

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.

This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD.**

Psalm 8

LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens. 2 Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. 3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? 5 You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. 6 You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: 7 all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, 8 the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. 9 LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

“Soaring”

Quoting Roger Gench, “*It probably seemed to them that they’d “slipped off the divine radar”*,”¹ that their God, the God of Israel, had abandoned them.” It was likely around 540 BCE and the Israelites who’d been living in exile in Babylon were being given an opportunity to return to their homeland. Babylon had recently been conquered by Persia and the new king was releasing them. You may remember that the city of Jerusalem had been attacked in 586 BCE and fully sacked in 597 BCE and the remaining Israelites had been taken captive and forced to come to Babylon where they’d since been kept as slaves. They’d been brutally treated over the last 70 years, made to work in the fields, in what were essentially labor camps. So many had died.

And while it is often imagined that it must have been a joyous thing for them to now be given their freedom, Nehemiah 11 reports that there was no crush of people begging to return. And this is likely because Jerusalem was still in its destroyed state, without a temple, or protective walls, without the comforts that would have normally been afforded them.² The people knew that they’d be returning to a very hard and dangerous life. They’d be going “*from the frying pan into the fire*” so to speak. In addition, these people were without an ounce of energy left in them for a trip, even back to their homeland. Imagine any people, for instance the people of Gaza or Syria or Myanmar being told they could go back. The Israelites were at this point a beaten down, broken and completely demoralized lot. They felt invisible to God, “as though they could wither up and blow away”. Indeed, it seemed to them that they’d “slipped off the divine radar”.

Have you ever felt like this... beaten down, fatigued, spiritually if not physically broken... maybe so much so that you have no energy to make things better? Have you ever felt you’re invisible, or abandoned by God? Well, if you’re human, I bet you have. We’ve all been in places, vulnerable places...in times, vulnerable times... when the only thing we can do is to

¹ Roger Gench “*5th Sunday after Epiphany — February 7, 2021*” <https://pres-outlook.org/2021/02/5th-sunday-after-epiphany-february-7-2021/> (accessed 2-5-2021).

²Christopher B. Hays. “*Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: Commentary on Isaiah 40:21-31*” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-isaiah-4021-31-3> (accessed 2-5-2021).

take one day at a time, maybe one hour at a time, and place one foot in front of the other, and just try to react to what is in front of us, to do what Mike calls, “shift into survival mode”.

I believe I've mentioned this before but Mike and my time in Houston in the early 1980's is a good example of this. There were some good times, of course. We were newlyweds, after all. To this day, we still maintain friendships made during that time. But much of those years we'd otherwise like to forget. The city, for one thing, was so very much bigger, crowded, and rougher than two kids from Nebraska had ever imagined. We never adjusted to the pollution which comes with a big city nor did our eyes appreciate the scenery we had from the windows of the places WE were living. I know there are some just lovely areas of Houston, but our view was of I-45 and some scrub land with pumpjacks on them. For the first year, I commuted 50 miles per day from our little apartment south of the city into downtown Houston to work evening shifts & w/ends as a hospital pharmacist in the med center, that is, until my best friend, Diana, was brutally murdered on her way home from work one night. I was shook badly with this, and I grieved her loss deeply. I left employment at the hospital as soon as I could, but not before a man also robbed, at gunpoint, the pharmacy satellite where I worked one day. Eventually, I began two years of residency at UTMB in Galveston, a 50mi/day commute in the other direction. This course, while good, required a lot of late nights of hard study and work. Mike, meanwhile, began a master's program which necessitated evening classes in Houston concurrent with long days at a highly stressful job in Baytown, also about 50 miles of travel to the East/day. There he worked in a synthetic rubber manufacturing plant along the Houston ship channel. Thanks to the omnipresent flare stacks, it was never dark. I used to pray that his car would not break down in the Baytown tunnel for I knew no human could breathe in there. During his time at the plant, 3 employees who worked with him developed brain cancer. In our 3rd yr, we somehow scraped together enough money to buy our first little sweet house which we loved. However, it was promptly flooded when we were hit by Cat 3 Hurricane, the same summer my 19 yo sister came to live with us, and my father was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. You get it. Survival mode.

