



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Comforting, But Not Comfortable

Isaiah 40.12-31

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Introduction

1. Tom Allen tells about the time a large bowl of Red Delicious apples was placed at the front of the cafeteria line at Asbury College. The note attached read, "Take only one please. God is watching." Some prankster attached a note to a tray of peanut butter cookies at the other end of the line that said, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples." (In Edward K. Rowell & Bonnie L. Steffen, eds., *Humor for Preaching and Teaching*, 78.)
2. Although he probably did not intend to make a theological statement, the prankster's note reminds us that, no matter what we say about God, in practical terms at least, we can think about him in a way that makes him "too small." As J. B. Phillips wrote:

Many men and women today are living, often with inner dissatisfaction, without any faith in God at all. This is not because they are particularly wicked or selfish or, as the old-fashioned would say, 'godless,' but because they have not found with their adult minds a God big enough to 'account for' life, big enough to 'fit in with' the new scientific age, big enough to command their highest admiration and respect, and consequently their willing cooperation." (*Your God Is Too Small*, Macmillan Paperback edition, 8.)
3. In the exilic period, the people of Judah also a view of God that was too small.
 - a. Babylon had overcome Assyria and proved to be even more powerful (and vicious).
 - b. Despite claiming their special place as God's chosen people, regular travels to the temple, and observing the prescribed feasts, the nation had grown weaker and weaker. Their temple, the city where it stood, and the practices associated with it were destroyed. Enslaved, they wondered where God was and why he had not come to their rescue.
4. Isaiah 40.1-11 announced that their fortunes would change. They would be comforted and experience a triumphal return of both God and his people to their land. If they doubted that would happen, they were assured by the command to "Behold your God!" (v. 9). But, what assurance was in that command? How could they be sure God was up to the challenge?
5. Isaiah 40.12-31 answers. It's a passage we need to study and ponder since we can still relate to God in a way that fails to live in awe of his majesty. We can make God too small by wanting a comfortable view of him. Consequently, we forfeit the comfort he promises.

Body

I. God is Not Comfortable (12-26).

A. The view of God's superiority in these verses is breathtaking.

1. His tasks surpass all else (12-14).
 - a) The questions in these verses are rhetorical, designed to remind Isaiah's audience of the majesty of Yahweh.
 - (1) The first question (12) appeals to the largeness and wonder of creation which, for all its grandeur, is still small in comparison to God who is:
 - (a) "so massive as to hold the oceans of the earth in the palm of a hand and to measure the heavens as a seamstress might measure cloth from nose to outstretched hand."
 - (b) "so sovereign as to weigh the mountains and hills in a scale as a pharmacist weighs herbs" (Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion, 23).
 - (2) The second question (13-14) rhetorically declares that no one is wise enough to advise God, and so serves to dismiss the claims of all other pretenders to his throne and place.
2. This general view of God is next applied to his superiority over all powers, whether supernatural or world rulers (15-20, 23-24).
 - a) In vv 15-17, the nations, whoever they are, and whatever their power, "are as nothing before him" (from v 17).
 - (1) Lebanon, renowned for its rich natural resources (especially its forests), serves as a case in point.
 - (2) The point is twofold: neither all the nations, nor any nation, whatever its power, can match God; consequently, none should be relied on too much. James Muilenburg says, "The nations are no threat, they have no power of their own; their pretensions have no weight with God" (in Bruggemann, 23).
 - (3) Verses 15-17 complete 12-14 and prepare for 18-20: the first three verses dismiss the Babylonian's power and the next three dismiss their politics.
 - b) Verses 18-20 address powers that are allegedly greater: any and all gods who might be offered as candidates worthy of being compared with God (perhaps especially those of Babylon, e.g., Marduk).
 - (1) Isaiah quickly dismisses them for what they are: "idols" — therefore, nothing, a point he makes through ridicule of them as mere blocks of wood (a point repeated later—see 41.21ff.; 44.9ff.).
 - (2) Babylon would have put great stock in their massive power—and would no doubt have pointed out that they had conquered the protectorate of Yahweh.
 - c) Verses 23-24 return to the point in light of the relative insignificance of the world: the rulers of the empires are in fact nothing who last for the briefest of times.
3. Verses 21-22, 25-26 are statements of praise to God even as the prophet highlights Yahweh's superiority over the earth and the heavenly hosts of the universe.

B. Isaiah depicts a God we cannot fathom and with whom we should never be comfortable.

1. We are tempted to put our trust in things we can fathom, and the powers we can see and hear.

2. In truth these powers—whether politicians, empires, or even the promises of health and wealth preachers who promise physical blessings for prayers—are, as Don Henley aptly put it in one of his songs, “Little Tin Gods.”
 3. The additional truth is that, whenever we trust these “gods,” or think that we have figured out the one true God to the point that we think we know and can manage what he will do, we set ourselves up for a lack of comfort when we need it most.
- C. Isaiah claims comfort, but only in the context of the majestic God of vv. 12-26.
- II. The Majestic God Gives Comfort (27-31).
- A. Verse 27 counsels us when we get “tunnel vision” and imagine the things we see or the way we think we’ve understood God correspond to reality. instead, we are dismayed (cf. Psa 44.24 for Israel’s attitude in their time of crisis).
 - B. Verse 28 reviews the majestic statements of vv 12-26 and builds the case for confidence.
 1. Notice that his creative work is not a one time occurrence.
 2. Notice, too, that this statement is made with assurance in spite of what appearances might have led them to believe.
 - C. Verses 29-31 drive the point home in a way that encourages us: God’s energy far surpasses that of the most hail and hardy.
 1. The choice is dramatic: “*Either* folk will be faint, weary, and exhausted—indeed, even youths, even high energy young people with seemingly inexhaustible supplies of energy! Or those who hope and wait and expect Yahweh will have strength to fly, to run, to walk—with no weariness or fainting (v. 31). Yahweh is the single variable—either weakness or Yahweh” (Brueggemann, 27).
 2. The challenge is to see life in terms of the reality of God, not the power structures that are close upon us.

Conclusion

1. More than one writer has noted the similarity between Isaiah 40 and Job 38-41. Both are concerned with the problem of people in trouble who wonder if or where God really is.
2. Job’s language may be more forceful because it is more direct: God himself asks the questions and shows Job that he is not comfortable. Job 38.1-7 prepares us for the four chapters that follow.
3. The paradox is in 42.1-6 where Job confesses his relative insignificance before Yahweh and then declares that his clearer picture of the uncomfortable God led to the comfort he so sought and needed. Like Isaiah, he was comforted by an uncomfortable God.

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