

Isaiah 40:21-31

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our text this morning is from the book of Isaiah, “Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"?"

Recently, as I was talking with someone, they shared with me that they moved to Rio Rancho because they wanted to get away from the lights of the city and see the stars. Have you ever just sat out at night and looked at the stars? We often wonder if there are other creatures or life out there, but in so doing we fail to appreciate the glory and wonder of God’s creation. The stars and beauty of space is God’s great artistry given form for us to see.

But more importantly to our text this morning, many times sitting up and staring at the stars can lead a person to feel small. We gaze out into the vastness of creation and come to the realization that we aren’t gods unto ourselves. Of course, almost everything in our culture today works to numb us to that reality. We appear to have more control over our daily lives today than at any other point in human history. With very little effort, we can become convinced of our own superiority over everything. But in reality, what we find is that we are just as small, just as bite sized as we ever were. We can find ourselves swallowed up by our technology, our games, our jobs, relationships, health issues, politics, or any number of other distractions presented to us in this world.

Indeed, the control that we believe we have over our lives is mostly an elaborate illusion. We are pulled many different directions each and every day, with many different potential masters wanting us to view them as sitting “above the circle of the earth.” There are countless forces in our lives vying to get the first crack at our time, talents, and treasures.

The most difficult part of it is that we can often directly see those other potential masters, or at least we can more quickly and concretely experience the consequences of not choosing to placate them. We get fired, get utilities turned off, or maybe face legal troubles. God doesn't do those things. If we blaspheme God, none of us would fear getting struck by lightning. If we say that God doesn't exist, we don't immediately drop dead. And this is the way that it has been for a very long time. This is why in our text this morning, we hear God asking why his people would say things like, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God."

Even today we are tempted to take either of these approaches as well. There are those who react to God with ambivalence, thinking that he doesn't really matter. “If God actually cares about what I do, then where is he to tell me to stop?!” we ask. We think that we can somehow hide from God. Our privacy is one of the highest priorities for many of us, and is something that in recent years we have gone to great lengths to defend and protect. We often respond to questions with, “That's between me and God!” Rightly so, God does indeed know what's going on. But I suspect that often the missing part of that sentence is, “That's between me and God, and he doesn't really care anyway.”

The negative impact that this has on our Christian lives and our stewardship is that we think God doesn't really care what we do. Our ways are hidden, and so he doesn't know or care

how much we give, or whether or not we help out at church. Heck, he doesn't even know if we use our time going to Church on Sunday, or if we are out at the mall.

Sadly, the greater negative impact of this thinking is that it leaves us in a sad and desperate place. Of course we don't want God to be too concerned about the things that we do wrong, but we most certainly want him to be at our beck and call when we need him. We would prefer a God who were a butler that comes when we ring a little bell. It's easy to think that God doesn't know what we're doing when things are going well, but when things fall apart, if we still think that God doesn't know or care about us, it is devastating.

Of course, this can then lead to the other approach that is mentioned in our text today, which is responding to God like petulant children saying, "...my right is disregarded by my God." We all have a pathological fixation on our "rights." We have a "right" to everything today, whether we have a legitimate claim to it or not. It's our right to have everything that we've ever wanted but it's also our right to not have to pay for it.

Of course, it's pretty easy to see where this sort of thinking impacts our stewardship. I don't need to give of *my* money because the Church has enough. I don't need to give of *my* time to help get something done because someone else will take care of it. I don't need to share *my* talent with the people of the congregation because the dirty, unwashed Philistines won't appreciate it anyway. Everything that we have we think belongs to us and no one else has a "right" to it.

Of course, this thinking leads us to an equally bad place. While the first thinking, that God doesn't really care about us, leads us to despair, this thinking that God has somehow wronged us not only threatens to make us bitter, but it tempts us to find our comfort and salvation in ourselves or our stuff rather than someone much higher.