Yes, we've all been there. In fact, we may feel like we're going through such a time right now, with the war in Cameroon, our current global conflicts, the especially perilous one in the Mid-East, the political division and persecutions in this country, persecutions which knock on our very doors. So let me ask you, friends, what are we to do when we find ourselves, as the scripture says, "*soaring, because even walking feels so hard*"?³

Well, what we do is...we come to the Lord, or more likely we realize that the Lord is coming to us. The people Israel, in their time of despair and powerlessness, were sent the prophet, Isaiah, and they were made to hear God through him. Isaiah gave them some of the most beautiful poetry in all of Scripture. Through it, their attention was directed to something outside of themselves, to something of God. He directed them to the stars, saying: "*God stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to live in....Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? [God] who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because [God] is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.*" Isaiah was telling them, in essence, to "*Go outside and look up. Look up and see what the Master has made. For if the Master has made these, the stars and the planets, and if God has set each and every one on their courses, if the Master has named them, then the Master has made and named you too!*" Isaiah was calling them to remember that God is much bigger than their despair, bigger than the chaos around them, and bigger than their physical and spiritual weariness. Moments of vulnerability, like it or not, help us recognize the dependency we have on one another and on God.⁴ Isaiah was calling them to "*Look up! Breathe deeply and rest in the Master' hands.*"⁵

As Shannon Kershner so well observes, "*Isaiah was asking his people to avoid grounding their faith in their experiences of their life, and to instead trust God to be God.*"⁶ He wanted them to "*doubt their doubts, and believe their beliefs.*"⁷ Asking the people to look up would give them sustenance. It would give them perspective and a moment of holy grace. Looking up

³ Shannon Kershner. "*Perspective.*" <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2018/020418.html>. (accessed 2/05/2021).

⁴ Christopher Hays.

⁵ Kershner (paraphrased)

⁶ Kershner

⁷ Thomas Allen communication (1998-2009)

could allow them to “to mount up with wings like eagles,” and soar. The writer of Hebrews would, in his time and place, encourage his down-trodden audience to run the race, to fight the good fight and to look up and see the face of Jesus in order to be given the same.

I once heard of a man who contracted a disease which caused him to curl in on himself. He was unable to look up without lifting his whole torso. As his bent-over posture and pain worsened, he wanted to deepen his lifelong interests, one of which was astronomy. He felt drawn to it. Sometimes he would wake up his wife at night just to get in the car and see a special constellation. When they moved to a mountain in upstate NY, they built an observatory on the top floor of their home and installed the most amazing telescope. It was configured with mirrors so that he could look down to look up. And that he did. He spent as much time gazing into the heavens as he possibly could. He wanted to be reminded that he existed in the very presence and care of God. There he'd find the testimony of the stars, the planets, their brilliance and orderliness, the perfection of their Creator.”⁸

Friends, sometimes it's pretty tough out there. Everyone can and does go through periods when we're in survival mode... in places of exile. We get overwhelmed and weary and can do nothing but put one foot in front of the other. But the biblical witness is this: that from age to age, God hears our cries and comes to us. He empowers us---in our exhaustion, in our oppression, and in our other moments of greatest need. God not only protects us with his divine wings, but he bestows on us....wings of our own!

Mike and I eventually moved on from our time in the Houston area. We moved to Georgetown, TX. Mike was going to be a grad student at UT and I a Clinical Pharmacist in Temple. There we rented a little house. It was on the edge of town in a rather remote, undeveloped area. What I loved about it was that it had skylights...windows on the ceiling. On our first night there, we had no furniture yet, so we camped out in the living room. It was really dark when the sun went down, but wonderfully we were able to lay on the floor and see the stars!! We hadn't seen them in sooooo long because the lights of the big city of Houston had

⁸ Kershner

drown them out. And for two people who minds were still so full of the weight of the world, whose spirits were so heavy with sadness, exhaustion and weariness, who needed so badly to heal, it was..... well....you know.....don't you?

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth....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.”

Amen.