

Isaiah 40:21-31

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 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. 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.*

On Eagles Wings - February 7, 2021

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Today is Super Sunday and it should be a pretty good game, for a change. Now I know not all of you are football fans or even sports fans. However, I believe we are all fans of excellence in whatever form it may take. Whether you care about the final outcome of the game, or the commercials on TV, or the quality of the snacks, I hope you can appreciate that in terms of pure human athletic competition, this day is intended to bring out the best the players can give.

And what then? After it's all said and done. After the final whistle blows and a victor is determined, what then? Well, two things, really. First, there will be a champion and the name of the winner will be engraved on a trophy and mentioned on sportscasts for a few weeks. But what also happens is that the whole cycle starts again. The winner is declared and immediately, all 32 NFL teams roll their records back to zero and prepare for a new season. Compete, find a winner, then compete again. Such is the sporting life.

And indeed, such is the nature of all our lives, isn't it? I mean at any given point in our lives, we are either performing some task and striving to do well at it, or we are preparing to perform a task. Most babies are preparing to crawl, then walk, then run. We go to school, where the objective is to prepare us academically and socially to participate in larger society. At some point, we find a job — a job which hopefully makes us a bit happy and uses the talents and knowledge we have obtained over the years. But even when we are employed, even when we have settled in somewhere, and yes, even when we may have a partner or started a family, we are still in the process of preparation. It never stops, does it? Prepare and act. Prepare and act. We are always preparing for something so eventually we can go out and do something.

Now in some ways, the pandemic has disrupted this cycle of prepare and do. The necessity of social distancing has curtailed many activities which we are used to preparing for. Most of our in-person meetings, whether at business, or with family, or at some kind of event — most of our in-person meetings have been reduced or eliminated. We can't prepare for something that's not going to happen, can we?

At the same time, we have prepared ourselves with new ways of communicating and interacting in order to get things done because to be human means we are always about doing something. Sleep is good. Rest is good. Genuine get-away-from-it-all vacations and retreats are good. But unless we are physically ill, doing nothing is not good. Human beings are supposed to do things and we all know about people, perhaps ourselves, whose lives deteriorate when they have nothing to do.

But in all our business, whether it is our doing or our preparation, a question looms over us. What is it all about? What is it for? Have you ever taken a moment in the midst of your constant preparing and doing to ask yourself what you're doing and why you're doing it?

Now the quick answer, of course, is that we do what we do because we have to survive. We have to eat, we have to provide for our families. As long as we are being productive in some way or another, that's OK.

And certainly, surviving is an essential part of living. And no doubt, there are some things we do not because we necessarily want to, but because we have to. All of us, at least in the short run, have to do things we just don't plain like. What if we didn't, for example, change the baby's diaper, who would? What if we didn't go to our office job with lousy pay and a nasty boss, how else would we pay the rent? If we didn't put up with certain relationships with people we don't like, then we may get into deep trouble by speaking out rather than just keeping quiet.

Life can be like a Merry-Go-Round, can't it? Up and down and up and down and round and round and round with no getting off until everything comes to a complete and final stop.

Now for some, being on the Merry-Go-Round of life is perfectly fine. There are ups followed by downs, but we know there will be ups again. Yes, we go round and round and the scenery never changes, but least we know about the familiar path we're on. We take comfort in knowing that which we have seen before, we will see again and again and again. No changes, therefore, no threats.

There is something to be said for stability. Some of us prefer more risk and adventure than others. However, few of us relish 24/7 chaos. Sure, we may wonder from time to time what life is like off the Merry-Go-Round, but the certainty of the Merry-Go-Round is preferable for many.

Perhaps that is why in this beautiful piece of scriptural poetry, the prophet Isaiah compares human beings to grasshoppers when viewed from the perspective of God. Grasshoppers are not long-lived creatures. They are born in the spring, thrive in the summer, lay their eggs, then die in the fall. Fifty-one days, for some species, that is all. Just fifty-one days.

One-sixth of one year. Nothing at all, at least compared our lifespans, isn't it? I mean, human beings live five hundred times as long as grasshoppers do, don't we? But all of us will die someday. Grasshopper or human, we do share a common fate. That is why Isaiah has no problem comparing humans to grasshoppers when seen through the eyes of God.

I'm not saying these things to be depressing. Far from it. Life and death are facts. The problem comes when we start feeling entitled to life and thus are shocked at the inevitability of death. On one level we know this, but many still forget: our existence on this earth, no matter how many years, is a gift. Life, in all its forms and spans, is a gift from God. Not one of us asked to be born: not a tree, not a bird, not a mushroom. We are alive purely by the desire and grace of God — but somehow we keep forgetting that simple fact.

