



THE EAGLE'S NEST

Sermon Series: **Better Together: 40 Days of Community**

Sunday, October 14, 2007
Worshiping Together

Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert
Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 40:12-31

Years ago – back in my high school and college days – I did quite a bit of backpacking in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California. One of the high points for me was being part of a three-week mountaineering course called “Summit Expedition.” It was like “Outward Bound”, but had a Christian emphasis.

I remember on that course one trail in particular. It was a trail that involved many switch-backs but which in the end brought us to the top of a high ridge with a sheer drop-off. The cliff was sheer-faced and you stood peering out over the edge at a drop-off of quarter-mile or perhaps more. Well, I stood there on the edge looking out and down and I felt like

an eagle perched up high in its nest. There was this urge to just jump off the face and fly! – Fly like an eagle!

Have you ever had that kind of experience? – Stood out high on a cliff’s edge? There’s no feeling quite like knowing that with one slip, the next stop is a quarter mile down or a half mile down or even a mile down! The tingle you get through your body is unbelievable! It’s an incredible combination of terror and wonder, -- knowing that with one slip you may lose your life, but at the same time you’re beholding a grandeur so overwhelming that if you can speak at all it’s only in a whisper.

I'm sure you've had moments that literally stole your breath away. Maybe it was looking out at first light over the serene stillness of a beautiful lake like Lake Louise in British Columbia, or peering over the rim of the Grand Canyon at sunset, or looking up far away from city lights on a perfectly clear night at the Milky Way, or then again, maybe it was witnessing the birth of a child. A moment which you can only describe as one of reverent awe.

Well, our scripture text this morning could be called one of the great "shock and awe" passages of the Old Testament. It witnesses magnificently to the majesty of God. Our reading is from the 40th chapter of the Book of Isaiah, beginning at the 12th verse. You will find it on page 517 in the Bible we've made available to you. Listen for God's Word to you:

¹²Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? ¹³Who has directed the spirit of the LORD, or as his counselor has instructed him? ¹⁴Whom did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice? Who taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? ¹⁵Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales; see, he takes up the isles like fine dust. ¹⁶Lebanon would not provide fuel enough, nor are its animals enough for a burnt-offering. ¹⁷All the nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.

¹⁸To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? ¹⁹An idol? —A workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains. ²⁰As a gift one chooses mulberry wood —wood that will not rot— then seeks out a skilled artisan to set up an image that will not topple. 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; ²³who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. ²⁴Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

²⁵To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. ²⁶Lift 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.

²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God'? ²⁸Have 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. ²⁹He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. ³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; ³¹but

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.

Those are moving words, aren't they? --- inspiringly beautiful, and poetic. But what have they really to do with us? Why should we care about these ancient words, penned some 3,000 years ago in Jerusalem by an Old Testament prophet named Isaiah?

Well, do you ever feel like God has forgotten you? – Or, that if he hasn't exactly forgotten you, -- then at least he's not exactly performing on all cylinders in your life – that he's under-achieving?

If you've felt that way – and I think we all do at times – then you can relate to Isaiah's message here in our text this morning. Isaiah is writing here to people undergoing an emotional meltdown. Displaced from their homes, exiled to a far country – the country of Babylon, -- the people of Israel are humiliated and demoralized. They are hearing from their Babylonian captors that not only are they nothing, but that their God is nothing. Their captors tell them that otherwise why would they be sweeping the streets and emptying the trash of the Babylonians? What good is a God who can't deliver you from bondage? Why not join us in worshipping the true gods of the Babylonians?"

Isaiah writes as the people are teetering on the brink of caving in and giving up. Oh, they remember God telling them they were appointed to be a light to the nations --- so why then are they living in such darkness? Why cling to the illusion that they are God's chosen people,

God's special people? Why not just give up? Why hold on? Why keep suffering like this?

Being a Christian is hard, isn't it? At least it was the last time I checked. We face temptations at work, at school to "go along to get along," and sometimes we wonder whether holding the line, holding to what Christ would have us do, really is all that it's cracked up to be. We doubt and discouragement sets in.

Now, I find it interesting that Isaiah doesn't play the guilt card here. He doesn't say to the people here, "Shame on you for doubting God." Nor does he do the positive thinking thing, "Things aren't really as bad as you think."

No, what's his prescription? It isn't drugs or alcohol or a long vacation or a shopping spree or time at a day spa or eighteen holes of golf or even take two aspirins and call me in the morning. No. His prescription for the people's discouragement is a *good shot of God's majesty*. You need to rise early and go to worship.

You need – he says in verse 12 -- the God who cups all the world's ocean in the palm of one hand. I love the fact that Isaiah doesn't say two hands. In one hand, God holds the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian and Artic Oceans. With his other hand he's twirling the stars or answering the prayers of five year olds.

This is the majesty of God.

I read about a family driving in their car on their annual family summer vacation. To pass the time they'd been singing songs they'd learned in church, when suddenly the youngest daughter shouted,

“I want to sing “Dumb Power.” They all looked at her and said, “What is dumb power?” She said, “You know, it goes, ‘Our God is an awesome God, he reigns from heaven above, with wis-dom power and love...’”¹

The raw power of God is evident in nature. Our God holds the seas *in the hollow of his hand.*” And indeed it is good, it is beneficial to look around at nature in all its beauty and complexity – (the regularity of the seas tides and the grace of the changing seasons and everything in between) and reflect on the One who created it all and who holds it all together.

