
LIFTED UP

ISAIAH 40:21-31 AND MARK 1:29-39

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2021 BY THE REV. BRUCE PUCKETT

It had been about 60 years since the exile began. By the time God's people received the words from the prophet that we heard this morning in the reading from Isaiah 40, a few generations had passed in the new land. It isn't that the people had no memory of life in Jerusalem. It's simply that only the oldest among them still had personal experiences of that time. You see God's people had been living in Babylonian captivity for long enough that they had plenty of time to settle in as if this was their permanent homeland. Children born in Babylon, grew up to have their own children, and grandchildren there. This was the world they knew. The stories of the world and culture around them had been the dominant stories of their lived experience. And while they learned the stories about God and God's covenant with them, they surely were left wondering if God had lost the battle to the gods of Babylon or if God simply stopped caring about them.

In these circumstances, the prophets message went out to some people who were tired and weary because of the long stretch of time they had been removed from their homeland. And it went to some who were settled so deeply into their life in exile that they assumed God and God's promises no longer mattered to their future. The experiences of God's people no doubt ranged from homesickness, to a sense of abandonment, to outright disbelief about God, God's power, and God's relationship with the people. It had been a long time, with so much hardship, so much struggle, so much loss, so much grief, so much abandonment, so much need. And the times were changing yet again. God was calling the people into a future that was hard for them to imagine and maybe even harder for them to desire. God was calling the people to leave their captivity and go again to Jerusalem: a city that would need rebuilt and restored.

With a life situation like theirs, it's no wonder that some of God's people were questioning whether they should put their hopes in other gods or other ways. It's no wonder that some felt like God was no longer paying attention to them in their need or that God simply was not powerful enough to do anything about it. It's no wonder that some were even saying that justice had been denied them, and God had disregarded what was good and right for them. After all that the people had experienced in the land of captivity, it's hard to blame them for being worn out, full of doubt, and unable to imagine a different future.

We're coming up on a year since our lives were upended by a global pandemic. The first confirmed death in the US from Covid19 was February 6—a year ago yesterday. In other parts of the world, the deaths, the lockdowns, and the change of life happened earlier than here. No, it has not been generations that we've endured this. It hasn't even been a year since we could sit mask-less with friends and family outside of our homes and inside public places without fear of sickness. But it feels like a very long time ago.

Just in the past week, I've heard three people speaking in their own ways of how the last year has impacted them. Last Saturday, I was talking to a friend who spoke of the cumulative effect of it all. He said, "You know, I really thought I was handling all the changes pretty well. I had gotten used to working from home. Really, I liked it better. I even found a rhythm with the kids learning from home with me. I have been taking all of it in stride—not being able to go out to eat or do the other things we like to do as a family. We've even made some special memories during this time. But, you know, over the last few weeks, I've started to notice how it's really all weighing on me. How my coping mechanisms for dealing with the stress aren't working as well anymore. My clothes aren't fitting. I'm not sleeping well. And I really just find myself wanting to drink every night. I'm really worn out. Something has to change." I know my friend is not alone in his sentiments. The hardship of our current reality has left many of us weary, tired, and in need of change.

Last Sunday, I was the online minister for the morning service. Perhaps you don't know this, but as you are watching the service on YouTube, a minister is present in the live chat responding to the service and to people who

are engaging with one another. One viewer last week was feeling particularly distressed. The viewer wrote in, “Don’t you all ever doubt that the thing you are believing is not real. Don’t you wonder if you are speaking and praying to god, but really there is nothing there.” Then the person added sarcastically, “God was really around when coronavirus began.” The struggles our world is facing today adds fuel to any doubter’s fire. Even for those with steadfast faith, seeing the hurts so many are experiencing has to raise questions. For many today it feels like at best, God has forgotten our plight and at worst, God was never there to begin with.

Last Tuesday, I was walking around campus as part of the University’s “C-Team”—the team who, let’s just say, is helping the Duke community remember the compact that we’ve made to wear masks, wash our hands regularly, and remain distant from one another. And as I was walking through the Brodhead Center, I heard a student talking to his friends. He said, “Really I just can’t wait to be able to walk around like a normal college student again.” And then in a moment of honesty that surprised me, and perhaps even caught him off guard with its public vulnerability, he said, “I’m so lonely.” The isolation and loneliness that so many of us have been feeling over this time just keeps growing. One article recently published talked about how the physical isolation of the last year has led to a break down in people’s mental health from not receiving physical touch from others. As one neuroscientist put it, “The human body has built all its models based on touch received from caregivers... We’re utterly reliant on the caregiver to satisfy the body’s core needs. Little can be done without touch.”¹

These feelings of weariness, doubt, and loneliness are not limited to the conditions caused by the pandemic. You’ve experienced for yourself or witnessed in others the kind of weariness that stems from generational poverty, justice perpetually denied, broken family systems, chronic illnesses, relationship struggles, mental health breakdowns, and so much more. Perhaps the cumulative effect of all life’s ills has made you or someone you love dearly feel abandoned and weary, longing for something different but either unable to move into a new future or trusting in all the wrong things to get there. It’s hard to blame anyone who is worn out, full of doubt, and unable to imagine a different future these days.

