



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Have You Heard? Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

I still remember the sense of awe and fear that I felt when I first saw the enormous head of the Wizard of Oz appear on our TV screen and heard that booming voice echo into our living room: "I am Oz, the Great and Powerful! Who are you?" As you yourself remember, Dorothy and her friends cowered before the towering image until she finally stepped forward and in a timid and hesitant voice answered, "I—if you please, I—I am Dorothy . . . the small and meek." to which the Wizard boomed, "Silence!"¹

Dorothy and her friends were awestruck and afraid, captivated and wonder-filled in the presence of the Wizard of Oz. Knowing that the Wizard was the only answer to their problem, they heeded his words and went off to do his bidding and retrieve the broom of the Wicked Witch of the West.

If the Wizard, using 1930's technology, could produce that kind of image and message, imagine what Isaiah could have done had he had access to today's technology. Nevertheless, the scene in the fortieth chapter of Isaiah is ominous enough. The setting is the assembled council of heaven and a voice is heard proclaiming a message to the Hebrew people. The voice extolls the wonder, the majesty, and the power of God:

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 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; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. 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.

To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He

¹Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allen Woolf, *The Wizard of Oz*, screenplay, 1939. Available online at: <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Wizard-of-Oz,-The.html>.

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.

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”? 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. Isaiah 40:21-28

I imagine the Hebrew people, like Dorothy and her friends, cowering in fear and wonder at the presence and power of God. Feeling very much like grasshoppers beneath the stare of the Almighty, they nod their heads. Yes, they have known. Indeed, they have heard of the great and powerful God who created the heavens and earth and everything within and beyond.

They knew by heart the story from the beginning. With little more than a thought and a whisper, God spoke the world into existence. Light . . . let it be! Sky . . . there it is! Land . . . down there! Plants, creatures, birds, and fish . . . become! Their poets had sung the praises of the Creator God for centuries:

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have ordained;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor. Psalm 8:1-5

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world. Psalm 19:1-4a

Bless the Lord, O my soul.
O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,

wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.
You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.

Psalm 104:1-5

The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty;
the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world;
it shall never be moved;
your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting.

Psalm 93:1-2

We also know this God. We have heard of this God of power and
might. We sing of God in our worship:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.²

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the king of creation!
O my soul, praise Him, for he is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear, now to his temple draw near;
Praise him in glad adoration.³

We sing your mighty power, O God,
that made the mountains rise,
that spread the flowing seas abroad,
and built the lofty skies.
We sing the wisdom that ordained
the sun to rule the day.
The moon shines full at your command,
and all the stars obey.⁴

²Walter C. Smith, "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise," *Hymns of Christ and the Christian Life*, 1876.

³Joachim Neander, in *A und O Glaub- und Liebesübung* (Stralsund: 1680); translated from German to English by Catherine Winkworth, 1863.

⁴Isaac Watts, "We Sing Your Mighty Power, O God," 1715, alt.

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the worlds thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed:
then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee:
how great thou art! How great thou art!⁵

Like the Hebrew people, we know this powerful God who rules from on high and created all that exists. Like the people of Isaiah's day, we have heard about this awesome God. And like Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Lion, we sometimes cower in the presence of such power and mystery.

But do you know that the curtain has been pulled back? Have you heard that the veil has been torn? While Dorothy and her friends discovered a kindly balloon pilot masquerading as a wizard, we find God himself, as powerful and creative as ever, in human form. We discover that while God is still worthy of our reverence and awe, we have nothing to fear from the One who created us, redeemed us, and watches over us forever. We find that the Almighty has shucked off the trappings of heaven and taken on human form, humbling himself in order to serve us, loving us enough to die for us, and rising again so that we, too, may enjoy eternal life.

No longer do we think God regards us as little more than grasshoppers. We do not stand before God as "the small and meek." Instead we commune with God as his children, created and claimed by him. He greets us, not as an avatar of the Creator but as Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Do you know that when Jesus began his ministry, he did not wait for people to seek him out? He went directly to the people who needed him most. Have you heard that whenever someone asked for Jesus' help, he offered it with grace?

Earlier we heard a story from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Having dealt with an unclean spirit in a man in the synagogue, Jesus went to Simon Peter's house. When he arrived, he discovered that Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a fever. Without a word, Jesus took her by the hand and helped her up. And the fever left her. There was no ominous sounding voice, no mysterious incantation, no dangerous task to be accomplished. He took her by the hand and helped her up.

⁵Carl Gustav Boberg, "O Store Gud," 1885, trans. Stuart K. Hine, "How Great Thou Art," 1953.

Have you ever known such a thing to happen? Have you ever heard of such news? This man, whom we know to be God Incarnate, the One who created everything that exists, who placed it all in order and caused it to function, this Almighty, all-powerful, Creator-Redeemer, cared enough and took the time to take Simon's mother-in-law by the hand and help her up. Amazing. Why would the Creator of the universe waste his time on one of us? Why would the One who came to redeem the world, bother with a sickly woman in a seaside cottage in a tiny village of a crossroads country far from the seats of power and influence?

The Hebrew people had known God cared for them. They had heard about God's blessings for them. Earlier we heard the voice from the heavenly council extolling the power of God, but we did not hear how God would extend his power. Continuing, the voice said:

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. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 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.

Isaiah 40:28-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard? God, the Creator of the universe, who spoke the world into existence, who fashioned humanity with his hands, who breathed into us the breath of life, still cares deeply about us, about you and me. God is powerful because we are weak. God is tireless because we are tired. God is hopeful because we are weary. Have you not known, have you not heard that Jesus came so that we might have life, full and complete, now and forever?

I have always liked the way James Weldon Johnson described the creation in his poem-sermon, *God's Trombones*:

Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that he had made.
He looked at his sun,
And he looked at his moon,
And he looked at his little stars;
He looked on his world
With all its living things,
And God said: I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down—
On the side of a hill where he could think;
By a deep, wide river he sat down;
With his head in his hands,
God thought and thought,
Till he thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.⁶

Have you not known? Have you not heard? God, the Almighty Creator,
cares about you and will take your hand and lift you up. Amen. Amen.

⁶James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, 1927, Electronic Edition; © This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It may be used freely by individuals for research, teaching and personal use as long as this statement of availability is included in the text.

February 8, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We are searching for you, O God, hoping for a cure for our ills, seeking healing for our maladies, praying for a remedy for all that is wrong in our lives. We have heard that you alone can work miracles and you, O God, know that we could all use a miracle or two. So we come searching and hoping and praying.

We are tired, God. The busyness of life simply wears us out and the responsibilities of life press upon us. We plod along doing what we know to do, but realizing that we are making little headway. We need your help, O God, for energy and resilience.

We are weary, God. The challenges of life have bested us and the claims upon our love have drained us. We know the right things to do and we know what would make the world a better, happier, more peaceful place. But our hope has drained out through the holes in our idealism. Our enthusiasm has waned. We need your help, O God, because we are fainting and no longer able to run the race.

We are ill, God. None of us is immune from the diseases that prey upon humanity. None of us is free from the anxiety that confuses and perplexes us. None of us is assured that good health will be our gift in life. We need your help, O God, for healing and health.

We are also not alone, God. We know that other people offer these same prayers and seek the same help from you. We also know that we may well be the answer to someone else's prayer, so we ask that you renew our strength, revive our spirit, and heal our apathy in order to fit us for your ministry. Take our lives, O God, lift us up, heal us, and help us to proclaim your Good News in word and in deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.