

“Remembering the Greatness of God”
Psalm 147:1-11 and Isaiah 40:21-31

When our daughter, Erica, was little, at every meal, Roger and I would pray a simple prayer with her. Maybe you prayed this prayer yourself, or with your children when they were small. “God is great. God is good. And we thank God for this food.”

It’s a simple little prayer, but, if you really think about it, it’s pretty profound. With the words of this prayer we are affirming some very important and powerful truths about God: God is great and God is good. These are truths that are worth remembering not just in childhood, but throughout our lives.

And it’s these very truths that the prophet Isaiah in our text for this morning is calling God’s people exiled in Babylon to remember. In exile, God’s people were sorely tested, and were tempted to forget the greatness and goodness of God. Let’s listen now to Isaiah 40:21-31 and hear God’s Word for us this morning. I’m going to read our text from *The Message*, a modern paraphrase of the Bible that really captures the meaning of the prophet Isaiah in this passage. (Read text)

As I mentioned a few minutes ago, our passage for this morning is set in the context of the exile of God’s people in Babylon. It is clear that they have been in Babylon for a long time. In fact, the original exiles have died, and Isaiah now speaks his words to the children and grandchildren of those who were originally taken into exile.

Initially in exile, God’s people had lots of questions...pointed questions...for God. “How long, O Lord?” “Have you forgotten us completely?” And they had waited for an answer from God. But, as the decades passed, and people were born and died in Babylon, some of the exiles came to unsettling conclusions about God. Some concluded

that God did not care, and that God did not notice their suffering, and, just maybe, that God didn't have the power to do anything about their difficult situation.

In our text for this morning, the prophet Isaiah speaks directly to the beleaguered and questioning hearts of the exiles. He has some important truths that he wants them to remember about God.

You'll remember that last week Pastor Ken spoke about how the prophet Isaiah, in Isaiah 43:18, exhorted the exiles to "not remember the former things, or consider the things of old," because God was about to "do a new thing" and create a new future for his people. Clearly, God didn't want the people to get so hung up on the past that they missed the great future that God promised was in store for them. Some things must be forgotten by the exiles.

In his sermon, Pastor Ken also lifted up Isaiah 46:9 as an example of God calling his people to remember certain things from the past that they needed to cling to as they moved into the future. In this verse, Isaiah records these words of God: "...remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me..." So, some things also, without question, need to be remembered by the exiles.

So, just what is it that God, through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, wanted the exiles to remember about him as they moved into the future?

Before I answer that question, I want to describe what I think God is trying to do in this passage. Some of you may remember a sermon I preached this past summer on friendship. My text for the sermon was taken from the book of Proverbs. In that sermon, I shared a powerful illustration of friendship in action. A young woman was diagnosed with a treatable, but chronic disease that was going to require some demanding lifestyle

changes. On the day she received this diagnosis, she arrived at her apartment alone feeling overwhelmed and discouraged. When she opened the door to her apartment, she was astounded by what she saw. On literally every wall in every room of her apartment were post-it notes. Knowing that she was discouraged, her Christian friends came to her apartment while she was away and wrote and placed post-it notes all over her apartment, pledging their support and offering their encouragement.

I liken our passage this morning to reminder post-it notes from God, intended to pledge support and offer encouragement to the exiles, and, by extension, to you and me.

So, now, I come back to our question: what is it that God wants the exiles to remember as they move into the future?

Post-it note # 1 says this: There is no one like the Lord. In verse 25 of our text, God poses these questions: “So - who is like me? Who holds a candle to me?” The obvious answer is: no one. There is indeed no one like the Lord. Our text for this morning and our first reading from Psalm 147 both eloquently speak of the awesome greatness and power of God who created everything that exists, including the stars and human beings.

Being reminded of the greatness of God is well and good, but we can imagine that the exiles might feel a little like the author of the recent book, “If God is so Great, Why Do I feel so Bad?” God’s people were desperately in need of some indication that God wasn’t just some distant and powerful deity, untouched by their pain. Post-it note # 2 from our text directly addresses their need.

Post-it note # 2 says: Just like the stars, God knows you by name. Our text affirms that God is the One who “marches this army of stars out each night, counts them

off, calls each by name...and never overlooks a single one.” God not only is great and powerful, the One who creates the stars and human beings; God is also good and kind and tender, the One who knows each star and each person by name.

Four years ago, following the tragic loss of the space shuttle Columbia during re-entry into the earth’s atmosphere, President Bush referred to our text for this morning and eloquently spoke of this reality that God knows each person by name. He said,

In the skies today we saw destruction and tragedy. Yet farther than we can see, there is comfort and hope. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘lift your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created all these? He who brings out the starry hosts one by one and calls each by name.’

