

Profound Simplicity

The Bible is at once so simple and at the same time so incredibly deep that, in the words of Joseph Sittler, no matter how many layers down we delve, we will never find the bottom.

Isaiah 40 is an example of this breathtaking contradiction. It provides such a simple answer to the question of who is God. Yet that simple answer has such profound implications for us that we can only begin to scratch the surface of what it means.

Our reading today begins with the author almost in disbelief that anyone could *not* know who God is. *Have you not known? Hasn't it been told to you? Hasn't it been obvious from the very beginning? This isn't rocket science, for cryin out loud! The answer has been sitting there in plain sight from the beginning of time, from the foundations of the earth.*

He then turns poet, and reaches into his imaginative soul to paint a word picture of God: God sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. God stretches out the heavens like a curtain, spreads the cosmos out like a tent to live in.

Isaiah has gone to the limit of creativity to colorfully evoke a picture of the most awesome, powerful being possible, so far above humans it isn't funny and says: that is who God is.

You know who else did that? The authors of Genesis. In the story of creation in Genesis 1, the authors turned poetic and reached into their creative souls to paint a picture of God as the most awesome, powerful being possible.

Both of them know exactly what they are talking about, and why shouldn't they? It's so simple who God is. All you have to do is open your eyes to the wonders of creation and then let your imagination take you as far as it can. That will bring you to an appreciation of how big and powerful and awesome God is.

The only difference between then and now is that science has pushed the limit of our knowledge to a point where we can see so much more wonder and power in God than the Old Testament writers could ever have suspected.

In Isaiah 40, having established the vast gulf between the Almighty and us, and the bewildering fact that, nonetheless, the Almighty loves us, the writer then lays out exactly what this means for us and for our lives.

God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. When we are absolutely exhausted by the challenges of life and the cares of the world, when it seems we, and this crazy world are going nowhere, and it's all we can do to survive, God will make it possible for us to mount up with wings like eagles.

We shall run and not be weary, we shall walk and not faint. Who knows why God's love is showered on us; that isn't something we can remotely fathom. But because it is, that makes all the difference in the world.

I'm not sure if this is the reason this reading is paired with our Gospel reading for today from Mark, but it makes sense to me. Notice the 24-hour time sequence in the story. Jesus spends most of the day teaching in the synagogue. When he finally leaves the synagogue, he encounters Peter's mother-in-law who is in need of healing. Jesus takes care of that.

Now as the sun begins to set, and his work day should be over, the people brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. The whole city was gathered around the door. Jesus spoke and healed all these people, one by one. Can you imagine how long that must have taken?

Then, in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place to pray. Did you catch that: while it was still dark. That means, after that long, brutal day, how much sleep could he have gotten? An hour or two at best.

Then he's up and praying. His disciples look for him and when they find him, he says, "Let's go on to the neighboring towns so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And they took off and went through Galilee, teaching, preaching, and healing those in need.

It's exhausting just reading that. What's more, it is so unexpected. Prior to this time, Jesus was not a dynamo of energy.

Based on the fact that nothing at all is written anywhere about his life during his early adult years, he was not accomplishing any great deeds. Why is he suddenly this whirlwind of activity?

I am in the middle of a biography of Ulysses Grant that sheds a little more light on this. His story is Isaiah 40 in living flesh. Nearing the age of 40, Grant's life was a mess. He was dismissed from the army for alcoholism. He failed as a farmer, in real estate, and everything else he tried. His father was disappointed in him; his in-laws hated him.

He was desperately trying to feed his family working as an assistant clerk in a leather goods store, and basically failing at that.

Grant was at the end of his rope, the end of hope, in despair of not being able to provide for his family. Just getting up in the morning was difficult. With nothing important to do, he could hardly motivate himself to do anything. Weary, powerless, going nowhere. Just trying to survive.

When the Civil war started, his country was suddenly in desperate need of people with military experience. Grant had fought in the Mexican War. He also believed strongly in the Union cause. Suddenly this man who was slouching around in a dead-end life with no future, who could hardly summon the gumption to wait on customers, suddenly found his strength renewed.

He mounted up on wings as eagles. He became such a dynamo of energy and initiative that family and friends could hardly recognize him. Grant accomplished so much that within three years, the man who was almost universally scorned as a deadbeat had become the highest ranking and most trusted general in the nation, and turned around the course of our nation's history.

What caused that incredible difference? One word: purpose. Grant needed something worthwhile to do, something he believed in. Once he had that, he was able to get off the ground and soar like an eagle.

Look back on that Gospel story. What caused this remarkable change in Jesus? What caused him to take on the Herculean task of proclaiming the good news and caring for thousands of people?

Jesus tells us in the last verse of reading. "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; *for that is what I came to do.*"

It's the same as what happened to Grant. Jesus found his purpose, his meaning in life. He received that purpose and that meaning from God. And once that was instilled in him, there was no stopping him.

Life without meaning is not much of a life at all. Meaning comes from God. Purpose comes from God. When Jesus invites us to join in the mission of the kingdom of heaven, what he is offering is purpose. That purpose will make as great a change in us as it made in him.

I cannot in any way explain what Isaiah 40, and what Genesis, tell us is true. I cannot comprehend why a being, to whom we are no more significant than a quark in a proton in a molecule of a grain of sand, would ever spare a thought for us.

I cannot understand why God not only grants us life, but infuses us with purpose so that we can live a life that is far more fulfilling and satisfying than simply existing. I cannot for the life of me imagine caring one tiny bit about what happens to an individual quark, much less being willing to die for that quark.

But we do not have to understand it. All we need to do is accept it, give thanks for it, and as individuals and as a congregation, get to work on that great purpose God has given us, that gives meaning to our lives, that allows us to mount up on wings as eagles.