Forgetting that we owe our existence to God and not ourselves can make us behave very strangely. When we forget God is our creator and not us, we can get into our heads the idea that we humans can somehow cheat death. We can somehow hold on and live forever. It amuses me that so many kings, dictators, and presidents just assume that they will be on this earth almost forever. They just assume they will always have power and control. After all, they have convinced themselves that they control the people and destinies of the nations they rule. Obviously, therefore, they can control their own personal destinies.

I'm sure your familiar with the poem Ozymandias by Percy Shelley:

I met a traveller from an antique land / Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand / Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command / Tell that its sculptor well those passions read / Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things / The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed / And on the pedestal, these words appear: / My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away."

The problem is this, friends: without God or shall I say without faith in God, human beings will turn themselves into gods. In other words, the richer or more powerful the godless people are, the more they will start confusing themselves with the one true God and thus forget that they are as mortal as everyone else.

Unfortunately, it is not just the kings and the billionaires who confuse themselves with God, it's their armies of followers. After all, it is for many far easier to believe in a visible human being than in an invisible God or a Jesus who did walk the earth physically but no longer does.

Yet it seems every generation immerses themselves in the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is all about substituting a person or an object or even a political ideology for God. (Note the word “idol” in ideology?)

And this is the dilemma of our time. Every generation, of course, has had rulers and other elites put themselves forward as virtual gods. We can point to numerous individuals who have claimed godlike powers, powers over life and death, power to expel enemies, power to bend the facts of history to focus all attention on them. In our present day, people like Kim Jong-Il of North Korea are for all intents and purposes the god of those unfortunate people. Others, like Putin of Russia, or Xiang of China very much follow in the steps of Hitler of Germany or Pol Pot of Cambodia. Over the past few months, even we in the United States, the supposed bulwark of democracy, have become painfully aware that certain individuals are being worshipped as near gods. The sad truth is that throughout the centuries, people of all nations are painfully disposed to surrender themselves to the total, godlike control of another human being and have been surrendering for thousands of years.

But now, the temptation of idolatry is even greater. We not only have dictators of all kinds clamoring for godlike powers, we have them directly invading our homes via social media and other technologies. During World War II, Hitler’s face was plastered all over newspapers, Germans were forced to greet each other with the words, “Heil Hitler” and “der Fuhrer” was constantly on the radio and holding rallies. He was hard to avoid, because he intentionally portrayed himself as the god of Germany.

But nowadays it’s even worse. We all know how easy it is for today’s gods to invade the privacy of their followers. Twitter, Facebook, chat rooms, 24-hour cable news, blogs of all kinds drill into the minds and hearts of millions every day. The controversy surrounding the Q-Anon conspiracy demonstrates how easy it has become for people to be infected with the poison of false gods. No wonder Q-Anon is described as a “religious cult” — because it is!

The good news, however, is that the Church, or at least this congregation, has a choice. Sadly, many groups who call themselves churches and claim to follow Jesus Christ have blindly chosen to worship at the altar of the gods of the 21st century.

Unfortunately, the sad truth is because so many so-called churches of Jesus Christ are doing so, the minority of Christian Communities like ours, communities who reject the secular gods of our age, we are being tarred with the same brush. Many who are not part of a faith community hear the

word “church” or “Jesus” and run screaming in the opposite direction. And you know, given the way many churches and religious leaders act these days, I can’t blame them.

At this church, in this congregation, we have chosen to worship God, the God of Israel, the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This God and this God alone. We reject any human being who claims to be god or acts like a god and any system of belief that says human beings can pretend to be god.

This for us, is and will be a never ending struggle. As today’s gods are exposed and deposed, the truth is that new people and new lying ideologies will arise in their place. It is up to us, this church, the Church of Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ to challenge them. Not ignore them, not run away from them. We must call out the idols of our age and proclaim the one true God.

Our God, the Lord, the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth and far beyond. Our God does not faint or grow weary; the understanding of our God is unsearchable. Our God gives power to the faint, and Our God strengthens the powerless. None of these things, not one of them, do the human gods of our time do. In fact, they do just the opposite. They destroy humanity. They destroy life.

Our path is clear and the end result is clear: those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, we shall mount up with wings like eagles, we shall run and not be weary, we shall walk and not faint. The challenge for us is clear: reject the gods of today. Follow the Lord and only the Lord.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.