And yet, how are we to understand God’s ways with us? That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it? God may hold the oceans in one hand and the stars in the other, but how is he holding our lives? How are we to understand his ways with us? Indeed, how *can* we understand?

Well, frankly we can’t. That’s what Isaiah goes on to say here. From the majesty of God Isaiah moves directly to the psychology of God. Verse 13: ¹³*Who has directed the spirit of the LORD,*” Another translation puts it, “*Who has understood the mind of the LORD?*” In Job it says God does things that are “past finding out.” His knowledge of our situations is much wider and deeper than our minds can comprehend.

Someone has likened it to waking up – and without realizing it – your nose is pressed right up against the great painting, *The Last Supper* by Leonardo

DaVinci. -- All you can see being from the perspective of what appears an inch or two in front of your eyes.

Would it be fair to say that you would have a limited and distorted view of Leonardo’s masterpiece? Here you are right in front of *The Last Supper* and staring only at Judas’ toenail. The painting is magnificent, monumental in size, perfectly balanced, coherent, and exquisite in detail – a work of genius – but you wouldn’t know that. What you would see would like a smudge or a fuzzy scribble.

Friends, that is a perfect picture of how we live our lives every day. Every day we see life as a mini-slice of God’s magnificent, overall plan of the ages, which one day will be unveiled at the coming of Christ, and grace and truth will triumph in the end. This is our faith. That he shall wipe the tears from our eyes and we shall sit with him in the heavenlies at the true last supper – the marriage supper of the Lamb – where we sill him face to face!

But in the meantime we wonder, “What are you up to God?” “Why do things have to be as they are?” I asked that question this past week when I read a newspaper article about the sex trade of children not in Bangkok, Thailand (where it’s been going on for some time), but here in America in places like Atlanta and Philadelphia and Chicago. Maybe it even happens here in Youngstown for all we know.

Does God care? Will God come down and work through his people to end this?

Well, that brings us to the matter of God’s supremacy. We’ve touched on the

majesty of God, and the psychology of God, but everything that's been said so far is framed within the larger issue of the supremacy of God. *How do we live in a world like this? How do we keep going?*

What is Isaiah's answer? He doesn't say, "Oh, exile isn't so bad. Whistle a happy tune and think positively. – You know, *“Don't worry. Be happy.”* – No, it's wrong! It's ugly and it's bad. Isaiah doesn't say, "Adapt and be flexible. That's just the way things are." It's wrong!

No, but look at what Isaiah does say in verse 29 – Isaiah's great punch line: ²⁹*He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.* All this awesome power – the power that flung the stars into the heavens and that formed the earth -- God's awesome power --- is available for the taking --- to make a difference! How? Through worship! Look at verse 30: 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.***

Ever watch an eagle in flight? One obvious characteristic of a flying eagle is effortless. They make it look so easy because it is easy. Eagles rise up on forces beyond themselves and they float on thermals above it all. God is saying, I want my people to mount up like eagles, renewing your strength in me the way eagles soar with – with peaceful composure. There are even words to a popular song, "Love lift us up where we belong. Where the eagles fly on a mountain high." Here is where you

belong this morning – where God's eagles fly as we gather to worship him.

But having been eagles together this morning, tomorrow we hit the ground running. *“They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”* “Walk” is the Bible's metaphor for living a life of faithfulness, a life of integrity. We're told to walk in the newness of life, to walk as children of light – or as God might say in the words of his minstrel Johnny Cash – *“because you're mine you walk the line.”* In the face of difficulty, in the face of opposition, in the face of resistance, we don't whine, pine, or decline; we shine as we walk the line!

You say, “If you only knew, preacher. If only you knew...My walk is more like a wobble. I'm not soaring; I'm barely keeping my head above water.”

But friend, every bit of the strength you need is here. Weakness is the perfect preparation for receiving God's strength. Does Isaiah say, “He gives strength to the strong?” No. He gives strength to whom? The weak. The Apostle Paul said it too, “When I am weak; then I am strong.” And you know what he meant by that, don't you? – That in his greatest times of weakness he had discovered a power/strength beyond himself, that came from beyond himself – the strength and power of Christ himself!

Here in worship we tap into his power. Every Sunday, no matter how tired, no matter how depressed, no matter how broke we are financially or materially or emotionally or spiritually -- we come here so that we might spread our wings together and rise up on God's thermal

winds Worship is our eagle's nest on high – our perch from which to look out at the world, and from which we take off and soar!

So spread your wings today, and next Sunday, and the Sunday after that, and the Sunday after that. Spread your wings! Renew your strength! Feel the tingle of God's majesty! And then go out their and soar like an eagle!

Join me in prayer: *Holy and majestic God, we often lose sight of your power. Help us to remember how great and awesome you truly are. Help us to trust, believing that there is nothing we cannot face when you lift us up on eagles' wings. Not opposition, not resistance, not illness or even death itself. Let us know that when we are weak, we are strong in you. For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

¹ Thanks to Vic Pentz.