

“Who Cares? God Cares!” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
February 4, 2018 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Isaiah 40:21-31

Let us pray together: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

Good morning! You are about to experience time travel – in your imagination. I'd like for each of us to imagine what it must have been like for the Hebrew people who were hearing this scripture from Isaiah.

Our time machine has taken us back to the time when the Hebrew people were in exile in Babylon. We are living in Babylon because of the Babylonian policy to move the powerful, the elite out of a country they conquered to weaken that country. You are 100 miles away from what was once your home. You know that God's temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed. You no longer have a king. Jerusalem's walls have been destroyed and wild animals roam the streets. You know that many of your family and friends are dead or missing. In short, everything you once held dear is now destroyed.

Psalm 137 expresses your emotions: **By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?**

You are in despair and discouraged. There's little joy in your life. You wonder if God has deserted you and forgotten God's promise to watch over Israel. God was supposed to guard and protect Israel. What happened? Where is God? You wonder if the gods of the Babylonians are more powerful than the one God you worship.

Got the picture?

Now, let's go forward in our time travel. Imagine you are now living in Russia. The Russians managed to gain control of the computer systems in the USA. Not a single shot was fired or bomb exploded. America was conquered by the Russians through cyber warfare. The Russians were quite aware of the independent spirit of the American people. To prevent a violent revolt, they moved the powerful, the elite from their homes in America to Russia where they could be better watched and monitored.

You are now several thousand miles from your home. You are separated from your family and friends. You can't help but believe the American dream is dead. You are in despair and discouraged. There's little joy in your life living in Siberia, a frozen, foreign land. You wonder if God has deserted the USA. What happened to 'one nation under God.'

Do you relate to either one of these scenarios? It's hard for us to understand how the Hebrew people may have been questioning if their God was as powerful as the gods of the Babylonians. It may not be as difficult to imagine that God had deserted the USA, because many people in our present time believe that God has blessed American but

will eventually withdraw that blessing just as God did to the Hebrew people when God allowed the Babylonians conquer them.

The point of these two illustrations is to help us understand what it may be like to feel deserted by God. The Hebrew people were living in despair and discouraged. Likewise, if I were moved to Russia against my will, I, too, would be living in despair and be discouraged.

Our scripture reading from Isaiah addresses those who are discouraged, who feel that God has deserted them. You who are in this imagined time travel, do these verses comfort you?

Let's look more closely at what Isaiah says. Not only does Isaiah address the Hebrew people with good news that applied in their day, but I also believe we need God's comforting words today whether we're concerned about the world situation or life's everyday problems. God's promise is there as we face the unexplainable violence in our world today and as we face our personal problems. So, let's look at Isaiah's words.

At the beginning of Isaiah chapter 40, God through Isaiah announces forgiveness to the Hebrew people. 40:2 - **Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for . . .** (NIV)

The Hebrew people did remember that God had warned them through the prophets that God would bring judgement on them for their injustices and idolatries, for neglecting to trust in God alone. They didn't expect such harsh punishment. But now, God is telling them they are forgiven. Yet, the question is still in the conquered Hebrew peoples' minds that perhaps God is not as powerful as the Babylonian idols.

Isaiah 40:21-23

21 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?

**22 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;**

**23 who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.**

God is the God who created the earth. God is the God who sits above the earth and looks down on its inhabitants. God is the God who allows rulers to rule and brings rulers down to nothing.

The Hebrew people knew this from their history, but it was so easy to forget in their present circumstance. What about you? Do you believe that God is the God who allows rulers to rule and brings rulers down to nothing?

Isaiah 40:25-26

**25 To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.**

26 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.**

God is the God who created the vast universe we see each night; the stars that go on further than we can imagine. And God numbers each one of the stars! Amazing! God is beyond our imagination. God is unfathomable. God is strong and in control. The Hebrew people needed to realize that the idols of the Babylonians were made from wood that the one true God created.

Isaiah 40:28

**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.**

Israel had complained that God had abandoned them. Isaiah is explaining that such a powerful, mighty God knows and cares about the Hebrew people, just as God knows and cares for each of us. If God can create the universe, can make the stars in the sky, is stronger than any ruler or nation, then God will at some point act on Israel's behalf AND on our behalf. God does not grow faint or weary, nor does he allow those who trust and hope in him to be faint or weary. We will not stumble or fall but will be strengthened.

Isaiah 40:29-31

**29 He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
30 Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
31 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.**

There is a condition in these words isn't there? We started our worship service with a song about waiting in the Lord. **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 does it mean to wait for the Lord?

When you think of waiting you probably think about waiting in line. Waiting for most of us is a passive experience, something we have no control over. Waiting can be and usually is, rather exasperating.

But the Hebrew verb for waiting used in this scripture from Isaiah means eagerly waiting, expecting, longing for, hoping for, expecting. As we wait for the Lord, we are

active, we are involved in our waiting. Our waiting is not passive. Though things may not be as we would like, we place our confidence in God and take one step after another moving forward.

You may not have related to the time travel scenarios I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. They may have been a bit too farfetched, beyond your imagination. But one thing you don't have to imagine is that no matter where you are in life - if you're in ancient Israel or in cold Russia or in a difficult situation today - God is there for you. We simply need to wait on the Lord. We need to place our faith, our confidence, in God.

Sometimes we like to cling to our despair or denial when overcome by our problems and issues. But, as you know, that doesn't help. We simply need to discard old ways that don't work any longer as the Hebrew people had to do and think about our situation in a new way.

During World War II, the RAF lost a lot of planes to German anti-aircraft fire. So, they decided to put armor on the planes. But where to put the armor? The obvious answer was to look at planes that returned from missions, count up all the bullet holes in various places, and then put extra armor in the areas that attracted the most fire.

Obvious, but wrong. As Hungarian-born mathematician Abraham Wald explained at the time, if a plane makes it back safely even though it has, say, a bunch of bullet holes in its wings, it means that bullet holes in the wings aren't very dangerous. What you really want to do is armor the areas that, on average, don't have any bullet holes. Why? Because planes with bullet holes in those places never made it back. That's why you don't see any bullet holes there on the ones that do return.

It's wise to cast off our old thinking and think in new ways. What are the thoughts that are non-productive that you keep thinking, that are limiting your faith and trust in God? What is it that's keeping you from trusting and hoping in God? Look at your situation from a new perspective and you'll be surprised what you'll find. Believe these words from Isaiah. Then, you'll find God there waiting for you to rest in the palm of God's big saving hands.

These verses from Isaiah tell us, and the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus confirms, that God knows all, creates all, controls all, and plans all but also loves us. We are not insignificant creatures in God's creation. God tells us how precious we are in God's sight. We can trust God.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? If we listen, if we hear, we will truly understand that our trust is in God alone rather than powerful humans or false gods. God forgives and gives us strength to carry on. The God who created us is strong enough to bring us back home, to restore us.

Let me close with another verse from this chapter in Isaiah 40:11. You may find these reassuring words similar to that comforting Psalm 23. **He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.** (NIV)

Yes, God cares for you. God will take care of you. Let's sing the first verse of the hymn by that title. The words are on the screen.