

February 7, 2021
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

Let's start with observing this morning. Observing the beauty of the texts we have just read. What did you hear? What spoke to you?

We started our bible study this past Thursday with this same exercise of observation. What unfolded was a beautiful inquiry into the heart of text, a search for the Holy Spirit, a curiosity towards grace. And, so this morning, I want to walk you through my own process of observation for our texts for today and I invite you to do the same after the service today.

Needless to say, this sermon will be a little different. I might call it a workshop in biblical imagination. As we imagine, there will be no specific structure to follow. What I invite you into is a process of simply allowing the Holy Spirit to speak through the texts and for you to listen to what you hear. Make connections and allow those connections to bring new meaning to how God is reaching out to you.

I think you might be surprised at what you discover. Let's get started.

I can't think of a better text to use for this exercise than our text from Isaiah. It's one of my favorites and offers an incredible depth of sacredness in the everyday moments of who we are.

Now, for me, the very first thing I noticed when I read Isaiah is that God pays attention to grasshoppers. In God's great, vast existence, God takes time to look and to see and to feel the things at the heart of creation...even the smallest among us.

*²¹Have 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?*

*²²It 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;*

The one true God, our God, who sits above this earth, encircles it, molds it, and loves it...sees you and sees me, sees the grasshopper. As I sit with this knowledge, the two words that come up in my imagination are greatness and gentleness. The God of grand, creative actions, who doesn't grow tired or weary, the God who can do all things, sees all things and knows all things has a deep desire to be among us. Even the smallest, seemingly insignificant being matters to God. We are known and we are cared for.

The next thing I noticed was this...the image of the grasshopper kept nagging at me...in a good way. Maybe because I loved catching grasshoppers as a child. I would sit in the grass during summer afternoons and watch them move about and at times I would notice that they would look back at me, calmly and mindfully. I craved that moment of connection. This small insect sitting in my hand, feeling the warmth of the sun and the blades of grass. Together. The greatness of nature and the gentleness of the moment.

And I remember something I once read from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard. She writes:

"...Last September I was walking across a gravel path in full sunlight, when I nearly stepped on a grasshopper. I poked its leg with a twig to see it hop, but no hop came. So I crouched down low on my hands and knees, and sure enough, her swollen ovipositor was sunk into the gravel. She was pulsing faintly...and her right antenna was broken off near the base. She'd been around. I thought of her in the Lucas meadow, too, where so many grasshoppers leaped about me. One of those was very conspicuously lacking one of its big, springlike hind legs – a grass-lunger. It seemed to move fairly well from here to there, but then of course I didn't know where it had been aiming."

The story of the grass-lunger makes God's gentleness all the more personal. That broken, tired, yet determined little grasshopper trying to get somewhere that we can't quite see. But, he's trying so hard. In the moment he was seen.

And, that moment of being seen takes me back to Isaiah. Because that's just the kind of God we are presented with in our text. The God that is so great and yet so gentle and is able to notice our faithful effort. The grit of the grass-lunger. The tiredness and the determination. The greatness and the gentleness of God, seeing our humanness and loving it.

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.*

In my process of observation, I let my mind spend time with these reassuring words. From out of whatever brokenness I may experience, whatever injury I may have incurred, whatever hurt or harm I may have encountered, Isaiah so beautifully points directly at the grass-lunger in my heart and says, it will be OK. God has enough strength and enough power to renew whatever part of me that suffers. God isn't just some all mighty God up there. God is a merciful, compassionate God who lifts me up when I can't go any further on my own.

And so, I close my eyes and envision the eagles' wings lifting me up. I hear the song in my mind that I have sung countless times in the church pews and around camp fires...

*And He will raise you up on eagles' wings
Bear you on the breath of dawn
Make you to shine like the sun
And hold you in the palm of His hand*

I spend time just allowing the words of the song to sit within my heart. I breathe and allow God to be with me.

As I sit with this scripture, I settle on these words...Greatness and gentleness. Strength and renewal. Love and security. Healing and hope. I feel gratitude for the God who knows me.

Now...What do you observe? What words speak to your heart? What images come to your mind? Being with holy scripture doesn't take any special skills or advanced degrees. At times, it just takes an open heart and a willingness to abide with God. That's the greatness and the gentleness made manifest in our souls.

Let me close with this final passage from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

"I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating, too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty beats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them, under the wind-rent clouds, upstream and down."

And then we sing once more in gratitude...

*And He will raise you up on eagles' wings
Bear you on the breath of dawn
Make you to shine like the sun
And hold you in the palm of His hand*

Thanks be to God. Amen.