

**Envisioning the other side**  
Menno Mennonite Church

February 7, 2021

**Purpose:** To put in spiritual context the anticipation of what is next.

**Message:** As we anticipate “what’s next” in these days, we can trust God’s nature to be the foundation of it all.

**Scripture:** Isaiah 40:21-31

**Synopsis:** We are in a moment of transition between what has been to what will be. The advent of, at least on the surface, the waning of the pandemic gets us anxious to imagine the next thing down the pipe. It can be hard to hope beyond our lived experiences. For the Israel of this launching of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah, the book of consolation as it is called, it had been generations since they had heard the voice of the prophet. As such, the introduction, again, of YHWH and the way of God was calling forward the best of the faithful community.

In the same way, we are invited to root our expectations in all time in the nature of God who moves still, even when it can be hard to imagine the newness beyond.

Isaiah 40:21-31

21

Have 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?

22 It is YHWH 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;

23 who brings princes to naught,  
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,  
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
when God blows upon them, and they wither,  
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

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

26 Lift up your eyes on high and see:  
Who created these?  
YHWH 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.

27 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”?

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

YHWH does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.

God gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;

but 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.

I always have found the introductions one of the more interesting parts of a public lecture. Beyond learning what sort of learning the speaker had, often for the first time in the collegial ethos of Mennonite School where noting your educational degree was profoundly out of style, it is where you pick up all sorts of fascinating tidbits along the way. The charming anecdote about a travel misadventure, whole avenues of endeavor that absent a fair determined interest in the speaker there would be no way or real reason to know or care it really exists. The more important and high powered the speaker, the more ingratiating and lengthy the introduction, to the point that you begin to wonder what is the opening act versus the main attraction. If you have spent much time at any professional or academic environment you know the style, cadence and implications of it all. The job is to setup the speaker to have the proper credibility to do what comes next; to speak to the needs and demands of the audience and what they expect to hear.

Which is what we have here. Isaiah is giving an introduction to, of all people, YHWH. This litany of the characteristics of God and demands of YHWH God, naming time and again the accomplishments and the workings of God for the people of God places YHWH again at the center of the conversation. Which seems a bit odd. At we turn to the Bible for a lot of things—inspiration, solace, counsel, even perhaps a good story. But always we assume the language and the conversation has but one basic quality: a direct and intimate understanding of the presence of God. So why the need for the recitation of who and what God does if this is the case? Why not simply say “this sayeth the Lord” and get on with it without the need for such an extensive explanation of it all, unless, perhaps, there is just a need to establish that the speaker is, indeed on God’s good side before getting down to business.

Sometimes, I think we forget the fuller nature of the Bible as we have it. Receiving it as we do in bits and bites, and reading it a chapter, a verse, or even a phrase at the time, it is easy to break free of the real-world moorings of the story that lies underneath. This text is especially given to this because it lies right at a major point of transition in the story of God and God’s people. This is where, were this cinema, you would have a big flashy fade to black and a title that would say “A long time later” or, were this a classic film, the intermission to take a break and get some popcorn. Because, where we leave off in Chapter 39 Hezekiah finally takes on the word of Isaiah and concludes “there will be peace in my times.” Only it didn’t really turn out that way. Enter the exile, the destruction of Jerusalem, and being carted off to the ends of the Earth.

As is so often the case in the biblical text the matters that begin with one set of Israelites does not end there. Instead whole generations pass and here we are given this new word as the work of the Isaiah text turns from warning to comfort, from disaster to healing. As such, no wonder such an introduction was needed. The people had to fundamentally be introduced to God for the first time because they have been well out of sight and out of mind for as long as most of them could possibly remember. We get lost in this when we read; when you can go through 40 years in the wilderness in an hour, it can be hard to remember the spans we are talking about. Gone is the assumed knowledge of God; now we have meeting God again for the first time alongside the exiled people of Israel. They are acquainting themselves to something that they might have heard tell of as an old story or something like that, but this was something else entirely.

So how do you begin to anticipate that which it can be hard to conceive of? When we were moving to Winnipeg, Emily and I went house shopping while Luke was still in the NICU. He had long been stable by that time, and we had already arrived at the intent to make this happen, so we chose to go shopping for a weekend while we still had impeccable childcare.

