but feelings of longing which lead us to hopelessness. But when we focus on the greatness of God, we'll find that peace, contentment, and hope can be ours in any situation we might find ourselves. We may even come to recognize that where we are is where we need to be for our own growth.

In our gospel text, it is the Sabbath day and Jesus has just left the synagogue where his teaching has left the people astonished. He then heals Peter's mother-in-law and, later in the day, others who are brought to him. Early the next morning, he goes out to a deserted place to pray, where he is found by the disciples. This short text provides us a number of themes to explore, but I want us to consider a couple of questions about a pattern of behavior Jesus exhibited.

Why did Jesus go to the synagogue week in and week out? Why did he continually take some time away from his teaching and healing ministry to go to a quiet place and pray? Why did he withdraw from his disciples and the crowds to go up on the mountains or into garden groves to wait upon God?

May I suggest that he did this because that is what helped him stay focused on his mission? May I suggest that he did this because this is what gave him strength? May I suggest that he did this because, without doing it, he could not have accomplished all he did? May I also suggest that if it was important to Jesus to come to his heavenly Father in worship, prayer, and time alone, that it is even more important for us.

Have you not heard that God has a purpose for us? That he promises to redeem us? That he promises to raise us up? Have you not heard that when we place our hope in those promises, when we feed ourselves with God's word and sacrament, when we speak to God and allow God to speak to us, God moves in to do what we can't do on our own? God moves in to give us the strength we need today and the peace that lasts forever.

Recall with me the first verse and chorus of Psalm 91, which is the hymn that will be sung next:

You who dwell in the shelter of our God,
who abide in his shadow for life;
say to the Lord, "my refuge,
my Rock in whom I trust."
And I will raise you up on eagle's wings...
bear you on the breath of dawn,
make you to shine like the sun,
and hold you in the palm of my hand.

My friends, the key to living in peace and hope is to know in the most intimate sense that God who made heaven and earth and gave a name to every living thing will - if we wait patiently - give us also wings like eagles and cause us to run the race and never grow weary. Have you not heard? Our only hope is in the Lord.