

Isaiah 40:21-31
Mark 1:29-39

THE BIG PICTURE

One of the threads running through my life has been a love of writing. When I was a kid, growing up in Homewood, Illinois (doesn't that sound homey?) our local newspaper, the Homewood-Flossmoor Star, had a page near the back called "King Arthur's Court." This was a page where they'd publish, in the newspaper itself, poems and stories sent in by local children. Yes, in the Homewood-Flossmoor Star itself, right there in black and white, you could, if your story was good enough, or at least not too bad, see your name in print. Not only that, but after you had had a certain number of things published, you got to be a Page of the Round Table, and your name was printed right there in the paper in the list of Pages. Yes, right there in the paper!

Then, as you got more and more things published, you worked your way up through the ranks, becoming a Squire, and an Attendant, and a Lady or Gentleman in Waiting, and I didn't know what all else, until finally, after several years, you reached the very pinnacle of literary success: you became a Knight of the Round Table, and you had your picture printed in the paper, and there was a little blurb telling where you went to school and what other things you liked to do besides writing. Yes, right there in black and white, at the top of a page in the back section of the Homewood-Flossmoor Star. I've had some thrills in my life since then, but very few of them have exceeded the joy of becoming a Knight of the Round Table.

I should add that it's not just the thrill of seeing my name in print that keeps me writing. I also love the process of writing itself, even though it can be torturous. But I love that feeling of creating something out of nothing, I love the process of polishing the stone until it begins to shine. Seeing the thing in print is just the stamp of approval on a magical journey that conjoins intellect and unconscious, and a little bit of luck.

It's the luck that seems to be failing me lately. I won't go into all the gory details, but I just don't seem to much sense of inspiration, or idea of where I'm going, or confidence that what I'm working on will develop into anything. And, as a writer, when you lose that sense of self-confidence—well, that's a pretty dark place to go to.

So day before yesterday, at about three in the afternoon, I sat down at my desk, having finally finished all the day's meetings and sent off all the day's emails. I sat down there and opened up the article I've been working on, and I thought to myself, "Let's see if we can make some progress on this." And this horrible feeling came over me, and I began to sharpen all my pencils, and clean up my desk, and check out the New York Times and my Facebook page, and do all the other myriad things that I do when I'm trying to avoid writing.

And, as one of those avoidance strategies, I opened up the Episcopal Lectionary Page and glanced again at the readings for February 5, since I knew that I was supposed to preach on them a couple days hence. I had glanced at these readings quickly, but not carefully, and I had not read through the whole Old Testament passage, partly because of its length. But when

you're trying to avoid writing, you suddenly develop a lot of tolerance for things that might otherwise test your patience.

And so, as I slowly and carefully read through the passage—you can be pretty careful when you're trying to avoid writing—I came to the part at the end about God renewing the strength of the weary:

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.

Well, that is a wonderful promise. And I read it, and I decided to pack up shop and go home for the day. So I did. I closed up my computer, put my books in my bookbag, and walked out into the sunshine. It was a mild day, and the sun was out, and there were some students sitting and lying on the lawn outside the Divinity School, soaking in the sun, and some kids running and laughing on the steps of Duke Chapel, with their parents looking on benignly. And I thought: "It's okay to be going home at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon. It's really okay."

One of the things that made this hard to do—and one of the reasons that I had to keep telling myself that it was okay to do it—was the knowledge, or at least the suspicion, that other people were still hard at work, and getting a lot done. It's tormenting, when you're suffering from writer's block, to open up Facebook and see the status updates from your writer friends, all of whom seem to be on an inspirational jag and to be writing four or five or fifteen pages a day.

This sort of comparison of yourself with others, of course, is one of the most destructive demons there is, and it is a type of demon that can only be cast out by fasting and prayer, or else the sort of intensive psychoanalysis that you probably can't afford. So it's probably cheaper, and in the end more effective, just to think about the sort of thing our lectionary passage from Isaiah is saying. It is addressed to discouraged exiles, people who have been uprooted from their native land and plopped down in the middle of a foreign culture that seems to sunder them from all the sources of vitality they have known. But it reminds them that, even in this situation of alienation and fatigue-inducing despair, the God who has sustained their people down through the centuries is still with them. "Have you not known?" the writer reminds his fellow exiles. "Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?" And he then goes on to enjoin his hearers to lift up their eyes and see the vast host of heaven, the stars, which God brings out every night and counts, calling them all by name.