For whatever reason, on that trip we fell in love with a bungalow a couple of blocks from Jubilee. The trick was that was the one house that we looked at that, frankly, needed the most work. Chalk it up to way too much This Old House and HGTV, we gained a vision for what this thing could be and put an offer in on it which of course got accepted. We had a couple of months between when we closed on the house and when we wanted to move in, and we thought we could pull it off. But, as is always the way, we ended up spending our first months in Winnipeg in a gutted basement apartment while we gutted and restored the even tougher first floor. With a newborn. Ambition, we don't lack; common sense is very much open to debate. We made it though and are still quite proud of the results, even if God had other plans for us along the way.

What I love the most about a project like that is coming time and again to see the progress along the way. Walls disappear; lines open up, surprises come and go, new walls and materials come in. It is this translation of hope and idealism from concept to reality that really speaks to me. Sometimes it takes a lot of imagination to get there, but slowly over time imagination becomes reality.

Along the way, one of the tougher things to share, is that vision of the possible. It takes some real vision to maintain hope for that which can be hard to conceive of. I think this is the

project that the writers of Isaiah are undertaking here. Gone is what came before—the proclamation of the disaster. Here now is a different, and in many ways, more difficult task—trying to infuse the imaginations of a people who have become distant from God with the possibility of God’s restoration plan to something greater than themselves.

It can be hard to hope beyond our experiences. We might struggle to imagine something beyond the life that we know to see something on the other side. Especially when our moment of change is beyond anything that we could have ever imagined, we can struggle to even imagine new life. I think even as we see the first signs of spring thaw in this long COVID winter in which we have been engaged, imaging a future beyond the assumed “as it was before” even when we likely know that as it was before is not going to be fully quite the same. We know that our problems, our dis-ease runs deep and spreads wide. Even with some moments of encouragement there is also much that is unclear and uncertain. We might even be wondering where God might be showing up in the midst of all this.

In this way, we have a lot in common with Isaiah’s people. Like a people who have long prepared for a journey only to be thwarted by delays, they might be weary; exile at least has become familiar after all. But this is where they needed to hear the words of the prophet asking them rhetorically again and again who their God is and what that means to them. The one giving the introduction is reminding them of the most important elements of the nature and immediacy of God. YHWH hears; YHWH acts; YHWH cares. In this poem, the writer acknowledges those who are weary and beaten down: even the young do exhaust themselves, they write. Often times we have to be reminded of what we already know—both that we suffer like everyone else, and that God comes even in the midst of that very suffering all the same. They can sit in their present state, or they can do something else: They can chose to hope.

They can choose to hope. The New Revised Standard Version begins verse 31 with the words “but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.” Other translations use “trust” rather than wait. Still others, interpret that word as “hope.” All three verbs could be considered as passive activities even if they are utilized grammatically in the active voice. It is the stuff we do until something else comes. We think of waiting as doing nothing until something changes that frees us to real action. Trust can be seen as a naive posture that looks for a hero to come in and save the day. Hope holds little more substance than a wish made when tossing a coin into a

fountain of water or looking up at a star. Certainly, we can choose to view these terms in insignificant ways.

We can choose instead to be active in our waiting, our trusting, our hoping. We can do this with the expectation of a God who does act; in God's time to be sure, but act all the same, and with power. These words of Isaiah, the prophet redeems the time that seems to have been lost, squandered, stolen, or wasted. Remember, that the pause between chapter 39 and chapter 40 of Isaiah was longer than a line in a book. Years; generations passed with no prophetic word of encouragement or assurance of presence. The prophet says to the people, the time in exile has not been wasted. It was renewing the people for what was to come. The seeming dormancy was in fact a time to recharge and get their strength back. Going full throttle will exhaust even the young and strong, but if we embrace the wait with trust and in hope, then we can be made stronger. We will be given the updraft of the spirit sweeping us off to God knows where (which is the whole idea, after all).

In this time of exile of a fashion, we too are given the opportunity to embrace that type of wait. Rather than fill every minute with the same meetings we had in person before COVID, or worse, exponentially increase what we do because of the seeming convenience of virtual gatherings and the perception of opportunity, we should learn how to wait. We can wait on the Lord. Not to be patient or passive, but to take advantage of the opportunity that we have been given to slow down and to pause for the purpose of remembering, renewing, strengthening, rebuilding. This is a gift of this moment, if we can find our way to receive it.

May we to the best we can wait on the Lord, and be amazed in the waiting at the places God's winds care us.