

Isaiah 40:21-31 (NRSV)

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 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;

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 he 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?

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.

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.

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

²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

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,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Have You Not Heard?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: *Isaiah 40:21-31*

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?

With these words God booms an answer to Israel's sorry-for-itself complaint. Earlier in this chapter from Isaiah God has told the prophet to proclaim those famous Advent verses, "Comfort, comfort my people." You may recall that the prophet responds on behalf of the people, "What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people is grass."

God tells the prophet to proclaim a word of comfort. The prophet demurs, pointing out that there is cold comfort to proclaim; the people fades like the grass; the people is grass. And then the booming rebuke: Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

To use the modern metaphor, God and the people are not on the same page. God sees comfort. The people see death and mortality. And God says, "What's the matter with you? It's been perfectly obvious from the beginning." This may be the age-old constant in the difference between God and humankind. To God the key to life is perfectly obvious; to human beings it seems to be anything but. And yet, there may be reason for God's frustration. That is, seeing the answer may not be the problem. The problem may be living what we can see plainly enough.

Yesterday, February 4th, 2006 was the 100th birthday of the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This morning I would like to spend a little time talking with you about Bonhoeffer, the time in which he lived and how he responded to it. In a sense, Bonhoeffer and the events of his time provide a case study to grapple with the conundrum posed in Isaiah.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born into an educated, non-religious family of some privilege. His father was a well-known psychiatrist with a highly-regarded teaching post at the University of Berlin. His well-educated mother schooled Bonhoeffer and his twin sister, Sabine, at home. Bonhoeffer was raised to be a disciplined but open-minded thinker. And so it was in one sense a great surprise when Dietrich announced that he wished to pursue a career in ministry and theology. His family and education would not have inspired such a vocation. However, the freedom his parents had valued and had taught him to think with meant that they sent him on his way with their blessing. Bonhoeffer excelled in theology. By twenty-one he had earned his doctorate and already the notice of the world of scholarship.

At the same time that Bonhoeffer was coming to adulthood and sprouting his scholarly wings, there were darker clouds building in other quarters in Germany. To understand this gathering storm more fully, one must start with a birth on April 20, 1889, at Braunau am Inn,

Austria. On that date to Alois Hitler and his cousin and third wife was born a son Adolph. The child showed almost no promise. Twice he was rejected from the Academy of Arts in Vienna, for lack of talent, he was told. The school suggested he might be an architect since he like to sketch. As a young adult Adolph wandered aimlessly, supported by a state pension, which finally ran out and left him homeless. As World War I approached, Adolph dodged the draft as long as he could, but was finally conscripted by the Bavarian army in 1914. His military career was undistinguished. Toward the end of the war Adolph was hospitalized because of exposure to poison gas. In the hospital, under the watch of a military physician and psychiatrist, he was pronounced a dangerous psychotic and incompetent to command.

The war ended badly for Germany, also. Her surrender in World War I was unconditional, and the allies imposed the treaty of Versailles on Germany. It was extraordinarily harsh. It declared that Germany had committed great horrors and crimes, and it imposed crippling reparations and sanctions on the country. Germany was completely humiliated and needed a scapegoat to explain such utter failure. Among the most convenient were the Jews, who were chosen to bear the blame for the country's failure and humiliating situation.

Adolph remained in the army after the war and was assigned to spy on the group called the German Workers Party. However, he became convinced by their politics, and by 1921 at the age of 33 he was delivering rousing speeches about the Jews and other emotionally incendiary topics to large crowds, a talent recently discovered and for which, of course, he would become famous. By July of that year Hitler rose to become Führer of the Nationalist Socialist Workers Party, or the Nazis.

The next decade in Germany was a political roller coaster in which various parties rose and fell and formed coalitions. But in the early 1930s, when the great depression kicked an already struggling nation in the stomach, the time was ripe for Hitler's scapegoating rhetoric and ideas to gain even more ground. On January 30, 1933 the Nazi party's strength had won the concession of partnership in a coalition government. On that date Hitler was made Chancellor of Germany while von Hindenburg remained president. When von Hindenburg died in August of the next year, Hitler would be proclaimed both Chancellor and President, and the Third Reich would be fully in place.

Two days after Hitler was proclaimed Chancellor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not yet twenty-seven, gave a live national radio address in which he criticized the currently applauded leadership principles of the Führer. Bonhoeffer recognized that the appeal of Hitler and the Nazi party was based on Germany's need to feel good about herself, to restore her self-image and sense of control. However, Bonhoeffer saw clearly that the approach of the Nazi party and Hitler was to find scapegoats to blame for all their problems and to promote an emotional and patriotic ideology. Bonhoeffer understood the need the country had to restore her respect, but he also believed that the job of the leader was to inspire people to face the hard problems honestly rather than appeal to their worst instincts. In his radio address Bonhoeffer said that when the leader simply gives the people what they want, when the leader appeals to the most shameful human emotions and inclination, the leader becomes the mis-leader. At that point, the radio broadcast was cut from the air.

