

“Do you not know, have you not heard?...The Lord is the everlasting God: he created all the world... Israel, why then do you complain that the Lord doesn't know your troubles or care if you suffer injustice?” (Isaiah 40: 21, 27-28)

Back in 1999 a horrible crime took place in northern India. A deranged man, believing that Christian missionaries were a threat to Hinduism, set fire to a jeep carrying a man and his two sons. The man was a missionary from Australia--a medical missionary. His work in India consisted not in trying to convert people to Christianity, but in living out his beliefs by running a hospital for poor people with leprosy. Most people in India were as horrified by this crime as anyone else, and it was the Hindu people who finally tracked the killer down and arrested him.

But what was truly amazing was the response of the man's widow, the mother of the two boys who were killed. She had every right to be bitter, to leave India in righteous indignation. But that is not the path that she choose. Instead she decided to remain at the Leprosy hospital and to continue to offer the care and compassion that had been their intent when they came. She continued to live out her commitment in spite of the brutality that had devastated her. Those who heard about this marveled, wondering how she could continue working there and how she had such strength. (from *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 2000)

Several years later the woman was interviewed for an Australian newspaper and the reporter asked her those questions--how were you able to stay there after such a tragedy? The woman replied, “I had lost my family and I had a very difficult decision to make. I could either give up on the mission, return to Australia, and carry that resentment and bitterness for the rest of my life, or I could look at a bigger picture and see that continuing to do good in the face of evil was the only way I could overcome my anger and grief and transform something evil into something good. It was not an easy thing to do, but it was the right thing to do.” (from wwe)

Psalms (Psalm 1) and Jeremiah (Jer 17) use the image of a tree whose roots go deep into the ground, planted by a stream. And in time of drought the tree is able to continue to be nourished by the waters that lie far below the surface of the earth. This imagery speaks to the person who puts their faith and trust in God, whose roots of faith reach down deep to a place where they can be nourished by God even when life is harsh. The tree --in some sense, in some way--knows that at times in life a drought might come--but it knows also that roots that go down deep can find the substance of life that will allow it to endure and to grow stronger.

The prophet Isaiah had a tough assignment. The people were in despair as they found themselves in exile in Babylon. They had hoped that God would save them from the Babylonians, but instead they had been overpowered and sent to a foreign land... Their temple had been destroyed in Jerusalem, and much of the city itself reduced to shambles. The temple had been their symbol of God's promises, God's claim on them as the Chosen people. Now they were desolate. In the passage we heard today, Isaiah proclaimed God's power to restore these devastated people. Isaiah declared that the One who created the universe and all that we can know in it has the power to give them hope and strength. In the midst of their captivity, their

despair, their hopelessness, God was their source of strength and hope.

No doubt there were many who felt cheated by what had happened in their life--their ancestors had lived powerfully and with prosperity, but they were now living as captives, victims of a foreign--conquering--power. Was it possible to continue to have faith in God in spite of such an earth-shattering disappointment? For those whose faith ran deep it was--they found reason to have hope, they found a source of strength. They knew that their lives and their present suffering, was only a small part of a much larger picture in which their lives were significant and shaped the future.

Life can be tough. Just this week we have seen an SUV in a wreck with a Metro North train, an airliner that crashed just after taking off, another hacking – this time Anthem’s very personal information on millions of people, and more retaliatory bombings on ISIS after a young pilot was burned alive. All these crises have us asking: How big is God? Is God looking at the same picture we see in this world, where the kingdom Jesus talked about seems very hard to discern and the scary stuff all too evident?

Our personal lives also force questions. If my tests show cancer, or I lose my job, or the loved one I prayed for dies, does this mean that God has turned his back on me? If a relationship I cherished dies, was God not powerful enough to help? If I make a really bad decision in my life, can God really still love me?

Isaiah’s message jumps into our questions with a jolt: God is great and human beings are like ants or grasshoppers, insignificant in comparison. How can we question God’s ways?

But we do. We frequently compare God to ourselves. If *I* were God, I would... But wait: What *would* we do differently? No more cancer? No more pain? No more death? But without death, would life itself have value? Without pain, would we learn to appreciate the ways we are able to reach out in love? If nobody died, would anybody learn the truth of the Resurrection and new life Jesus came to give us? Would we ever realize our need of God? Or would we be complacent, self-satisfied, and basically empty, thinking we could see the whole picture? Only God can see the larger picture.

There in exile in Babylon, Isaiah promised the people who trusted God that they would mount up like eagles as God renewed their strength. In Jesus’ day, Jesus healed those who had great needs, but healing of diseases was not his main objective. His objective was to get folks to see that the Creator also cares about how the little things are lived out: love your neighbor as yourself...there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for the sake of another... In as much as you gave food or clothing or shelter to one of the least, you did it for me. (Matt 25)... God wants us to risk giving up pursuit of things which give us no life in order to trust God.... “Your heavenly father knows what you need...”

Jesus Calling, for Feb 5, has this counsel, as though from Jesus to each of us: “Seek my Face, and you will find not only My Presence but also My Peace. To receive My Peace, you must change your grasping, controlling stance to one of openness and trust. The only thing you can grasp without damaging your soul is My hand.” (*Jesus Calling*, by Sarah Young)

As human beings, we cannot see the whole picture, and what we DO see may be overwhelming or discouraging. Sometimes we may feel as though we are totally cut off from God. If so, the word given through Isaiah so long ago is today the Word God offers *us*: “Do you not know, have you not heard? God is big enough for whatever threatens to undo you in your life. God is big enough for any tough time.”

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus had been healing people and preaching in the synagogue and was having a great start to his ministry. People were flocking to him. And it would have been easy to be carried away by that fame and admiration. Most of us would be. That is why Jesus woke up before the sun rose and found a quiet place to go and pray by himself, he needed to nurture his faith. If he needed to, then the rest of us do as well.

We do not see the long-range picture of our world or of our lives. We cannot see the scope of God’s understanding, purposes, or love. We gain perspective and vision and understanding as we pray, as we ask God to help us understand what we cannot figure out or manage ourselves.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, whose young son died several years ago of the disease Progeria, which causes children to rapidly move into feeble old age, and who wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, gave a pretty good summary when he wrote the following: “No one ever promised us a life free from pain and disappointment. The most anyone promised us was that we would not be alone in our pain, and that we would be able to draw upon a source outside ourselves for the strength and courage we would need to survive life’s tragedies and unfairness.”

One of the ways that we develop the strength to endure the valleys of life is by walking with God over the mountain tops, in the good times of our lives. When we realize the presence of God in times of light, then we will be more able to see God in life’s dark times.

Writer/theologian Frederick Buechner was lecturing on the miracles of Christ when someone asked him to give an example of a miracle. After a pause, Buechner responded; “There is only one miracle, and it is life. Have you wept at anything during the past year? Has your heart beat faster at the sight of beauty? Have you thought seriously about the fact that some day you are going to die? Do you really listen when another person is speaking to you rather than just waiting for your turn to speak? Is there anybody you know in whose place you would go so that you--and not they--would suffer great pain? If you answer ‘no’ to these questions, then chances are that you are (pretty much) dead already, for you are missing that great miracle—which is life itself.” (*Wishful Thinking*)

Jesus found life--in abundance--by laying down his life for others; and we are invited to do the same, knowing that in trying to hold tightly to our life we will lose it, but in giving up our life we will find it. May the God of all life be our source of joy and hope and salvation as we dare to let the one thing we hold onto tightly in this life be the hand of our Lord. Amen.