



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

“Be Not Dismayed, For I Am Your God”

Isaiah 41.1-20

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Introduction

1. Clara Null tells that the children in her Sunday school class had problems repeating the model prayer. One prayed, “Our Father, who art in heaven, how’d you know my name?” (In Edward K. Rowell & Bonnie L. Steffen, eds., *Humor for Preaching and Teaching*, 76.)
2. That child showed one kind of misunderstanding, but the question may also reflect another: when we face trouble or are overwhelmed, we may begin to think that God is not really watching or caring.
3. We need two things when we experience those thoughts and feelings.
 - a. We need to know that we are not alone in having them.
 - b. More important, we need a clear picture of God and his promises.
4. The section of Isaiah we are studying—and our text in particular—helps with both needs.
 - a. The text reflects a time when Judah wondered where God had gone. Did he care? Did they matter? Was there any reason to hope?
 - b. Isaiah’s response is to teach them things that re-centered their thinking on God.
 - i. They saw the might and power of Babylon and their impotence before that empire.
 - ii. Isaiah assured them that the time was coming when they would again be more of a force in the world.
 - iii. He reminded them that what mattered was whether their primary focus was God.
5. The heart of the reassurance in our text is in vv 8-10, especially in v 10 — “... fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Body

- I. A Summons to Look at God (1-7).
 - A. The text envisions a courtroom scene in which surrounding nations are called to adjudicate the claims of rival gods (v 1).
 - B. The Babylonians would be dealt with by the stirring of “one from the east” whose military power would be more than adequate for the task (2-4).

1. This is best understood as a reference to Cyrus and the Persians (see 44.28; 45.1) who would come from modern day Iran (east of Iraq where Babylon was) and would dominate the region for over 200 years until the rise of Alexander the Great.
 2. The rise of the Persians is attributed to God. Certainly, there were geopolitical explanations, but Isaiah wants the people to be know God is ultimately in control.
- C. The reaction of the witnesses ("coastlands" may refer to the peoples who are observing, including perhaps Babylon and/or other nations within their sphere of influence¹) is also noteworthy (5-7).
1. There are no counterclaims; Yahweh is too strong for them to matter (it is part of Isaiah's "deliberate poetic strategy ... to make the response of Babylon as feeble and unpersuasive as possible [vv. 5-7]" — Brueggemann, 31).
 2. They do respond with fear and confusion, along with empty exhortations to courage.
 - a) The world of the time was terrified of the threat of Cyrus, Yahweh's agent. "As Cyrus cannot be resisted, so Yahweh cannot be opposed" (Brueggemann, 31).
 - b) The response is one of self-deluding panic; "be strong" in v. 6 has the sense of "Get a grip!" But, in truth, there is nothing for them to grip.
 - c) Their fear leads to a hopeless gesture: making idols that "cannot be moved" (a sarcastic reference) because they are being nailed down so that cannot be overturned (an act that means they have no power, force, or mobility).
- D. Isaiah's message to the exiles: a better day is coming; God is at work.
- II. Personal Assurance from God (8-13).
- A. Having established his control over the panorama of world events, Yahweh now turns to specific preoccupation with the exilic community ("but you" - v. 8).
- B. Verses 8-9 serve to remind them of a tradition of divine attention and care.
1. There is a connection with the ancestral promises to the patriarchs ("Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend" - v. 8).
 2. "Chosen" and "not cast you off" in v. 9 recalls memories of Moses, especially in Deuteronomy where Israel succeeded after first failing (cf. Deut 7.6; 10.15; 14.2).
 3. "That is, the entire memory of Israel is mobilized in this moment in order to assure the exiles that this guaranteed relationship still operates and is decisive for the present and for the future" (Brueggemann, 33).
- C. Verse 10 "speaks the most characteristic phrase of the salvation oracle, 'Do not fear'" (Brueggemann, 33).
1. Babylon was intimidating, keeping Israel anxious about survival and well-being.
 2. But God, who is in control (see vv 1-7), reassures simply because he is.
 3. It's the same message revealed at other crucial times (see Luke 2.10; Matt 28.5).
- D. Verses 11-13 declare the consequences of Yahweh's massive intervention.
1. "Behold," i.e., "take notice," "pay attention"!
 2. Those who think they are so powerful and in control are "as nothing" (v 11).
 3. Verse 12 declares what seemed to be impossible: Babylon will disappear (which is what did happen, just as it had with Egypt generations before—see Exod 14.30-31).

¹ See Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion, 30-31.

4. This did not "just happen," but was the work of the Lord himself (v 13).
- E. Do not miss this important connection in these verses: the mercy of the Lord (8-13) is only possible because of his power (1-7).
 1. "The merciful inclination to say 'do not fear,' ... is groundless if the merciful one is not also the powerful one. Israel's assurance arises from Yahweh's capacity to reorder the public processes of world power, a most remarkable claim" (Brueggemann, 34).
- III. Change Brought by God (14-20).
 - A. The use of "do not fear" in v 14 links this section with the preceding one
 - B. Israel must look beyond itself to the glory of Yahweh (14-16).
 1. "You worm Jacob" (14) may not be a reminder of their dependence on God as much as it is a repetition of their self-evaluation as unimportant and hopeless.
 2. This seems to fit the context that follows where Yahweh stresses that he is the one who makes a way where there seems to be no way.
 - a) The rest of verse 14 affirms his place and ability to help.
 - b) Verses 15-16 use figures that depict Israel as a force capable even of "roughing up" Babylon.
 3. Notice something interesting about the verbs in these verses.
 - a) Yahweh's work is declared with just one verb ("I make") whereas Israel's work consists of "threshing, crushing, and winnowing."
 - b) Israel is expected to do something, but is enabled to do it by the energy that comes from God.
 4. So, Israel should not exalt and congratulate themselves; they should rejoice in and praise Yahweh. He is the reason they need "not fear," the basis for new life.
 - C. Verses 17-20 extends the message of renewal to the transformation of creation.
 1. Israel is called to consider new possibilities beyond the despair induced by Babylon.
 2. As the emphasis on his names in vv. 17, 20 shows, the focus is on God; the purpose of these wondrous things is so "that Yahweh may be enhanced" (Brueggemann, 37).

Conclusion

1. These verses constitute a remarkable call to faith. They call for focus on Yahweh, and to see that "the God committed to Israel is the one who acts powerfully over the larger domain of creation. How could the exiles not believe that from this same hand a new future is possible?" (Brueggemann, 38)
2. The same can be asked of us. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has observed that, "though you are one of the teeming millions in this world, and though the world would have you believe that you do not count and that you are but a speck in the mass, God says, 'I know you.'" (Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Quotes and Idea Starters for Preaching and Teaching*, 69.)
3. Because the same hand works among us that worked among them, we can believe that a new future is possible. "Be not dismayed, for I am your God!"

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