“Have You Not Heard?”

Isaiah 40:21-31

Matthew 11:28-30

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I’m not a spatial person. S-P-A-T-I-A-L, as in space, not special. I am a special person though, too. But anyway, I’ve never been a spatial person. I’m currently dogsitting for a family who lives out in the county and as I wrote my sermon, I sat in their office and looked out over expansive fields of grass and cows. From my chair, I could see even beyond the fields to the mountains that surround us, the very tip tops of them still with snow on the ground.

Now, if you ask me questions of spatial specifics -- which mountains are they? How far away are the mountains? How many acres of fields could I see? It would be dangerous for me to even try to guess. Ask John. I think I’ve asked him a million times now, “Now, which mountains are those?”

So yesterday, when I saw a website my cousin shared on Facebook that was titled “The Size of Space,” I knew that my mind was about to be blown. The website starts off by showing you an astronaut in space. Then, when you click the arrow on your keyboard, it zooms out to show *that* astronaut next to the Hubble Space Telescope. Then, next to a space shuttle. Then, next to the space station and so on and so forth. It only takes five taps of the keyboard for the little tiny astronaut to disappear when compared to an asteroid called, “Bennu.” Similarly, it only takes a few taps of the keyboard to have the Earth disappear in comparison to enormous bodies like red giant stars and black holes.

Those cows I could see out the window? Definitely not visible by the astronaut -- the smallest unit in the chain.

You begin to feel pretty insignificant fairly quickly with this visualization. You realize how small your little piece of the world is compared to the expanses of the universe.

For the Israelites in today’s passage from Isaiah, their worldview had been interrupted with a few similar taps from a political keyboard. They’d been enjoying their time in Jerusalem, when all of a sudden, a foreign king rose to power and before they knew it, they’d been expelled from their homeland -- the Promised Land, the one given to them by God following their liberation from Egypt.

In just the blink of an eye, their world had been turned upside down, nothing made sense anymore, and so they began to question their significance in God’s eye. The author of today’s text describes the inhabitants of the earth as being like grasshoppers - so numerous you can’t count them and yet so alike that you can’t tell them apart. That’s how the people of Israel felt -- like insignificant grasshoppers in the eye of God.

The text gives us some insight into the Israelites’ mindset as they begin a life in exile. The people are without their city of Jerusalem and without their beloved Temple. They ask themselves, “What will become of my home? What about my family and friends? Wasn’t that the Promised Land? Did God break God’s promise? If God resides in the Temple, how can God be with us here in this exile? We are alone. We are lost.”

While we aren’t privy to the specific laments to which this passage from Isaiah responds, we can *imagine* these are the types of questions and cries the people have voiced.

We can imagine that they sounded something like the words from Psalm 137 - a psalm also written during that same time of exile:

1 By the rivers of Babylon—

there we sat down and there we wept

when we remembered Zion.

2 On the willows there

we hung up our harps.

3 For there our captors

asked us for songs,

and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,

‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’

4 How could we sing the Lord’s song

in a foreign land?

5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

let my right hand wither!

6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,

if I do not remember you,

if I do not set Jerusalem

above my highest joy.

The people in exile, in this psalm and in the little bit we hear of their cries in Isaiah, don’t conclude that there *is* no God, but that God has simply *disregarded* them. What a devastating thought.

It’s with that context that we must keep in mind when we read the questions of this text: “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’s tempting to read this with an accusatory tone. But when we look at how suddenly and totally the lives of God’s chosen people had been turned upside down, how they had begun to question whether or not God still cared for them, I think these questions are meant in a more gentle way.

“My friend, remember when we re-told the stories of God’s deliverance in the Temple all those years? Didn’t you catch that God has promised to be with us always? Not just with our ancestors long ago, but with us today, and with our children in the future? My friend, in case you haven’t heard the good news yet -- God’s love for us is eternal! My friend, even though we might be far from God’s dwelling place in Jerusalem, our God -- Yahweh, who was and is and shall be -- *our* God travels with us wherever we go, because *our* God created the world and so there is no corner of it in which God cannot be found. My friend, I know that you are tired and weary, but I want you also to know that God will never grow tired or weary of loving us.”

The writer from Isaiah is trying earnestly to convey how present God is, and how much God loves every single one of them.