And this sort of shift in perspective can indeed be therapeutic. In the months after the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, as we were all waiting for the next shoe to drop, and wondering if it would come in the form of an an economy-wrecking computer virus or a dirty bomb or a cleverly engineered bacterium, I found myself thinking about a book I'd seen when

I was a kid called *Cosmic View: The Universe in Forty Jumps*. You can find this book online; I looked at it there again last night. It starts out with a photo of a girl sitting outside somewhere in a lawn chair holding a cat on her lap. Then it moves away from her in powers of ten; the scale of the first picture is one to ten, the scale of the second one is one to a hundred, the scale of the third one is one to a thousand, and so on. At the sixth step, one to a million, you see a map of the central part of the Netherlands (apparently the girl is Dutch), at the seventh, one of Western Europe. At step fourteen, you're looking at the entire solar system, and at step twenty-two at our Milky Way Galaxy. In the last step of this ascending scale, number twenty-six, all the galaxies and groups of galaxies are just dots of various sizes.

Then the author returns to the original picture and starts to zero in on it microscopically, again moving in powers of ten, but this time showing smaller and smaller things, not larger and larger ones, until you reach a scale of ten to the minus thirteenth, and you see the nucleus of a sodium atom from a salt crystal from grain of salt that got stuck to the girl's hand when she ate her lunch. At every stage of magnification, you see some sort of pattern, from a network of fields and roads to the contours of continents to the spiral shape of a galaxy to successive layers of molecules in a crystal. The pattern constantly changes, but there is always a pattern.

And I found this book oddly comforting, because it was a reminder that there is a big universe out there, and that there are infinitely complex worlds hidden beneath our very fingertips. So this book, and books like it—I looked at a lot of galaxies in those days—were reminders that we *weren't* alone, that we *hadn't* been abandoned, that we *might* survive; that there was some overarching intelligence and will guiding the universe, and that it seemed to have designed things in a grand and beneficent and thrilling way, and that it might not intend for us all to commit mutual suicide just yet. "Have you not known? Have you not heard?...Why do you say, 'My way is hidden from the Lord'?...The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth."

And this same everlasting God has a place in his plan for each of us. We are like the disciples in our Gospel story, anxiously hunting down the God who seems to have given us the slip, afraid we're going to miss out, afraid we're going to be left behind. But we're also like Jesus himself, who had to steal away by himself sometimes, who had to leave work at three in the afternoon, who had to recharge his batteries, because he, like us, sometimes found he couldn't deal with it all, because he, like us, sometimes got exhausted, because he, like us, sometimes maybe even became depressed.

But see what he recovers by this transgressive act of abdication, which seems at first like such a dereliction of duty: "Let us go to the neighboring villages that I might proclaim the good news there also; for this is why I have come forth." Somehow, by going off by himself in this seemingly irresponsible way, he has recovered his sense of vocation, his consciousness of being sent into this world for a purpose. "For this is why I have come forth." Ah, yes. What a wonderful thing it is to remember why you are here on this earth. And that is a discovery that the almighty God promises to each one of us.

Near the beginning of the last section of the *Divine Comedy*, the Paradiso, Dante meets a group of souls in the outermost suburbs of heaven. They are there in this relatively humble place because they have broken their vows, even though they were not at fault in doing so. Dante converses with one of them, a nun named Piccarda, whom he had known in her lifetime, and whom he at first has trouble recognizing, because, as he puts it, in John Ciardi's translation, "Something inexpressibly divine shines in your face, subliming you beyond your image in my memory." I love that: "subliming you"—the opposite, perhaps, of "sliming you."

He asks Piccarda nevertheless if she and her companions don't desire a more exalted place in the kingdom of heaven, and she smiles and replies that that would be impossible, because God's will has decreed that they should be where they are, and "his will is our peace." And that is the word of power that casts out the demon of envy and unhappiness and points the way back to [the path of] creativity and life. His will; our peace.

We were put here for a purpose; and that purpose can be known; and that purpose will be fulfilled. Amen.