

Sermon

Feb. 4, 2018

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

Based on Isaiah 40:21-31

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A few days ago I was trying to work at Starbucks. I needed to focus on my work. But I was sitting next to two guys who were in a constant and loud conversation about work, including a few bits that needed to be held in confidence. I tried to work, but their conversation was really distracting me. It was hard to focus. Of course, they had to talk loudly because Starbucks was full of people and most of them were having their own conversations. You could barely hear the piped in music because there was so much talking going on. With all these conversations going on, it was hard for me to focus on my work. In fact, it was almost impossible. And I'm pretty good at tuning out background noise.

I know, you probably are thinking, "Maybe you should get up and leave, go someplace quiet." But no, I chose another option. I went to Spotify on my phone, put in my earbuds, and cranked up the latest Arcade Fire album. All was well. The background noise was muted out and I could finally focus so that I could work...on this sermon.

Sometimes it is hard to focus on the task at hand because of all the background noise. Or you have multiple responsibilities demanding your attention all at once. We call it multitasking. Or it's one interruption after another. You're trying to get your work done while the phone rings, then your husband asks you something, then someone's at the door, then the laundry buzzer goes off. Or sometimes it's hard to focus because our heads get crowded with thoughts. You are trying to focus on your work but your thoughts are wandering off, thinking about what Julie said yesterday, thinking about what's for dinner, thinking about what you will do this weekend, thinking about what Julie said again. Our heads get full of thoughts pulling us in all kinds of different directions. It can be hard to focus.

But then there are other times when we focus on things that shut us down or drain us of our energy. You focus on how you never have enough money. Or how you don't have the strength and stamina you used to have. Or how your hopes were dashed. Or how the hopes and dreams you longed and worked for will not come to pass. Or you focus on what someone did to you, how you were cheated, how you were hurt and mistreated. We sometimes focus on things that raise our anxiety. We relive over and over in our heads negative talk that weighs us down. We focus on what we lack, what we used to have, how great things used to be and how pitiful things are now, and we get down and depressed. We may even start thinking it's too late, it's not worth it, it's over.

What we focus on makes a difference to how we are able to engage or not engage with life. If we focus on negative things, it brings us down and maybe even immobilizes us. It can take away our hope. If we don't focus on anything at all, we go in lots of different directions or spin our wheels. We can't get anything done. If we focus on possibilities, on positive things, it lifts us up and energizes us. If we focus on God, even in difficult times, we find renewed energy and commitment to move forward with hope.

Israel, God's chosen people, were languishing in Babylon. They were in exile. They were broken, a shadow of their former glory. And when they focused on their dire situation, it brought them down. They were despondent. They wondered if their way was hidden from God. Did God know what was happening to them? Did God care? Israel had lost so much. They used to have their own land. They used to have a lot of wealth. Kings used to come to Jerusalem to see the glory of the Temple. David's rule was top rate. Solomon's wisdom and wealth was legendary. The whole world knew about the power of Israel's God. But now it was all gone. Jerusalem was in ruins. Israel had been overrun and all their best had been taken captive and marched to Babylon. Under the oppression of the king of Babylon, they had no political power. They were vulnerable to exploitation. They were a small minority in the land of Persia. They were thoroughly beaten down. They were a defeated people. And as they focused on their lot, despair arose as hope faded.

But the prophet sought to draw their attention toward God. In their gloom and despair he asked them, “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” The prophet reminds them that rulers come and go, but God is constant. In the big picture, all rulers are barely rooted in the earth when God blows on them and they wither and blow away. These great and mighty people, in comparison to God, are just dust in the wind. The prophet reminds them that God is the creator of everything. Wherever they look, in this foreign land of Babylon where they now live in exile, God made that land. God made the Persians, their captors. Everywhere they look, they see the handiwork of God, the one who made earth and sky and sea. The prophet reminded them that God does not faint or grow weary. God is full of energy. Some speculate that God *is* energy. I don’t know about that, but the prophet says that God does not faint or grow weary. And he also says that God shares God’s power with those who are faint. God does not hoard power. God shares it. The energy of God energizes those who are low on energy. God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. God does not beat up or wear down. God builds up and renews. So the prophet says to his people, who are down and depressed, weighed down by their loss, and says to them, “Hey, don’t you know who God is and what God has done? Don’t focus on all that you have lost, focus on God who is with us!”

This doesn’t mean that God makes sure every situation has a happy ending. The prophet isn’t saying that all the people have to do is focus on God and everything will be better. They will have renewed hope. They will remember how awesome God is. They will be encouraged. But they will also remain in exile. They will remain a broken people, oppressed, a shadow of who they used to be. Their present situation will not change overnight. What they gain is hope and the strength to move forward with their lives. God is everlasting and full of power. But God doesn’t fix things or orchestrate everything to work out the way we want in every situation, or even, dare I say it, the way God wants. Yes, God’s plans can be frustrated. Things don’t always work out the way God intends. Free will and rebellion is real.

There are many examples of this. Think of John the Baptist. He was the greatest of prophets, the forerunner of Jesus. Yet his head was

cut off in a jail cell. Stephen proclaimed the gospel to the people in Jerusalem. As we read in Acts 7, Stephen preaches an amazing sermon, taking us through the Hebrew scriptures in order to reason with the people, to help them see what God was up to. But he got stoned to death for it, the first of millions who have given their lives for the sake of proclaiming the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Yet, God saw to it that Peter was busted out of prison, sending an angel to break the chains that held him. The same thing happened to Paul, who not only got busted out of jail but was also saved from shipwreck and a snake bite. Why did God save Peter and Paul but not John the Baptist and Stephen? The prophet would say that God's understanding is unsearchable. Some questions we just can't answer.

Maybe that comes across as a dodge. When you don't know the answer, just say, "Who knows? It's a mystery." People have always struggled with the question of why bad things happen to good people, why God allows some people to make it through their struggles while others fall. It seems unfair, or arbitrary. All I want to say about that is that God never sits back and does nothing. If God is love, then God always acts in loving ways. God influences every situation in order to bring about what is the best in that situation. It's just that God's influence is not the only influence in any given situation. God's influence can, and often is, resisted. It may not be the best answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people. But it seems the most consistent to God's character and the fact that our choices and actions make a real difference.

What God does in every situation that we find ourselves in is to strengthen and empower us. If we turn our focus to God, rest in God's presence, remember who God is, how God loves us, then we are energized. We may be so filled with renewed energy that it is like we are soaring on eagle's wings! But if not that, we may have enough energy to get running, to set those goals, make that plan, call that meeting, hit the streets and get to work. But if not that, God may give us the energy we need to keep walking, one step after another. You may not be sure exactly where you are walking, but standing still isn't good enough for you. You will pick up that book you've been meaning to read. You will

get up a few minutes earlier so you can spend some time reading the Bible and praying. You will drop by and see your neighbor who lost her husband a few months back, just to check on her. God gives you enough energy to do something positive. It won't solve all the problems in your life. But at least you are doing something to make things better.

And that's the point that the prophet was making, a point we can receive today. When we focus on God, remember what God has done, remember who God is, remember that God is with us, we find that our spiritual strength is renewed, a glimmer of hope is kindled within us, regret and despair loosens its grip. We find ourselves able to move forward and not be frozen in place. For us, individually and as a church, this is good news. Focusing on God, we are energized to fly, run, or walk, moving forward into the future God has in mind for us.