

FEBRUARY 8, 2009  
EPIPHANY 5  
“A GOD’S-EYE VIEW”

Let us pray: Gracious God, we confess our confusion before the mysteries of our world, a world we struggle to comprehend, but a world that we know is comprehended in your grace, a world whose confusion you chose to enter into in the person of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name I pray. Amen.

All of our texts for today, despite their considerable dissimilarities, have this in common: they presume that faith has a “*message*” to “*proclaim*,” as St. Mark says of Jesus; that St. Paul has a “*gospel to proclaim*” as he writes the folks in Corinth; or as our Psalm put it we have “*thanksgiving and praise to sing*” in response to the Creator God “*who sends out his word; who makes the wind to blow and the waters to flow.*” There is a “message,” a

proclamation, a gospel, a word that draws us together on this cool and overcast winter morning, a message around which we gather to warm our hands and hearts.

Second Isaiah, the prophet of the Babylonian Exile, called by God to instill hope in a people who, as Psalm 137 puts it so plaintively, “*sat down and wept when they remembered Zion*” wondering “*how can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*” — the poet/prophet of the exile put it most memorably of all, I think, in the latter verses of his 40<sup>th</sup> chapter which Charles read for us earlier. It is perhaps the loveliest chapter in the Bible (which I encourage you to read in its entirety sometime this week) that begins with the words we heard way back there in December on the Second Sunday in Advent which many of us can’t help but hear to the strains of Handel’s Messiah: “*Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her....*”

Only then follow the words that St. Mark will use at the very beginning of his Gospel to describe the ministry of John the Baptizer: “*A voice cries out: in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*” And then a few verses later is painted in words this familiar and comforting image: “*He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather that lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom....*”

It’s further on in this much-loved and well known 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah that the words of today’s OT text are found, words maybe not quite so familiar to us, I suspect. But they’re words at whose rhetorical force I marvel as the passage begins with a series of seemingly relentless rhetorical questions that drive us, the hearers, to the point of awed silence:

*Have you not seen?*

*Have you not known?*

*Has it not been told you from the beginning?*

*Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?*

It kind of hushes us up, doesn't it? And maybe puts us a bit on the defensive? What is it we're supposed to have known, heard, been told, understood? Anyone remember what follows from the text we heard read? What is it we're to understand from the foundations of the earth, that was told us from the very beginning?

*It is God who sits above the circle of the earth,*

*and its inhabitants* (that's you and me, sisters and brothers, so listen carefully now)

*its inhabitants are like **grasshoppers**.*

That's it?! That's the message, the Word, the Gospel, that God has for us—that we're like grasshoppers?! Well how does that make you feel? Why I thought we were created in God's image. I thought we humans were inspired with the very Breath of God breathed into us at creation, I thought, as the Psalmist once put it, that we're made a "*little lower than the angels*" and, what's more, that God has given us

“dominion” over all things. So how is it we’re **grasshoppers?**

But, you see, the message, the Word, the good news, isn’t so much about us, in the first place, as it is about God. But mention us, us human grasshoppers, and that’s all we hear with our anthropocentric — our human-centered — way of hearing and seeing and understanding. So let’s back up a minute and hear it all again as a good word **about 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 God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,***

***who** (that is, God) *stretches out the heavens like a curtain,**

*and spreads them like a tent to live in;*

*who brings the great to naught,*

*and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing* (take that, you self-appointed ‘masters of the universe’, whether in Washington or Moscow, Tel Aviv or Teheran, Beijing or Baghdad).

And the prophet concludes:

*Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,  
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
when God blows upon them and they wither,  
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*

The English Catholic writer of the 1920’s, G.K. Chesterton, author of the Father Brown mysteries which some of you may know, once observed that there are essentially two kinds of people in the world: when trees are waving wildly in the wind, one group thinks that it is the wind that moves the trees while the other group thinks that the motion of the trees creates the wind. Now most of humankind, Chesterton goes on, through most of the centuries of human

history has believed that the wind moves the trees. But in recent times a new breed of people has emerged who blandly hold that is the movement of the trees that creates the wind.

