

The prophet and poet Isaiah writes to a people in exile- an exhausted people for whom hope is shrinking or perhaps a resilient people looking for deliverance and the strength to move into the unknown future. They've been living in the foreign land of Babylon for a while now- having been forced from their home in Jerusalem- where they're hoping soon to return. The psalmist tells us that they wept by the waters of Babylon as they longed for Jerusalem (137:1). Because of their predicament, the Israelites are tempted to think that the Babylonian gods are stronger than the God of Israel or that God has flat out abandoned them. Perhaps another god has their best interests at heart and will sustain them in the future? Let us pray before turning to God's word. **PRAY.** Isaiah 40:25-31. **READ.**

On Thursday morning of this past week, several friends posted pictures via social media of the magnificently breathtaking sunrise. It looked like the sky was on fire with an array of fierce pinks, bold oranges and a hint of soft purple- like a scene out of the movie, Lion King. One friend commented that God was showing out! Another friend wrote that her daughter made her come outside and look up at the sky to see God's incredible handiwork. Who else but God could have done it? With such mastery, God laid out the skies and then set them in motion. Have you ever looked up- day or night- and been lost in their beauty? My friend looked up and poetically captured the beauty of the sunrise- grateful to her daughter for the reminder of her place among all things and God's great attention to detail evidenced in creation.

The poet prophet Isaiah reminds the Israelites to look up and remember who God is and who they are. He speaks to them in the midst of their being tired and

afraid, and he reiterates their thoughts: “Our ways are hidden from the Lord. God is ignoring our predicaments” (v. 27). This is what they claim is their situation. Or is it that they have forgotten who God is and who they are in relation to God?! It is into this hopelessness that Isaiah addresses their concerns with creation imagery...masterfully putting God and humanity into perspective, weaving back and forth between assurances of God’s power and promises of God’s caring watchfulness. Isaiah states a few verses before these that on one hand, God is so big and mighty that the earth’s inhabitants appear like grasshoppers (v. 22). And yet, on the other hand, God is so intimately acquainted with creation that God knows each star in the sky by name and will not forget or lose one of them. Who else could do this?

God is incomparable beyond words or measurement. No one holds a candle to God! Though God is mighty and transcendent, where else in Scripture do we find a description of God’s tender care and attentiveness? God has also numbered the hairs on one’s head, and God knows when even one sparrow falls from the sky (Matthew 10:29-31). Though the people are like grass (Isaiah 40:6) and the nations God can bring to naught (Isaiah 40:23), this does not mean God is indifferent or distant. In fact, God will care for God’s flock like a shepherd, “gathers the lambs in his arms, and carries them in his bosom” (Isaiah 40:11). In other words, Isaiah is not telling these exiles new information. He is reminding them of what they already know because they seem to have forgotten. They’re suffering from amnesia or selective memory. Isaiah rhetorically asks them twice, *Don’t you know? Haven’t you been listening?* Then he tells them...*God doesn’t come and go. God lasts. God is the Creator of all you can see or imagine* (v. 28,

*The Message*, Eugene Peterson). In the face of these reminders, how could they think that God ignores and disregards them? On the contrary, the Lord hears and sees the exiles' plight and does not ignore the justice that is due them. Isaiah, with his rhetorical questions and poetic words, tries to jog the Israelites' memory and also offer encouragement. Just like singing spirituals and hymns to people in memory care will sometimes bring back a flood of memories. "Artful lyric does not instruct so much as it recalls to mind what one already knows deep within one's heart. It is powerful, not because it informs, but because it reawakens one's heart knowledge" (Kyndall Rae Rothaus, Baylor's The Truett Pulpit).

