

Isaiah 40:1-11

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 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 for ever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!' See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

John 3:18-21

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

"Helpless are the Hopeless"
Rev. Charles Schuster
September 13, 2009

Friday night, we're sitting in front of the Blue Bell Ice Cream Parlor on the north end of Fort Collins, and I'm enjoying a large scoop, I mean a large scoop, of peanut butter and chocolate ice cream in a cone, when we are approached by two young people who appear to be recent middle school graduates whose primary issue carries with it concern about surviving high school calculus and what's the best cure for acne, and they walk up to us, Kathy and me, and they say to us, "Would you like a million dollars?" And they hand us a piece of paper that looks like currency, and it says "A Million Dollars." And on the back of it we find the million dollar question, "Will you go to heaven?" And they're asking us, "Do you worry about death? And after you die, do you think about hell?" It's the Living Water Church, and they're asking us about death. And it's made me think about sin and hell and heaven and while eating an ice cream cone, getting prepared to think about my eternal rest, in front of the Blue Bell Ice Cream Parlor. And since then,

I've thought about life and death and sin and heaven and hell, and I can see what they mean. It's a million dollar question. The Living Water Church is worried about our blasphemous, adulterous, thieving lives. I can see what they mean. It's just I think it's deeper than that. There's a problem with us, and it comes out in ways they know, but it's deeper than I think where they've gone. The Million Dollar Question.

The million-dollar question we address ourselves to today, related to the state of our soul, the million-dollar question is, was, and always will be, who are we? Rally Day forces us to ask the question posed by Isaiah, "Who are you?" If you look at the prophet, you see there's a difference in tone between the first 39 chapters and the rest of it, the 66 chapters. I think there's a difference between the 55th and the 66th, but that's a different issue. We'll talk about that next week. 1st Isaiah, which we talked about last week, is telling people the bad news, they should repent, but they do not hear it. 1st Isaiah was a member of the Living Water Church. The chapters after that, 2nd Isaiah, chapters 40 through 55, written during the Exile by somebody else, telling the people the good news, and that the bad times are over, and they didn't want to hear it. Strange as it seems, it's true that people would rather listen to bad news than suppose the news is good. A bad thing we know about is better than a better thing we're not sure of. We can put up with the worst easier than we can imagine the best, because we've learned to cope with the fact there is no hope for anything better.

First thing that's wrong with us is our low opinion of ourselves, sometimes. You see, it's Rally Day, and we can't rally if we retreat. We'll never get somewhere if we think we can't. British royal navy and marine corps disclosed fitness reports of some of their recruits. This is what they said of one candidate. "The men would follow him anywhere, but only out of curiosity." Another was labeled, "He'd be out of his depth in a puddle." Another, "This young lady has delusions of adequacy." Another, "She sets low personal standards and then consistently fails to achieve them." And then there was one who had a second report, a follow-up. "On my last report, I said he had reached rock bottom. Since then, he's begun to dig." And finally, the analysis of one man, "This person, if accepted into the Royal Navy, would be depriving a village somewhere of its idiot." We can only hope the candidates have a better opinion of themselves.

We will never rally if we think we'll never get there. The people of Israel had this problem, they were slaves in Egypt. Moses took them out, but they didn't want to go. In the desert they complained, they said to Moses, "What's the matter, were there not enough graves in Egypt? You brought us out here to die." Moses never made it to the Promised Land. I think he never thought he could. He complained to God about the people, and his mission. "Why are you giving me these people? They're not even Methodists." He complained to God about being asked to speak to the people when he had a speech impediment, and he was angry with his people, so angry when they made the golden calf, that he took the tablets and threw them down. He never made it to the Promised Land. And the incredible thing about Israel, if you look at their history, it happened in time in history, the Babylonians are coming to take them over, and what are they doing? They're beginning to negotiate with the countries around them, and they start negotiating with Egypt. Going back to being slaves was better, because it insured they

were safe. That was the best they thought they could have. That's the problem, sometimes our problem. You can't rally if you think you'll never get there. We've got to look inside and see the strength God gave us. We've got to look inside to know we have the resources to do what we must, and to go where we can. We are not helpless, we are not hopeless, we can't rally if we only retreat. We can't move into the future if we stay stuck in the past. It's easier to stay stuck. It's a comfort in a way to become prisoners of our memories than to venture forth with new dreams.

Christopher Reeve was Superman in the movies and my book, Superman even more as that awful fall off the horse... quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down, from his wheelchair, saying to us, years ago, several years before his death, "So many of our dreams seem impossible. Then they seem improbable. But finally they become inevitable." And that great soccer player, I think the best in the world, Mia Hamm, she said, "Celebrate what you've accomplished, but raise the bar a little each time you succeed." Last Sunday night I watched a football game. I remember thinking the green and gold had no chance. The CSU football players looked across the field and they saw their little old sheep, feeble little Cam, standing there waiting to be shorn. It just took a couple of students to lead him on a very thin rope, and the little sheep was timid and almost polite. And across the field was this buffalo snorting and digging dirt, and boxed up into a pen, locked and keyed, two tons of mean and angry, runs as fast as a pickup truck, jumps as high as seven feet, and they call him Ralphie. They could have called him Brutus or Zeus or Caesar or Thor, and it took fifteen people holding onto big strong ropes to drag him around Folsom Prison... Stadium. Ralphie the Buffalo, massive beast, Cam the cute small humble polite sheep, and yesterday the faces Weber State's Wildcats. Again, big, dangerous, furious wildcats. They were so lucky, a fumble with thirty seconds to go. If they're not religious before that game, they should be now. The ram, the wildcats, the buffalo, who's next? O, the humanity, O the slaughter. "What chance do we have?" they've got to be saying to themselves. But if those football players had thought too much about the mascots they would know not to rally because they must retreat because you cannot rally when you know that you can't get there. Defend the fort? Let 'em have the fort! Head for the hills! Except, a ram can whip a buffalo or a wildcat if the ram believes there's a tiger in the tank and a dream in the mind and a destination in the wind.

