

Not one of them is ever missing

Isaiah 40:25-27

February 8, 2015

Nobody knows the trouble I see ...

Is that you?

When you are troubled, when you are distressed, what brings comfort?

Probably one of two things -- either a change in your situation or a change in you, either a change in the distressing circumstances themselves or a change in perspective. And which of these comforts does our faith promise? Both!

God will make all things new! God is making all things new. The story of our faith is a story of a God who saves: setting prisoners free, bringing exiles home, forgiving sins and healing diseases, doing justice and showing mercy and making peace and calling faithful people to do the same. God changes circumstances.

But sometimes God's help seems slow in coming, at least from our human point of view. Sometimes it seems that the months and years and even generations roll by and nothing changes and we are still troubled, still distressed. When trouble persists, comfort is found in a change in perspective.

The words of the prophet enjoin a change in perspective. The people of Jerusalem were in distress and had been for a very long time. Their situation had not changed. They lived as poor and defenseless and humiliated vassals, subject to the will and whims of Babylon. Their city and their Temple still lay in ruins, and so many of their people -- neighbors, relatives, leaders -- still lived scattered in faraway lands.

But the prophet tells them: God is coming! You have suffered long enough! Your time of trouble is coming to an end. Endless, changeless suffering is enervating. We grow weak in body and weak in will. We cave in. We give up. But a word of hope is empowering. We can hang on! We can get ready!

Hope provides a different perspective and the prophet also offers a different perspective on the nature of humanity.

All human beings are like grass, they last no longer than wild flowers.

So we don't need to be afraid of anybody: not Babylon's mighty kings or ISIS' murderous fanatics. Neither should we be surprised at our own frailty, our own mortality, our own limitations. Real comfort comes when we remember that God's word endures, that we live out our days, as many as we may have, relying on God's strength, not our own. Comfort comes when we are reminded to put neither our fears nor our hopes in the wrong place.

But the surest source of comfort is remembering who God is.

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?

When our eyes and our minds are all full of trouble, when all we can think about is our distress, we are anxious, we are fearful, we despair. But when we shift our gaze, when we see things from a different perspective, when we "see" God as God is, everything changes. Everything -- our circumstances, our troubles, our selves -- looks different.

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

God is the source and sustainer of all that is. To God the nations are a drop of water and the most powerful of human rulers are like wisps of straw and the people of this earth are like tiny ants. When we "see" God as God is, everything else pales by comparison, everything that seemed so daunting, so intimidating, seems like nothing at all.

But if God is so far above and beyond us, if the nations of this earth are nothing to God, if the rulers of this earth are nothing to God, if the people of this earth are like ants to God, who am I to God?

That was the complaint of the people of Jerusalem. God doesn't know our troubles or doesn't care. God can't be bothered, or is too busy, or isn't paying attention, or is simply too far above, too far beyond, too far away to notice.

And that is often our complaint, too, if we are not too demoralized even to complain. When life is hard, when troubles mount, when nothing changes, we are not really surprised, because we don't really expect God to do anything! We give God his due, we acknowledge him as creator, but we know when it comes to this life, when it comes to facing our own troubles, we are on our own. God is out there, somewhere out there, watching perhaps, but disengaged, maybe even disinterested. Why would I expect the creator of the universe to care about me? That's preposterous!

But the prophet says: "Not one of them is ever missing!" One of what? The stars! Not a star goes missing, because God knows just how many there are and calls each one by name.

Aldebaran, Rigel, Betelgeuse, Sirius, Polaris. Those are some of our names for the few stars we call by name. But God has named them all. God knows each of the more than 100 octillion (that's a billion times a billion times a billion -- 100 followed by twenty-seven zeroes!) stars by name. God is not disengaged, but intimately involved, not disinterested, but infinitely interested. God may be above and beyond, but God is not apart.

And if God knows the names of each of the 100 octillion stars, do you suppose God knows the names of each of this world's seven billion people, men and women created to bear God's own image? Do you suppose God knows your name? Not one of them is ever missing. Are we talking about stars ... or people?

Nobody knows de trouble I see ...

It was a song born in a time of distress, in an age of unrelenting suffering, sung by a people ignored, it seemed, by all the world and by all creation.

Nobody knows de trouble I see, Lord, nobody knows like Jesus.

Somebody knows! Jesus knows! Somebody knows me! Jesus knows me! And that brings comfort. That faith put all the sorrow, all the suffering, into perspective.

So pray for me, brothers! Pray for me, sisters! Help me to drive ole Satan away! Because Satan is a deceiver. And what is Satan's deceit? Convincing you that you are on your own. Convincing you that God -- if, of course, there even is a God -- convincing you that God surely doesn't care about you. Look at yourself! Think about it! You really believe the creator of the universe cares about you?

Well, do you?

Pray for me! Pray for each other! Pray we will not be deceived! Don't you know? Haven't you heard? Not one of them, not one of you, is ever missing ...