

Have you not known?

Isaiah 40:12-25

February 1, 2015

Have you not known? Or do you want to plead ignorance? No one ever told me. I wasn't raised in the church. I haven't been paying attention. I've been busy. I do have my own life to worry about. I didn't know.

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?

The world was made by the one who sits on his throne above the earth and beyond the sky.

Above you, above the nations, above the earth. Beyond the sky, beyond the stars, beyond the universe.

To him, whole nations are a drop in the bucket. To him, powerful rulers are wisps of straw that the wind blows away. To him, Russia is nothing at all. To him, the Republic of China is nothing at all. To him, the United States of America is nothing at all. To him, Barack Obama and Warren Buffet and Bill Gates and Tim Cook are wisps of straw.

To whom, then, or to what, can this God be compared? To nothing and to no one, because everyone and everything that is is because God made it. The pot cannot be compared to the potter. The painting cannot be compared to the painter. The song cannot be compared to the singer.

And that is what makes an idol, any idol, so ludicrous. The artisan works carefully, using the best materials at hand -- silver and gold, or oak or cherry if her patron cannot afford these precious metals. She works carefully, shaping and securing and adorning the image so it will please her patron and ... so it won't fall down! Then her patron takes the image and puts it on his mantle or stands it in the corner of his living room and he falls down and worships it. He worships her creation, hoping she made it well enough -- that it won't fall down!

It's silly! It's just silly, isn't it?

But we worship idols, too. We work carefully, choosing the best materials at hand: pleasant thoughts, pleasing ideas, happy fantasies, soothing assurances. We work carefully, making our idol big enough, strong enough, solid enough that it won't fall down, that it won't let us down. And we give our idol a name, We call it ... God.

But this god is an idol. This is a god of our own making, a “safe” god, a god under our control. We make him -- we make it -- the way we want it to be. We decide which attributes we like in our god and which we don’t. We fashion a god with whom we are comfortable, a god who will not test us or trouble us or make demands of us, a god who will serve us. And we worship this god, this god of our own making, a god -- if we have done our work carefully enough -- that should not fall down, at least in our lifetime.

But we know better. We know better! In our most lucid moments, in our most honest moments, in the moments -- admittedly rare -- when we do open our eyes, when we do open our ears, we know better. Have you not known? Have you not heard?

There is a place -- if you have courage enough to go there, or if the circumstances of your life take you there whether you want to go there or not -- there is a place where the line between belief and unbelief grows very thin, a place where any god of our own making, any safe and comfortable god, simply will not do, a place where our idols fail us, a place where our idols fall down.

A place where we are confronted with the stubborn opacity of what is: a reality so full of mystery, so far beyond the limits of our feeble minds, so full of light and darkness, so full of matter and emptiness, so full of wonder and terror, so full of wonderful and terrible things -- astonishing beauty and unthinkable suffering, serendipitous fortune and inexplicable misfortune, moments when it seems there must be a god and moments when it seems there can’t be a god.

In this place -- where the smartest among us know nothing and the strongest among us can do nothing and the most pious among us cry out, “Is there no God?” -- in this place, you do one of two things: you become an unbeliever, or you -- literally -- meet your maker. You come face-to-face with the living God.

The people of Israel were in such a place, the people to whom the prophet spoke. Their homeland had been ransacked, their leaders humiliated, their holy places desecrated, and they themselves forcibly relocated, living out their days in a foreign land. Their god, the god they had thought was on their side, protecting them and prospering them, the god to whom they made dutiful sacrifices in exchange for answered prayers and personal and national blessing, this god had failed them. Either he wasn’t there, or didn’t care.

It was the gods of Babylon that were impressive. No, not its gods -- what good are gods? -- but its men, its women. Oh, the glory and wonder of Babylon’s surpassing wealth and overwhelming might and splendid culture!

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? To the Lord, the nations are nothing. Babylon is no more than a drop of water. The Lord brings down powerful rulers and reduces them to nothing. They are like young plants, just set out and barely rooted. When the Lord sends a wind, they dry up and blow away.

In Babylon, in exile, the people of Israel will either have no god at all, or they will finally become aware of, they will finally remember, the God who is.

To whom can the holy God be compared? Certainly not to our idols, our idols, our homemade gods, that pacify us and get us through life's little bumps and turns, but only because we get ourselves through life's little bumps and turns, because the idol itself, the god we fashion for ourselves, has nothing but us in it. When the wind blows, when the sky turns dark, when the emptiness of space opens out before us, when the terrors of history unfold before us, our idols -- and we -- fall down.

But the Lord is there -- not a safe and comfortable god, but the God who is, whose thoughts are not like our thoughts and whose ways are not like our ways, who may test us and trouble us and make demands of us, but who stands when no one else is left standing, who cares when there is no one left to care, who is more and better, more awesome and more terrifying and more just and more wise and more glorious than anything we could have imagined, the God who loves us, the God who loves this world, the God who loves all that he made.

Is there anyone else like the Lord? Whom will you worship? The safe and comfortable, and pretend, god, of your own making. Or the God who is?