Because of His great power, and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. The same Creator who names the stars also knows the names of the seven souls we mourn today. The crew of the shuttle Columbia did not return safely to earth, yet we can pray that all are safely home. (1)

God so clearly wanted the exiles to know with certainty that he knew each one by name, cared deeply for each one, and would lead them all safely home from exile.

Not only does God care and know each exile by name, Post-it note # 3 reminds us that: God never loses track of the details of our lives. You’ll remember that the specific complaint of the exiles against God recorded in our text was, “God has lost track of me. He doesn’t care what happens to me.”

The prophet Isaiah thunders against this charge, and reminds the exiles that God “...doesn’t get tired out, doesn’t pause to catch his breath. And he knows everything, inside and out.”

The prophet reminds the exiles that God knows and is involved in all the details – both great and small – of our lives. While I was in college, I attended an Inter-Varsity

Christian Fellowship conference and heard a true story that so powerfully illustrates this point.

The story was told by Dr. Helen Roseveare, a British medical missionary who spent her entire career serving in Africa. Helen was the only doctor assigned to a missionary hospital and orphanage. The conditions were very primitive. One night as she was delivering a baby, the child's mother died during childbirth, leaving the hospital staff with a very premature baby, and a crying 2 year old whose mother had just died.

The hospital was ill-equipped to care for a premature baby. They had no electricity and no incubator. They wrapped the child in blankets and placed her in a box and raced to fill their only hot water bottle. They hoped these primitive measures might help the baby to survive. While filling the hot water bottle with water, it burst. It was their only hot water bottle.

That night, in desperation, they placed the baby near a cook fire and tried to keep her warm. In the morning, Dr. Roseveare met with the orphanage children as she did each day for prayer. She told the children about the baby and her two year old sibling who had lost their mother. She told them about the hot water bottle that had burst and the medical staff's desperate attempts to keep the baby warm enough to survive.

During the prayer time, one ten year old girl, Ruth, prayed bluntly and earnestly. "Please, God, send us a water bottle. It'll be no good tomorrow, God, as the baby will be dead, so please send it this afternoon." Dr. Roseveare recounted that she gasped at the audacity of the prayer. Ruth concluded her prayer by saying, "And while you're at it, would you please send a doll for the little girl so she'll know you really love her?"

Dr. Roseveare admitted that she had difficulty saying “Amen” to the prayer. It seemed that the only way God could answer this prayer was to send a package from her homeland, and in almost four years since she had left Britain, she had not received any packages.

Halfway through the afternoon, Dr. Roseveare received word that a car had arrived at their mission outpost. That day a twenty-two pound package from home addressed to Dr. Roseveare, her first package in four years, arrived. She called the children of the orphanage together and they opened the package. Inside they found a variety of clothing and food items. Near the bottom of the package she discovered to her amazement a brand-new water bottle. Ruth was watching as Dr. Roseveare discovered the water bottle. She rushed forward saying, “If God sent the water bottle, he must have sent the doll, too.” Rummaging to the very bottom of the box, she pulled out a small, beautifully dressed doll. She looked at Dr. Roseveare and said, “Can I go over with you and give this doll to that little girl, so she’ll know that God really loves her?”

The package had been on its way from Britain for over a month. God never lost track of the needs of the premature infant and her two year old sibling in that mission hospital. God knew and cared and was involved in the details of their lives. (2)

There is one final post-it note. Post-it note # 4 says: God is always eager to give fresh strength and new beginnings. Our text for this morning reminds the exiles of God’s eagerness with these words, “He energizes those who get tired...those who wait upon God get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles, they run and don’t get tired, they walk and don’t lag behind.”

Understandably, the exiles wondered about their future. We can imagine that they might have wondered if they had drifted so far from God in exile that they were no longer God's special people. But, God reassured them that if they would wait upon him, that is, if they would put their trust in him once more, they would receive fresh strength and new beginnings. In essence, God was trying to clearly communicate that he was not done with the exiles, that, indeed, he was doing a "new thing" and preparing a future for them that would rival their wildest imaginings.

Friends, these are powerful post-it notes from God. God says to the exiles: There is no one like me. Just like the stars, I know you by name. I never lose track of the details of your life. I am eager to give you fresh strength and new beginnings.

The best news of all is that these are not just post-it notes from God delivered to Babylonian exiles some 2500 years ago. They are words from God to you and me today. Like the exiles before us, God invites us this morning to once again put our trust in him, and to receive the fresh strength and new beginnings eagerly offered to each one of us.

Friends, remember these timeless truths: God is great and God is good, and receive the fresh strength and new beginnings offered to you today. May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

- Robin Garvin
Mar. 18, 2007

Notes:

- (1) From: CBS News, "President Bush Mourns Shuttle Crew," February 1, 2003.
- (2) "A True Tale from Africa," Dr. Helen Roseveare, 2000.