

ISAIAH 40:1-8; 18-24

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all the people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

A voice says, Cry out! And I said, What shall I cry? All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever...

To whom then will you liken God or what likeness compare with him? An idol? A workman casts it and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. As a gift one chooses mulberry wood—wood that will not rot—then seeks out a skilled artisan to set up an image that will not topple.

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.

LESSONS FROM THE MOUNTAIN: Episode 5

MOUNTAIN TIME

Isaiah 40:1-8; 18-24

I plead guilty, your Honor! No, you do not need to appoint a Special Counsel to conduct an investigation. I freely admit that I have been my own worst enemy and that I have heavily bought into the old Protestant Work Ethic which not only encourages, but demands that we be productive members of society which is pleasing to God and that in a just below consciousness sense, is a primary determinant in our salvation. Work! Work! Work! You can play later, but not until you earn it!

Every year we go to the mountains, I come away with a lesson in hand. In fact, I firmly believe that if you go there and return empty-handed that you must have stopped your ears to their whispering message. In the Bible, the mountains are the meeting place between God and humans. God typically delivers commandments and insights from the high places of earth. But you must grow very still to hear what the mountains say. And that is just the point they were underscoring to me this year. Sit down, stop what you are doing, be still and then you will hear my voice.

Oh, like many of you I have trouble being still. I am guilty of impatiently moving from one thing to another so quickly that I forget why the very activity I am engaged in was so important in the first place and I have jumped to something else and my mind is already speeding ahead to the next intersection like the motorcycle cop leading a funeral procession. Is it any wonder I often struggle to sleep at night?

This is what makes Hot Springs, North Carolina an ideal location for curtailing this whirlwind of mental activity. Hot Springs is, shall we say, on Mountain Time. Because nothing happens in Hot Springs. There are no newspaper stands; the inn at which we stay has no television; it is set in a valley through which the French Broad River cuts its swath through the

mountains of the Pisgah National Forest; it does have the railroad which winds along the banks of the river, but the trains go as slowly as life in the town and only three or four times a day—not like the 30 or 40 I am used to at home. Conversations are long and lingering. Life stories are told without hesitation.

And as dusk falls and darkness begins to quietly swallow the surrounding mountains, a stillness settles in that feels like eternity. You cannot really see them in night's shroud. But you can sense their presence and know full well that in the morning they will still be there. They have been there for millions of years; they are here today and they will be there again tomorrow. They haven't changed. They form the foundations of the earth. And so their constancy made me wonder—why am I going so fast? What is my hurry? What am I seeking? How come I can't throw away my watch and be on Mountain Time?

The poetically beautiful writings of the prophet, Isaiah, drive home a point to a people who desperately need to be reminded that there is a much larger picture in life than their current suffering. He is addressing those who have been taken as hostages and are currently living in Babylon, exiled from their homeland. They are longing for home. They are reaching out for hope.

To a lesser degree, perhaps, we and the greater portion of humanity seek the same reassurance. We are, after all, human; and humans tend to become obsessed with their circumstances which often renders a sense of meaninglessness and futility to their lives. We lose sight of the temporary nature of our existence. We are all aware of our mortality, of course, but we are very good at denying it. And while that may be helpful in one sense since it is not useful to dwell on it, there is a downside to it as well. Because what it ironically does in our efforts to get everything done is makes us actually speed time up and in the process cutting us off from our spiritual natures which are not earth bound and are not limited by time; instead being connected to the eternal life source which is God.

Listen again to the prophet: *A voice says, Cry out! And I said, What shall I cry? All*

people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever...It is he who sits above the circle of the earth and...who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to live in, who makes the princes for naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

As I see it, our problem is this: when we become fixated upon all of the details of our daily life—our routines, the latest headlines, Facebook postings, the completion of the dozens of tasks we have set before ourselves which our work or our families or our households require of us, we easily lose sight of what Isaiah refers to as *the word of God*. A consequence of that can be that we feel a compulsion to go faster and faster in order to avoid an existential confrontation with the Big Questions of why I am here and what is the purpose of this merry-go-round of activities. But the reality is that sooner or later—whether it is because of an illness, a major change in life, the loss of a significant person—it all comes to a grinding halt forcing the confrontation to occur. Going faster will not prevent it. We cannot outrun it. For the question of eternity will be delivered like an Amazon package on our front steps. What will be in the box?

For many it becomes a spiritual problem masquerading as a mental health issue. Why are we the most medicated nation in the world? Who hasn't gone through intense periods of anxiety or aggravated depression where we just feel angry and can make no rational sense of our lives and just long for some relief from all of the complications and irritations of the worlds we have helped to create. And we don't even know where to turn except to a prescription from our doctors, or alcohol or perhaps something illegal and dangerous to our health. There have been times in my life when I thought I could just exercise my way out of it. Who hasn't been there from time to time?

If we are seeking a cure for this, I am not sure we will find one. But I do think we

can manage it. I recently read a story about three couples in Washington state who had a mission to complete. One person in each couple had lost both parents within a year. In sharing their grief as friends, they hatched a plan to scatter their parents' ashes on the mountain behind their homes. So upward they hiked and in time discovered a rocky outcropping that called out to them to receive the ashes. It was a beautiful and easily recognizable place they could return to at any time to pay their respects.

The Reverend Ann Lewis of Snohomish, Washington, later wrote about that sad, but significant occasion: "It occurs to me that most of life we live somewhere in between the valleys and mountaintops—in gray ordinariness that has subtle reminders of our mortality as well as promises of future joy. But it is the reports of what glory is above that empower us to endure and persevere in faith."

This is what Isaiah was calling upon the diaspora to remember. *A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all the people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

I go to the mountains periodically seeking spiritual balm for my soul. Not everyone can go there. For you maybe it is a lake or the seashore or even to a park in your neighborhood. But no matter where it is, there is one requirement—that you be still; that you focus on your breath and that you let the world stop for awhile and that you listen. Don't talk. Don't take your phone. Just open your heart and receive. Get onto Mountain Time. Because Mountain Time is God's Time.

Reverend Thomas Dunlap September 2, 2018