Isaiah recognizes not only the Israelites' fears but also their fatigue. The people are weary. Everything seems scarier and more overwhelming when running on empty. Around the holidays, I hit a wall. I mean...hard. It was a wall of weariness and despair. Everything felt difficult. Every single decision. Every discussion about what people missed- how lonely and isolating it is not to worship together in person. It's the truth, and it's hard. The word "tired" has been used a lot among friends and colleagues. It has been a doozy of a year! Many of us never imagined that almost a year later we'd still be in the midst of a pandemic. I think it's safe to say we all are ready to resume some sense of normalcy- whatever that looks like. And then comes more curveballs- vaccination delays, newly discovered variants and the unknown efficacy of the vaccines on these variants. One thing is for certain though...we will gather safely together once again. I know among the staff here at Triune we've been telling stories of what used to be and what is as well as talking about the future. Many answers for the future are unknown and that can cause lots of fear and anxiety. Coming out of this pandemic, much like

the Israelites return to Jerusalem, many things will have changed. As much as the Israelites reminisce, they cannot go back to those days, they can only move into God's new future. It is the same for us. We often have to remind one another around here that God is the One at the helm and the future is in God's creative and powerful hands. Yes, we're still fulfilling our mission. No, the church isn't closed, and yet we also recognize our grief and sorrow- at the loss of "the way things used to be" or "not being able to do \_\_\_\_\_ right now" or "missing seeing and hugging our community and loved ones" or "the loss of a loved one."

Through it all, we're still a community of faith- beloved children of God. The authentic encounters we've had with God through one another and will continue to have reside not just in our heads but also in our hearts and bodies as well. God is made known to us in our stories. And when we remember our story, we deepen our relationship with God and lean more on God's word.

In another Bible translation (NRSV), Isaiah encourages these worn-out ones to *wait* on the Lord (Isaiah 40:31). I read from another translation that uses the words "hope in" instead of "wait for." The translation really is "to hope; to await in anticipation; to wait." I often find that the word "wait" is the last thing a tired-of-waiting person wants to hear. But maybe wait means to stop trying to control things...quit spinning your wheels and rest for a minute? Maybe wait means to stop trying to power through, remembering that God cares for us despite our limitations? Rest awhile and trust that you are not alone, that help from someone more powerful is on the way. Isn't that what it means to hope in the Lord? To wait...to rest...to trust in God- the One who makes a way out of no way. To trust in the One who is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. The

One whose understanding is beyond our reach...who gives power to the tired and revives the exhausted (v. 29). Because as Isaiah reminds us...even young people aren't immune to exhaustion, as they also succumb to weariness. Even the strongest get weak-kneed and stumble. But God doesn't wear out. Perhaps though- like the Israelites- we, too, sometimes feel abandoned by the everlasting God. We fail to look up- even in our weariness and remember. Look up and be in awe of the beauty and diversity of God's creation or remember that God knows our name and accounts for each one of us, even though we're like grasshoppers to the greatness of God. Isaiah's poetry tries to not only jog our memories but also have a conversation with our hearts.

Poets and prophets have such a way with words, don't they? In Mary Oliver's brief but poignant poem entitled, "Instructions for Living A Life," she writes, "*Pay Attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.*" The act of worship helps us to tell our story and puts us in God's story. My friends posted to tell about their astonishment at God's work in the world through the spectacular sunrise. There's also plenty to be astonished by and to tell about from today's passage. Hear this good news: we will never wear God out. God, Creator of all things, won't tire with us, even in our forgetfulness or failings or complaints. Though we will never know the depths of God's divine wisdom, those who put their hope in the Lord will have their strength renewed. They will fly on wings like eagles. They will run and not be weary; they will walk and not faint (v. 31). Hear me clearly, church. The promise isn't that the problems of this world will go away or that we get to escape them. The promise- the biblical witness- is that from age to age- a strong, creative God hears the cries of his people and offers us renewed strength for

whatever we face. And this promise of the Lord's creative and mysterious yet life-giving power continues to be a word of hope for God's tired and weary people. Weary and beloved children of God, as we move forward into this uncertain and unjust world, may our hope be in the Lord, the everlasting God, who renews our strength...our wingspan...our step...and our faith! Don't you know? Haven't you heard? Amen.