

Sermon (2/4/18, Isaiah 40: 21-31):

It's not easy to wait even though there seems to be a lot of need for it these days. We wait in traffic, in Doctor's offices, on phones playing annoying music. We wait for tables in restaurants or on lines to order food. We wait for laboratory tests, many times on pins and needles. We wait on check-out lines in stores. We wait for updates on our computers that always seem to come at the most inconvenient of times. The Department of Motor Vehicles is notorious for their waiting queues as are rides at amusement parks, not that the two should be confused or should they?

A week ago Saturday, my wife and I went to the soup stroll in Schenectady. It's an event where numerous restaurants offer small cups of their specialty soup for a \$1. The weather was great which meant the lines were long at each of the venues. Seemed almost a little silly to wait so long for such a little cup of soup but, for a change, we were in no hurry and it just felt good to be outside, so we waited. I mentioned to my wife that at least now we know what it's like to wait on a soup line!

Whether it be in frustration or with superhuman patience, waiting tends to almost always be perceived as a necessary evil, at best, or an abusive waste of time, at worst; a desert place between two points – empty of any and all redeeming value.

The Hebrew people being addressed by today's passage in Isaiah are in a desert place. To one side, they see the home from which they had been cruelly ejected. Long ago, they called it the Promise Land, the land that God had led their ancestors to promising them a flourishing future. With fierce rage, Babylon then swooped in, destroying everything, including their hope. Their homes were gone, their Temple was gone, their community was decimated, their families torn apart, and now many of them had landed in Babylon as Prisoners of War.

They were in a desert place. Their past hope reduced to rubble. Their misty future fraught with few signs of promise. What were they to do? Which way were they to turn? How were they to live? Would this desert place be a time of endless despondency? Or could it be, might it be something else?

Like a lightning bolt searing through the clouds, God speaks. “Have you not heard? Have you not known? Have you not been told from the beginning?”

It’s a call to remembrance. It’s a call meant to shock despondent hearts into a new way of perceiving. Their ancestors had been through this drill before. Just when all things seemed to bottom out. Just when all hope had been evacuated from the room. Just when mortal induced mess seemed to rule not only the day but also the future, God revealed that God had something more up God’s sleeve. It might not have been readily apparent. It might not have been easily perceived but it was there as sure and certain as the dawn.

Today’s passage bears similar overtones of God’s response to Job, inviting the listener to rise-up to a new place of seeing and even remembering.

‘Have you not heard? Have you not known? The Lord is the Creator of the ends of the earth!’

Have no doubt, God is still in charge. Have no doubt that when all is said and done, even the powerful, the seemingly immovable, the heartless princes and rulers of the earth will be brought to naught.

Have you not heard? Have you not known? God’s ways are unsearchable. Try though we might, demand though we will, longingly though we might yearn to see as God sees, God’s understanding is unsearchable. But know this, on this we can count... this God who is powerful will fortify the powerless. This God who does not grow weary will give strength to the weary. This God who does not become faint will lift-up those who have fainted.

I have been listening recently to a song by Andy Gullahorn called ‘Line in the Sand’. Basically, it’s a song about gaining perspective. The author of the song begins by describing how offended he would get as a kid when his Dad would call him by the name of one of his brothers. At the time, he swore he would never do such a callous thing to his children. Lo and behold, he became a Dad and, lo and behold, as you might have guessed, he too often confused his kids names. Perspective is everything.

Eventually the song moves to the story of ‘Jesus drawing a line in the

sand' when a riotous crowd threatened to stone a sinful woman.

'Let he who is without sin, cast the first stone.' Jesus said and one by one, the stones harmlessly dropped from their hands as they walked away. Perspective is everything.

Perspective keeping is also one of the essential roles of Sabbath keeping. It is not meant to just be a time to rest and do nothing, though those things are important too. It is meant to be a time of relationship building with this God whose perspective is very different than our own. This is something that must be done over a long stretch of time just as human relationships require time to form and strengthen. It's not something we can magically download in times of desperation and crisis.

Sabbath keeping is meant to be a time to worship, learn, to be a part of a community that is being challenged and shaped by the hand of God. It is meant to be a time of regaining a sense that even though God's ways are unsearchable, this we can know for certain - the faint will be lifted-up and the weary will be given strength. Sabbath keeping is a discipline of relinquishing our insistence on being in control so that we might learn that God's trustworthy hands can and will guide us to safe places where 'princes will be brought to naught and the rulers of the earth will be brought low'.

It's so easy to get lost in the desert place. It's so easy to perceive the waiting time as simply an unproductive waste.

Yes, our leaders might boldly declare that everything looks peachy and wonderful. They might leave us with the impression that if we only get on board with their plan, success will surely follow. They might fool us into thinking that all things rise and fall upon our own mortal ingenuity and our loyalty to their vision. We might rise-up with cheers of exuberance for a short-time but by the time we sit down again, the disappointment of the same old empty rhetoric settles in. The fallibility of our ways and the shortsightedness of our myopic visions again become apparent.

And, yes, equally so there will be other voices declaring that all is lost, our hopes for this world are fruitless, our efforts to redeem are exercises in futility, our best hope for peace is to escape all that is -

leaving behind this creation to fatally drive itself into its self-made wall. The result is the same. Again, we are thrust into the desert places thinking that we are to just bide our time, waiting for the destruction of all that we know.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth!

The voice of Isaiah calls us to resist – to believe in the one who does not grow faint or weary of creating. To act and do according to the ways of God which we learn in and through our Sabbath keeping. Yes, there are times when we might feel like our efforts are bearing little fruit. Yes, there are times when the numbers we are taught to use to measure success only scream ‘failure’. Yes, there are times when the forces that work against God’s ways of justice, grace, and love seem to have the upper hand. Yes, there are times when the waiting time looks like desert time. Even so, we do, not because we always understand. We do, not because it always makes sense according to our limited perceptions. We do, because God does not give up on us. We do, because God’s ways will prevail even if it means bringing the powerful to naught. We do, because we know that even when we grow weary in our waiting, God will renew our strength like those who mount up with wings like eagles. We will run and not be weary, we will walk and not grow faint. And for that, we declare, with one heart and voice, to God alone be all the glory! Amen.