

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Hart, February 8, 2009, Epiphany 5, Isaiah 40: 21-31, Psalm 147: 1-12, 21, I Corinthians 9: 16-23, Mark 1: 29-39

+In the Name of the Holy One who counts the stars, who heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds. Amen.

I like this morning's reading from the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah. I've had my eye on it for a couple of weeks. "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..."

Isaiah sings of the Holy One who creates and rules the universe. Princes and rulers of the earth come and go, planted and grow, then suddenly the harsh dry wind of history sweeps them from the scene. The prophet asks us to lift our eyes to the speckled, starry sky. He reminds us that God alone calls all the stars by name. God is the creator of the ends of the earth.

It's one very potent way to get the attention of humans, draw from us awe and reverence, make us mindful of the immensity of the universe and of the short span of our lives, lives full of ambition and fated for death.

The Welsh poet and Anglican priest, R.S. Thomas, wrote that reverence for creation will work on us this way. We can be drawn to God by the stars of heaven:

"Come to me by numbers and  
Figures; see my beauty  
In the angles between  
Stars, in the equations  
Of my kingdom. Bring  
Your lenses to my worship  
Of my dimensions..."

But you know, reverence and awe don't always work, not with everyone. Sometimes reverence and awe for the vastness and complex beauty of God's creation stops when we encounter human pain and suffering at the personal level. And the Prophet Isaiah was aware of this. He doesn't end his hymn of praise on the note of God as creator.

Isaiah brings his song to a conclusion with the One who creates as the One who touches individual lives. "He gives power to the faith, and strengthens the powerless." It's an amazing poetic juxtaposition. God who sits above the circle of the earth and sees us like grasshoppers reaches out with the finger of creation and infuses each one of us with power and strength. The weary and powerless of the earth are noted. And "they shall mount up with wings like eagles."

That same poet, R.S. Thomas, saw it too. In that poem he said:

"...you must put  
Your knowledge off and come  
To me with your mind  
Bare [...]"

I will come to you in the simplest  
Things, in the body  
Of a man hung on a tall  
Tree you have converted to  
Timber..."

The earliest followers of Jesus knew their scriptures. They were plenty familiar with this passage from Isaiah among many others. This they knew. God created the heavens and the earth. God was ruler of the universe. And if individual lives mattered it was because God loves the work of creation down to the last grasshopper. And these early disciples of Jesus watched Jesus touch people and heal them. They made the connection. Only God the creator does this for you and for me.

Today's Gospel reading is about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It starts with the healing of the wife of Simon Peter and then the story moves outside the door of Peter's home where the crowds gathered. "And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons..."

The people experienced something startling in Jesus' ministry. The God who sits above the circle of the earth was walking amongst them, caring for them, touching their lives with the power of creation itself.

When I thought about all this, I tried to bring to mind when, I thought, people are most vulnerable. It seems that the message today is spoken not only to evoke our awe and reverence for the Holy One, the Creator, but also to bring us to a mindful awareness of God the healer. And so I was thinking about those from the parish who are ill, those in hospital. Deacon Joyce Treppa made calls on them earlier in the weeks.

When are we most likely to sense the personal power, strength and healing of God? When we are sick, when some thing or event has drained from us our strength, that's when we gather before the door of Peter's house seeking God.

I hadn't even written these words, when I got a call that one of those in hospital, Marjorie Hughes, had died. After that phone call, there was a palpable sense that God the Creator and God the Healer are one. Marjorie has found the power and strength of God and has risen up with wings like an eagles.

For the first time in my life, this week I have been intimately involved in the potential death of a business, in the laying off of employees and with the hurt and anxiety of people who suddenly feel powerless. Again this is a moment when people are vulnerable, when God the Creator can seem very remote unless that creative power is experienced very personally.

And this very thing is the promise the scripture readings bring us this morning. The psalmist says, God "counts the number of the stars." And the psalmist also writes, God "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." The One who created the stars and can call them by name, is the One who reaches into the lives of every person, no matter how weak and powerless, no matter how sick and grief stricken. The energy that flows from God through creation flows right into your life, my life, the lives of those without work, the lives of those in hospital and most certainly in the continuing lives of those who now know the nearer presence of God. The God who is the creator of the ends of the earth is the God at work in Jesus curing the sick before the door of Peter's house.

We come together with faith and trust in this God. We will go from here with power and strength to meet the days ahead. For we shall “mount up with wings like eagles, ... [we] shall run and not be weary, walk and not faint.”