If we look inside to see what God has given us to do and where God has set for us to go, we'll get to the promised land. We are not helpless, because we are not hopeless. Who do we think we are? See, it matters. Million dollar question, who are we? It was Jesus who said, according to the Gospel writer John, "The light has come into the world. Men and women love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil." And then he's supposed to have said, "But if we come into the light, it is clearly seen that our deeds have been wrought or borne from God." Today's Rally Day. Today we dream for our church, but there is sometimes something wrong with us if we forget who we're not. We are not gods. We won't get anywhere if we think we have arrived. It's easy to forget we aren't gods. On Friday, Michael Jordan was inducted into the professional basketball hall of fame, and as he was being recognized, he said to the audience, "Don't even think that there's going to be another Michael Jordan. There will never be another Michael Jordan."

I remember Muhammad Ali saying, "I am the greatest." I remember the Beatles saying that they were more popular than Jesus. You know, sometimes we think it's all about us and there's nothing beyond us, we think we've arrived. But we'll never get there if we think we've arrived. There's no reason to rally if we're already there.

Your children putting your preachers in the dunk tank at the All-Church Picnic and then going about bragging, I've said this before, it seemed to me a lot of sin going on there. Seemed to me it ought to be addressed, that I would address it with the parents. And then the day after the picnic, in the back yard of our house, on Monday, day off for me when I should have been thinking about the next sermon and the love of God, and we got yellowjackets in our back yard. There are ways to get rid of yellowjackets that are Christian. But I bought a six-pack of insect spray, Raid, and found myself shooting them out of the air. Surely there's something wrong with the soul of a man who would turn an infestation into target practice, whistling all the time "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." But I tell you, all at once, I was God in by back yard, and there was justice, and it was cruel and fast, and the Living Water Church could use me as their poster child as a pastor on the fast track to perdition.

When we think we're God, when we forget who we're not, we'll do strange things, we'll come up with strange ideas. There's a story, it's about people who thought they had arrived. "After having dug to a depth of ten feet last year, New York scientists found traces of copper wiring dating back a hundred years and came to the conclusion that their ancestors already had a telephone network more than a hundred years ago." Not to be outdone by the New Yorkers, in the weeks that followed, a California archaeologist dug to the depth of 20 feet and shortly thereafter, a story appeared in the *LA Times* that read, "California archaeologist finding traces of 200-year old copper wire have concluded that their ancestors already had a high-tech communication network a hundred years earlier than the New Yorkers." One week later, the Moundsville Daily Echo, a local newspaper in Moundsville, West Virginia, reported the following. "After digging as deep as 30 feet in his pasture near Proctor, West Virginia, Bubba Brown, a self-taught archaeologist, reported that he found absolutely nothing. Bubba therefore concluded that 300 year ago, West Virginia already had gone wireless."

We're not going to get there if we think we've arrived. We're not gods. We can do great things, but we can't do it all alone. Roy Nichols, I think one of the great bishops in the United Methodist Church, African-American, Pennsylvania bishop, tells the story often told, I think it's his story, I heard him tell it twice, I read it in a book he wrote - Little boy working with his dad on a garden, trying to clear out the rocks so they could put a garden in. Little boy hit a big rock, couldn't budge it. He dug under it, he tried to pry it up, it wouldn't move. "Daddy," he said, "I've done everything I can do. I can't get this rock up." And his Dad said, "You haven't quite done everything you can do." "Why is that, Daddy?" "Because you haven't asked me to help." And guess what, the dug it up together.

I like how Kierkegaard said it, he said "It's easier to become a Christian when I'm not a Christian than to become a Christian when I already am." It's better to know I still have work to do on my spiritual life than to think I've done all that's necessary, in other words.

We're adequate, we are not perfect. We're on a journey, and the destination looms. We are not gods. We haven't arrived. God is not an angry judge, God is not the giver of gifts at our command. God is rather, strength for the journey. God is light when the world is very dark. God is a perspective when we've got difficult decisions we've got to make. God is a power beyond us to help us, but we've got to ask and we've got to know we can't do it all. We are not helpless, because we are not hopeless. Our hope is in the God who made heaven and earth, and we will never get there if we think we've arrived.

Friday night sitting in front of the Blue Bell Ice Cream Parlor, enjoying a large scoop of peanut butter and chocolate ice cream, I got handed a million dollars, and got asked if I was worried about death, and got told how God is not happy with our blasphemous, adulterous, thieving lives. The Living Water Church is worried about our soul. They should be, because sometimes we forget the power of God inside us, and sometimes we forget the power of God beyond us, really, to rally. We've got to think we'll get there, but we've also got to know we haven't arrived.