

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, September 17, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid

Three Meditations on Isaiah 40

First Meditation: Comfort, O comfort – Isaiah 40:1-11

Isaiah wrote hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Isaiah 40 is one of the great chapters in Scripture, one of the great chapters in all of the world's religious writings. Its words are at once practical and poetic, realistic and idealistic. They flow and soar and comfort and inspire and challenge and unsettle. They take us from the troubles and tribulations of this life, and project us into the joys and richness of life in God's realm.

Isaiah 40:1-5 seem to predict a time of peace, a time of comfort for God's people, a time when the present hard times will end. There will be a highway for God through the desert. Valleys will be lifted up, mountains and hills will be made low, uneven ground will be levelled, rough places will be smoothed out - again with the wilderness. It will be a time when God's glory will be revealed for all people to see. Sounds like a truly peaceful time.

Then the mood changes. Moving straight from that peaceful, and therefore hopeful and joyful, prophecy, Isaiah turns serious, even sombre. The voice crying in the wilderness is told what to cry, and it's not an encouraging message. People are grass. Human constancy is like the flower of the field. Grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it. People are no better than grass. Then to make sure that his audience has heard him right, Isaiah says it again: grass withers, the flower fades.

Is that really a message of peace? Actually, yes, it is. Because he is not talking about just human weakness, vulnerability, and mortality. He is talking about God. *And the word of our God will stand for ever* Isaiah 40:8. Then the mood switches again, back to the stuff of peace: *Here is your God!* Isaiah 40:9. God is coming with might, God's strong arm rules, preceded by recompense and bringing reward.

And this God who is coming with might to rule is less like a conquering hero than a shepherd. God will feed God's flock, lambs will be gathered in

God's arms and carried in God's bosom, the mother sheep will be gently led. You can't get much more peaceful than that pastoral image.

Second Meditation: Above the circle of the earth – Isaiah 40:12-20

Matthew Henry was born in Wales in 1662 but lived most of his life in England. His father, Philip, was a Church of England cleric, but just about the time Matthew was born, he was ejected from the Church of England for refusing to adopt the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Matthew began legal studies but gave them up to study theology, and in 1687 became minister of the first of three Presbyterian congregations that he served. He died in 1714. He published his Complete Commentary of the Bible in 1798. It is an exhaustive verse by verse study of the Bible, and is a product of both its time and the author's theology. For that reason, it can seem dated to today's readers, but there is a charm to the language he uses and a depth to the way he expresses his faith. This is what he says about Isaiah 40:12-20.

All created beings shrink to nothing in comparison with the Creator. When the Lord, by his Spirit, made the world, none directed his Spirit, or gave advice what to do, or how to do it. The nations, in comparison of him, are as a drop which remains in the bucket, compared with the vast ocean; or as the small dust in the balance, which does not turn it, compared with all the earth. This magnifies God's love to the world, that, though it is of such small account and value with him, yet, for the redemption of it, he gave his only-begotten Son, Joh 3:16. The services of the church can make no addition to him. Our souls must have perished for ever, if the only Son of the Father had not given himself for us.

Third Meditation: Have you not known? – Isaiah 40:21-31

In his commentary in Feasting on the Word, William Carl, Professor of Homiletics at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, says that this section of Isaiah 40 deals with theological amnesia. The people of Israel have forgotten who they are, and who and what their God is. The passage dates from the time when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. The nation has been conquered, the Temple has been destroyed, the people have been carried off into slavery. Now they can only sit by the rivers of Babylon and weep for

what they have lost. They are weak, faint, powerless, exhausted. They voice their lament in verse 27: *'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God.'*

In answer to this, Isaiah reminds them of what they have known and heard and been told from the very beginning, from the foundations of the earth: that God, the Creator of the world and the Ruler of human history, is greater than whatever they are going through right then. In fact, God is so much greater than whatever they are going through right then, that it is as if God sits far above it all, far above the circle of the earth. And from God's viewpoint far above it all, the inhabitants of the earth are like grasshoppers.

By God's mighty power, God brought out the host of stars, and numbered them, and gave them each their name. To God, the heavens are no more than a curtain, or a tent to live in.

And before such a God, the princes of the world are naught, the rulers of the earth are nothing. It takes only a breath from God and no matter how firmly the princes and rulers seem to be planted on the earth, *they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble* Isaiah 40:24.

To the people of Israel, enslaved by a powerful enemy and helpless to do anything to save themselves, Isaiah's words bring a message of hope in a time of desperation, of reassurance in a time of despair. Whatever they may be going through then and there, God was still God, Creator of the world and Ruler of human history.

But it doesn't end there. Verses 28-31 move things from the level of God up there, God out there, to God right here. The God who is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, is the God who never grows faint or weary or exhausted the way we humans do. The God who can bring down princes and rulers simply with a breath is the God who gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. And those who wait for the LORD will have their strength renewed, enabling them to soar, to run and to walk tirelessly.

I chose Isaiah 40 as our text for today because it is one of my favourite passages in Scripture. It is also a passage for New St James to ponder. Where will you find what you need to move forward in faith? What will

dictate your mood, your disposition, your frame of mind as you prepare for what lies ahead? What will inspire and motivate and encourage you when you feel weak, faint, powerless, exhausted?

Listen again to what the poet/preacher/prophet Isaiah said to the people of Israel, and through them, to you and me:

²⁷ *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'?*

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.*

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.*