Thanks be to God that he reveals himself to us through his Word as someone much higher than us and much bigger than us. We have a God who created the world out of nothing! A God who placed the stars in the heavens as a grand testament to his power and love of beauty. As Isaiah talks about the true God in our text today, he describes a God who is above the earth, stretches out the heavens, rules over the rulers of the earth, who brings out his host, and more! In the text, God asks the question, “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him?” Truly, our God is incomparable! He is greater than any one of us could ever imagine!

But he is even more than that. While our God is immeasurably powerful and above us, he still knows each of you and cares for you. Note that in the list of attributes that Isaiah gives, he says that our God is “He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name.” He calls his people by name. Think about that for a minute. There is no way that you or the things you do are beneath the attention of a God who knows you by name, nor is there any way that a God that immensely good would truly wrong you simply because he can and he chooses to.

In fact, he has decisively proven that to us. Our Lord Jesus Christ, true God of true God, became flesh and dwelt among us. He came and lived a human life just like you or me. He felt the same temptations that we feel. He saw the same kinds of evil that we see today. He saw the hurt and pain that the corruption of evil brings into our lives. Yes, dear friends, Jesus knows you!

We have a God who, though he is above us in every way, took on human flesh and became one of us. He humbled himself to show us his love. And we see his love nowhere more fully or clearly than at the cross. It was at the cross that Jesus stretched out his arms and gave his life so that you and I can have life. He gave up his rights as the only begotten Son of God and died so that you and I could be given the right to be called children of God. Jesus lived his life

knowing that his ways were not hidden to his God. His way took him to the cross to pay for our sins of trying to cover up our deeds and act in our shameful secrets.

You see, the difference between the lies of the world and truth of God is that God doesn't try to tell us that we aren't small. He doesn't "put us in our place" by tearing us down, but simply affirms his own splendor. The greatly comforting thing about having a God as big as we do is that he can be counted on to handle whatever trials and difficulties we experience in our lives. God is not incapable of understanding our own feelings and thoughts. One of the biggest hurdles that we must jump over when talking to someone going through a difficult time is not immediately saying that we know how they feel if we don't truly know. The wonderful truth is that God does know! He knows because he has felt it himself.

When we truly step back and see just how much our God has given us, we can only stand in awe. Our God gives to us all that we need. He doesn't say that today he's only going to give us 5% of the oxygen that we need. He doesn't say that he'll only let 25% of the sun shine. He doesn't say that only 2% of the plants will grow in order for us to have food. He doesn't forgive only 76% of our sins, either. Our God gives to us and he gives generously, abundantly.

It is from our appreciation that we then seek to begin being good stewards of the myriad blessings that he has given us. But we remain being good stewards when we understand and recognize our place in the creation. We are small, and on our own, that is a terrifying thought. But our God, through Jesus Christ, has brought us into something much bigger than any of us. We are part of the Church, something that is far greater than the sum of its parts. We belong to a cloud of witness that stretches back to the very beginning of time and will continue on until the last day. There is nothing bigger than that!

And because we have been made a part of the Church, we also have an obligation to her. We remember that our ways are not hidden from our God, and so we would walk as his faithful people. We remember that we don't have a "right" to what we have been gifted with, but we do have the obligation to share those blessings with others.

This is why we give not just our treasure to the Church, but we also invest ourselves as well. We bring our time and our talents to bear as well. No matter what we have been given talent to do, there is a place for it in the Church. If you have been given the gift of hospitality, then you can help decorate or ensure that things are put in good order. If you've been gifted with being able to cook, there is much use for your gifts. If you can help build, paint, or clean, those are things that you can help do here as well. If you can teach, if you are a person who simply enjoys helping others get around to where they need to be, or if you just want to serve, you can help.

Truly, we are in this together. We have been brought together to be God's congregation here in this time and this place. Let us seek to be the faithful and answer his calling. We must recognize that our membership and participation in the Church is an opportunity to serve not just God, but also our neighbors. Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting. Amen.