The prophet in Isaiah 40 spoke to God’s people who were worn out and weary, doubting and skeptical, lonely and abandoned, hopeless and seemingly without a good future. The prophet knew the experiences of God’s people and the reality they had lived. So he spoke first of who God is and then of what God would do. God’s people were searching anywhere and everywhere for solutions, for relief, for something to trust and hope in, for a future. The Babylonian world had provided its own set of solutions, its own set of stories and myths about who or what was in control and who or what had the power to affect the future. So the prophet redirected God’s people’s searching away from the Babylonian gods to the one, true God, who created all and is above all. The prophet proclaimed, “To whom then will you liken God. Or what will you compare God to? An idol? You can observe the workman who creates it, and the goldsmith who overlays it with gold, and gives it silver chains. There’s no way this idol with man-made chains has strength and power like God’s.” You can hear the prophet continuing, building steam as he goes. “And what about those made out of other stuff of the earth, like wood. The best woods don’t rot, but it’s up to the artist to make something that won’t easily be knocked over. That’s no real power. That’s no real strength. 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? It is God who sits above all creation. Those who look large on earth are like grasshoppers to God. God is even responsible for spreading out the heavens. God oversees the rising and falling of kings and rulers. Even with all of their power on earth, they are like nothing to God. Just a puff of God’s breath will knock them over, like stubble blown away by the wind.” The people surely could hear the prophet reminding them that when it comes to real power, there is no comparison between the Creator and the created. Any created thing—be it idols made of wood or rulers of lands—that the people would put their hope or trust in was and is unequal to God. “Just look up and see,” the prophet continued. “God’s hands are the ones that flung these stars into space and that bring them out for view each night. This reveals God’s strength and power. So don’t even

¹ https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/jan/24/lost-touch-how-a-year-without-hugs-affects-our-mental-health?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook&fbclid=IwAR33rfzJYVnRtn_LnRQfwSyFhhOnz8Rr6Vmhk7uSotGmrJC4gGtwnUkvQfQ

trust in these magnificently created things that are far above us all. Trust instead in their Creator. For it is the Creator God who is strong and mighty.”

The prophet thoroughly dismantled the notion of the long-lasting vitality and virility of any other would-be god. No other thing would compare. But for a people who were worn out and weary, who felt abandoned and uncertain about the future, who were doubtful and wondering if God even cared, speaking of God’s power and might was not enough. So through the prophet, God addressed the worries and cares of the people head on. “Why do you say, ‘God doesn’t see our situation and things will never be made right’? Haven’t you known for yourself or heard from others? God is everlasting. That means the creating God who was faithful in the past is still present for today and will be there in the future—always creating anew. And not only is God near, God cares about your weariness and powerlessness, and God is able to and will do something about it.” As *The Message* paraphrase puts it “God energizes those who get tired, [and] gives fresh strength to dropouts.” The prophet encouraged the people, “Wait on God to give fresh strength for the journey ahead, for the future not yet seen, for the road God calls you to walk.”

God called the people forward into a new future, into a new creation, with the assurance that, even if it would be challenging, they would be empowered and sustained for the journey by God’s bountiful provisions.

Today so many are worn out and weary, doubtful and skeptical, feeling lonely and abandoned, hopeless and with no good future in sight. So often we find ourselves searching anywhere and everywhere for solutions, for relief, for something to trust and hope in, for a future. The world around us provides its own set of solutions, its own set of stories and myths about who or what is in control and who or what has the power to create the future. Yet the word proclaimed to God’s people so long ago, speaks still to us today. All other things pale in comparison to God. God’s power and longevity are greater than all others, and it’s not even close; they are simply on different plains. But best of all, God’s capability is only matched by God’s commitment to and care for us. To put it in technical theological terms, God is transcendent and immanent. God is seated above all creation, and yet God is as near as our next breath. And this is good news for us. God is not a distant deity who set things in motion and then took a step back to let the world run itself. God is everlasting, ever-creating, ever-making new, ever-touching, ever-renewing strength, ever-giving power, ever-setting things right, ever-present, ever-ready to provide just what we need.

Jesus came to proclaim and to be this very message—God fully powerful, and God fully present. He is the reality of God’s power meeting God’s commitment to be with and care for humanity in our greatest need. So the Gospel lesson tells us of Jesus showing up in the home of his followers and healing a person on the verge of death. He touched her hand and lifted her up. The God with transcendent power and immanent care showed up to give power and strength to this faint and powerless woman. And she was lifted up to serve her Lord, just as Jesus calls all his disciples to do.

So I wonder, are you tired? Lonely? Weary? Doubtful? Feeling abandoned on the verge of lifelessness? Just wait as the everlasting God shows up, enters your home, and takes you by the hand.

“I’m sick,” you say. “Here’s my hand,” Jesus says.

“I’m tired,” you say. “Here’s my hand,” Jesus says.

“I’m lonely,” you say. “Here’s my hand,” Jesus says.

“If God’s even there, I doubt God cares,” you say. “Here’s my hand,” Jesus says.

“I can’t stand the injustices,” you say. “Here’s my hand,” Jesus says.

“I can’t go on,” you say. “Here’s my hand,” Jesus says.

“I just need a loving touch,” you say. “Here’s my hand,” Jesus says.

And it’s new life for you. And it’s new creation for you. It’s like you’ve got wings for the first time and energy that will last. You’ve been lifted up. Now what will you do?