Now this is what Chesterton is getting at. The older consensus has always held that the **invisible** is behind and gives energy to the **visible**. But in our modern—and now, I suppose, our post-modern world—this former broad consensus has fallen apart in a world dominated by what we like to think of as “the scientific world view” so that today what most people naively assume they see and hear and touch—what is measurable and quantifiable—is basic reality—is the “really real”—and it is that co-called “empirical reality” which generates whatever people come up with that cannot be verified with the senses. As Paul wrote the Christians in Rome, for example, “*For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?*” or as he wrote the Corinthians, “*we walk by faith, not by sight.*” Like the wind, whose effects we can see

but which itself is invisible, so the prophet is saying, God’s wind, God’s breath, God’s Spirit—all translating the same word both in Hebrew and Greek—is powerfully if invisibly at work in our world, even as in today’s Gospel reading, by a seemingly miraculous act of healing. Healing itself a good example, isn’t it, of God’s invisible power at work, for all that we know about healing—scientifically and medically speaking—there still is a great deal of mystery about the whole healing process that is not fully reducible to scientific, empirical explanation—take the whole matter of the placebo effect, for example, that I’ve mentioned before.

Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not arguing for a “God-of-the-gaps” view of things, that classical Christian apologetic that mistakenly finds God only the gaps—the interstices—of human understanding. The problem there of course is that the more scientific progress is made and our understanding of nature expands

and deepens, God is increasingly made homeless and beside the point in our world.

Rather, I believe with Isaiah as a matter of faith and not sight that God **comprehends** all of reality—the whole created order, the cosmos and the chaos that surrounds it—not that God inhabits only the gaps in our knowing. And the wind—invisible and powerful and life-giving—is a great metaphor for God’s “elusive presence” in our everyday world.

Isaiah goes on, but now it is Yahweh’s words we hear:

*‘To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal’? says the Holy One (yet another rhetorical question).*

*Life up your eyes on high and see:*

*Who created these (meaning the stars and planets. In other words, use your senses, Yahweh is saying, open your eyes and check it out, for while I am invisible my work isn’t.)*

*The one 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*  
(perhaps the origin of Jesus' words about  
not one sparrow falling to the ground  
without God's knowing it.)

And now finally, after reminding these exiled grasshoppers of God's utter otherness as Creator, finally the Voice addresses directly the exiled people's concern:

*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?'*

(That is, 'Why do we seem to be ignored by God?' — an honest enough question, often asked in the Psalms, e.g.). But then again comes Isaiah's rhetorical refrain:

*Have you not known?  
Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

“Get over it grasshoppers!” Isaiah seems to be saying.

Which is Yahweh's way of saying through the voice of the prophet: "I am no mere tribal deity, no mere totem of you clannish descendents of Abraham, you ungrateful former slaves whom I liberated from Egyptian slavery.

I—Yahweh—the God of the burning bush—I will be who I will be. But know that I am the Creator of the ends of the earth."

Continuing in the voice of the prophetic Word bearer now, the Message continues:

*The Lord does not faint or grow weary;  
the understanding of the Lord is  
unsearchable (a nice warning to scientists  
and theologians alike).*

*The Lord 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.*

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?” brothers and sisters in Christ. The good news is that “**WE ARE NOT GOD.**” We are not omnipotent or omniscient or omni-anything except maybe omnivorous in our appetites and in our exploitation of the creation. We are, to put ourselves in perspective—in God’s perspective, a God’s eye view—but grasshoppers—a nice, humorous image I always think—folks bouncing here and there, sometimes violently swarming our environment like our locust cousins, or sometimes rubbing our legs together to make sounds so others take notice of us, a little like our cousin Jimminy Cricket, wishing upon a star, wondering what or who we are.

But the best of the good news is that God knows who we are and what we’re for, though from our perspective we’re but specks of dust on an uncommonly lucky planet where life is a lottery ticket with a god-zillion odds against us and the future of the kind of life we embody.

The good news is that though most of the time we haven't a clue about how to create on our own any lasting meaning or purpose out of our existence, God the Creator has somehow managed to shoe-horn the divine presence into the likes of one of us—into an infant born in a cow's manger—who grown to adulthood embodied for us what God intends human life to be—love to the death for one another lived without fearing death, as if death had no real finality—the kind of life worth dying for even.

Believe it or not, this man Jesus is God for us—for us human grasshoppers--and not just us believers but God for the whole cosmos. It's true. Trusting that it's true isn't easy. Only God makes such faith in this kind of invisible reality possible. And the good news is that God does just that freely and unconditionally and often unexpectedly. Grace we call it.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? You bet you have. And you're lucky you have! The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.