Hitler would brook no critics. In rapid succession books of countless authors were burned in the city squares, professors, including Karl Barth and Paul Tillich were expelled from

their teaching posts, Jews were banned from any civil service positions, the German church was taken over by the Nazi party, the prison camp Dachau was opened, and Jewish businesses were boycotted. Later those same businesses would be destroyed by Nazi-sponsored mobs under the cover of darkness, and then their owners required to pay to clean up the streets. It would be twelve hellish and genocidal years before it would be all over, but Bonhoeffer and a few others could see where it was all going already. Most others did not, or at least would not.

God's questions in Isaiah reverberates in the face of that moment of history. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?"

In one sense one might say that at least Israel had heard more than Nazi Germany. The prophet had complained, "The grass withers, the flower fades. Surely, the people is grass." At least Israel was willing to look mortality, both human and national, in the face and weep. She did not resort to scapegoats and ideology and emotional rhetoric empty of any tissue to connect it to reality. When God says in Isaiah that he is the one who, "who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing," Israel agrees. It is her complaint. But Nazi Germany tried to beat back the inevitable ephemerality of human societies by denying the facts they had heard but not listened to, known but hid their eyes from. In the end, far more than the grass would wither.

Israel sees the impermanence of human societies, nations and governments, but God is still frustrated with her. There remain things she has not yet grasped, things that God says have also been obvious from the foundations of the earth. The question is, what things does Israel fail to see?

Much as in the Book of Job, God answers by directing Israel's attention to the heavens. "Where do you think these came from," says God, pointing to the stars. 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," roars God. But this display of vastness and power cannot finally satisfy. To simply set human weakness and vulnerability next to God's power and invincibility and point out the difference, to say that we are like grass and God is forever, does nothing but inflame our discontent. In and of itself, it cannot be the answer.

Near the end of our passage, though, comes something more promising. There it says God "gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless."

In the face of fear and defeat, one may turn to all kinds of human devices in hopes of changing reality, but every one of them will fail. Many of the human devices we try will set us onto paths so dangerous they need but be mentioned and they are recognized as symbols of the full force of human depravity: Pol Pot, Hitler, Holocaust, Pinochet. Just the mention of these conjures up the worst attempts that human beings have made to protect themselves from life's ephemeral realities. In the face of fear and defeat, too often human being has traversed such paths. But there is another choice. In the face of fear and defeat, one may turn to God who "gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless." This choice, this choice to turn to God leads down a very different track. When we look to the hills and our help comes from the Lord, it is true help and not a poor substitute.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks of the transition that he made from being a theologian to being a Christian. Another way to say it is that it is the transition from theoretical to being, from doctrine to belief, from speculative arguments to being a living Christian. Bonhoeffer became

suspicious of much of the church, for he came to think that the church was not the church of Jesus Christ when it became too little engaged in living its faith and too much engaged in formulating doctrines about faith. Toward the end of his life Bonhoeffer more and more located the heart of the Christian message in the sermon on the mount, in chapters 5, 6 and 7 in the Gospel of Matthew. In these sayings Jesus informs us who is blessed. He warns us about retaliation. He tells us to love our enemies, forgive those who hurt us, and love our neighbor as ourselves. He teaches us the Lord's prayer. He tells us to build our house on a rock and that if we ask it will be given to us. He tells us to take care of the poor, to lay up our treasures in heaven, not on earth, and to be the salt of the earth.

As early as 1932 Bonhoeffer had the center point of his theological insight. In a sermon entitled, "On Freedom," he argued that to be free was about the opposite of what most people think. Most people see freedom as being free for themselves. Bonhoeffer suggested that freedom really means to be free from ourselves. That is, freedom means to be free from seeing ourselves as the center of the world, which allows us to see more clearly and to be free for others.

Toward the end of his life, twelve years later Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend, Eberhard Bethge, "The church is the church only when it exists for others." It is important to note, however, that Bonhoeffer is not simply espousing self-sacrifice. He is not saying to the one who feels like withering grass, "Buck up, buddy, and quit feeling sorry for yourself. Get out there and do something." He is saying instead that when one turns to God who gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless, when one turns to God whole-heartedly, then one becomes free from the burden of one's own fear and loneliness. It is the mystery, the irony, the unexpected grace of faith. In a sense, it gives us what we need by taking the need itself away and replacing it with freedom. And when that happens, when that happens, living for others does not drain us dry but fills us with living waters.

From the earliest of our scriptures, from the journeys of Abraham and the wanderings of Moses, God has both demonstrated and admonished us toward this understanding. Time and again God reminds the people of how God has cared for them, saved them, guided them and loved them. And then God admonishes them, also time and again, "As I have treated you, you are, also, to treat one another." From the beginning, from the foundations of the earth it has been clear. Have you not known? Have you not heard? Surely, surely we have. Thanks be to God. Amen.