This passage from Isaiah offers two important promises. First, it promises the people in exile -- and us today -- that when we are feeling lost and alone, when we feel that everyone has forgotten us, we can always trust that God has never forgotten us.

And secondly, it promises a space for grief. At no point in this passage does the writer denounce Israel’s mourning. It may grieve the writer (and God, for that matter) that Israel has such a short memory in regard to God’s transcendence and God’s providence, but the writer never condemns Israel for its grief. It allows space for their desperate sighs and their anxious groanings.

The passage reminds us that God has room for our own signs and groanings as well.

And our sighs and groanings may be more in number (like grasshopper numbers) than they usually are.

Throughout this pandemic, we’ve had to find new ways to do Church and all that Church entails -- from John and I preaching at a cell phone to you on Facebook...to a virtual Christmas pageant ...to a reimagined Ash Wednesday and Lent.

Our Presbyterian Women have also been innovative in how they reach each other. Every month since September, I’ve been meeting with one of the leaders of PW to record that month’s Bible study. Then we upload it to YouTube and the women of the church log on to participate in PW.

Since September, we’ve marveled again and again at the Holy Spirit’s wise guidance in this year’s national Presbyterian Women study which is called: “Into the Light: Finding Hope Through Prayers of Lament.” Each month, the study takes on a different kind of lament -- personal, communal, etc. We’ve marveled at how timely this study is and how in pre-pandemic years, the group might have gotten tired of talking about lament month in and month out. But in these difficult times, we have found the need to lament each month.

This month’s focus is on lament for your city or community and on Wednesday, I recorded Linda Foster, a new member of Covenant who has jumped into being an active member in our congregation. As I recorded Linda, I heard her reflecting on all of the changes our world has gone through in the past few decades and how much our world has especially changed in the last year. She talked about how it was appropriate to lament for our city and world and that God makes space for us to lament. And so, in order to put her words in action, Linda composed a lament for the city of Staunton. I have Linda’s permission to share her lament today. If you are worshipping with us from a different city or region, I invite you to imagine what lament you would offer for your city.

And now, a lament for Staunton:

Remember O Lord what has befallen us

There is discord among our city’s leaders

Persons in power make decisions and statements that create division among groups of people

Our city’s buildings stand empty, damaged by floods

Our city streets are empty of celebrations from fear of disease

Our people are unemployed and go hungry

Our churches are empty; your children yearn for their church family

The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has turned to mourning, our hearts are sick.

Restore to us a peaceful city where your people live and work together in unity, equity and equality.

Restore jobs and give us our daily bread so that no one goes hungry.

Remove the COVID virus from our city and the rest of the world.

Fill your churches with people who praise your name above heaven and earth.

Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored. Amen.

In a few moments, we will celebrate communion. In this sacrament, we remember and celebrate Christ and what he means for our lives and for our world. In that famous beginning of the Gospel of John, we have the beautiful verse - “The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.” The Greek word for “dwell” actually means to dwell as in a tent or to encamp. In the incarnation of Christ, God was no longer only present from Israel’s point of view “above the circle of the earth … stretch[ing] out the heavens….like a tent” for the people to live in. Instead God came to dwell among the people. God said, “Let me live with you, alongside you, feeling your joys and celebrating with you, but also feeling your pain and mourning with you. I am here. I am with you.”

When we take communion, we are nourished and renewed to continue on our journey of faith. In communion, we remember the saving act of Christ and are given sustenance for the journey ahead. We say the ancient words and remember -- Immanuel -- God with us. Always.

Friends, we’re almost a year into this pandemic. I don’t know about you, but I’ve been stuck in a cycle where I have periods of time in which I feel okay and times in which I don’t. I’m not always feeling “Miriam-with-her-tamborine-celebrating-Pharoah’s-downfall.” Sometimes I’m feeling “Israel-in-exile.”

But today’s text from Isaiah, as well as some of the psalms, Christ’s own words of comfort for weary souls, and (heck, the whole book of Lamentations!) tells me that God can handle my laments and that when I am done lamenting, God will still be there, waiting patiently to renew my strength and restore me so that I can continue on my journey to wherever God is leading me.

And know that God makes that promise to you as well.

All praise be to God.

Amen.