

Sermon for January 30, 2022—“Perspective”

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany (OT), Year C—Texts: Ps. 19:1-6; Ps. 121; Isa. 40:9-11, 21-26

Can you remember a time when you looked up into the night sky, and really noticed the stars, the magnificence of the night sky? I do.

It was April of 1994, and my wife Jane and I were living in upstate New York at the time. We were on our way to Montreal, Canada for a short vacation. We’d gotten a late start, so it was around 9pm, and we were driving north on Route 87, along the New York/Vermont border. Still a few hours away from our destination, it had gotten very dark, and very, very cold. I recall noticing that Jane had fallen asleep, and having the thought that we seemed to be in the middle of nowhere.

It was about then that we passed a sign telling us that the exit for Lake Placid was just ahead. As we did so, I looked up into the northeastern sky, and there I saw something that I’ll never forget: Waves of shimmering lights that seemed to dance, and magically change colors. I was awestruck for a moment, but quickly decided to pull over. As I did, I woke Jane, and pointed to the amazing phenomenon in the otherwise clear night sky.

We both got out of the car, and despite the bone-chilling cold, we watched for a while, realizing that what we were seeing could only be the Northern Lights. It was over almost as quickly as it’d begun, and we were left standing there, watching the now clear night sky. It seemed as if there were millions of stars above, tiny, bright diamonds shining against a black velvet backdrop. I never realized until that night how much the lights of the suburbs had obstructed my view. But that night, on the side of that highway, I felt I could see into the farthest reaches of space. But more than anything, I remember being in absolute awe of the splendor of God’s creation.

Anytime I read about the majesty and glory of God, as it’s revealed in the night sky in the Bible or elsewhere, I remember how it felt that night in New York, to sense the sheer awesomeness of God. Even now, when I’m out on a cold, clear night—any night—I look up and remember that night; what I’d witnessed, and what I’d felt.

As I look back, that sense of wonder has been an important part of my faith journey. I think it’s because it helps me to keep things in proper perspective, especially when things aren’t going so well. Isaiah knew how difficult keeping the right perspective was when faced with life’s challenges.

The prophet was writing to the people of Israel after they’d experienced war, a period of judgment, and exile from their homeland. He was addressing people who’d undergone great trials and adversity. They were so beaten down that they’d forgotten that God was still with them. They began to question whether God remembered them at all. Isaiah knew their situation. He knew their hearts—and he knew that it was in fact **they** that had forgotten God, not the other way round. He challenged their forgetfulness. He wrote to the people, and asked a crucial question: “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?’”

In our reading, Isaiah offered words of comfort and encouragement. The most important thing for the Israelites to remember, was the identity of the God they served. As one scholar put it this way, “The issue isn’t God’s grasp, but Israel’s weariness and exhaustion.”

So Isaiah calls to the Israelites. He tells them to look up at the stars. “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. Isaiah knew that the people would regain their perspective if they lifted their eyes to the heavens.

Remember this, Isaiah wrote, that it was our God formed the heavens. He knows the number of the stars in the sky, and calls each by name. No doubt he remembered the words of the psalmist we read a moment ago: “The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Think about this wondrous truth. Does it give us a sense of the power and majesty of God? If this is the God that we worship, the God who calls each of us by name, do we believe that God can help us in our time of struggle?

Isaiah says look at the stars, and remember the power, the magnificence, of the God you serve. What a wonderful promise to a people who were discouraged, beaten down, and worn out with life! What a wonderful gift! God is our strength. God gives us what we need, even when we think we can’t continue on our journey.

So today, when we look at our lives, what do we see? Are the problems that we’re facing so overwhelming there seems to be no end to the struggle? Do the obstacles in our paths prevent us from imagining what might be possible tomorrow? Or the day after?

Do you despair of any hope for true healing to take place? To find some sense of meaning in our circumstances? Is there regret? Remorse? Guilt? Have we made bad choices? Is anyone feeling alone and powerless? Forgotten? Alone? Take heart! Through the prophet God speaks to us: Lift your eyes, says our God. Lift your eyes to the heavens.

All may seem overwhelming. The good news is that we’re not alone. We’ve not been forgotten. We don’t have to do it all alone. God reminds us, through the apostle Paul that God’s grace is sufficient for us, that “power is made perfect in weakness,” that whenever we are weak, then we are strong. So, we must never—not for one second—allow ourselves to believe that God has abandoned us. He never has. He never will.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus told his own disciples in a time of great anxiety: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are counted. So do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows. And just before He was arrested, Jesus said to his disciples: “I am not alone, because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage, I have conquered the world!”

Still, despite all that’s been said, and all that’s written, all that been passed on to us, it’s easy to forget, as writer/theologian George MacDonald once wrote, that “affliction is but the shadow of God’s wing.” It’s easy to lose sight of the trees in an immense forest. That’s when we most need to remember that it was God who made the forest in the first place. But we forget don’t we? My goodness—yes. How quickly we forget. I think the problem is that we can’t see things from God’s perspective.

For that reason, there’s a poem I’d like to share. It’s by the Rev. Dean Beatty, and it’s entitled “Blessed Comfort.”

O, what a blessed comfort,
that God makes no mistakes.
Though trials lead to sorrows,
His own he'll not forsake.

Recall, he is the righteous judge.
He always will do right.
Though now, there may be storm clouds.
The future will be bright.

He has a plan and purpose,
Though hidden from our view.
By faith we trust his wisdom,
That he will see us through.

The paths of earth we walk today,
are tainted by the fall.
But these we'll leave behind us,
When we hear God's final call.

Paths of faith are sometimes hard.
We long to see ahead.
But if we let the Savior lead,
We'll never be misled.

Returning to the comfort,
That God makes no mistakes.
We trust His plan and purpose,
That our good He'll undertake.

A wonderful poem, but I have to ask: Do we? That is, do we trust God's plan and purpose? That our good He'll undertake? Do we believe that God knows us? That God loves us? That God cares about us? Are we placing our lives in God's hands? Are we trusting in God's power? I read somewhere that, "Faith isn't believing that God can. it's knowing that God will!" God himself says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

Friends, you may have heard this before, but I'll say it again—and here brothers and sisters, is the thing—what we need to do is let go and let God. What we need to remember is that "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." We need to trust God to be God. God understands our hopes and our dreams, our fears, our anxieties, and our pains. God's wisdom is unsearchable. God's power is unmatched. I'm always telling people that maybe it's time to stop telling God how big our problems are, and start telling our problems how big our God is.

Remember who you are and—perhaps more importantly—whose you are. Rest in God's holy presence. Remember to look up at the stars. There is where you will find the gift of perspective.

Thanks be to the God. Amen and amen.