

**5 Epiphany – Year B – February 11, 2009 - Homily**  
**Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39**  
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Israel is beset by enemies. The Babylonian army was one of the greatest, most violent and powerful armies that the world has ever seen. The Babylonian strategy was to divide and conquer. As Isaiah writes, the Israelites have been conquered and exiled and they are desperately trying to make sense of where God is in all this. God's chosen people are in a mess, and the prophet Isaiah has been given a word from God to help straighten them out. Since they are in exile, the Israelites are powerless, scattered and have been struggling to keep the faith of their ancestors. Forced to live isolated from the support of their broader community, the Israelites have begun to incorporate the worship of other gods into their lives. According to the Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai, worship of any other god, but YHWH is idolatry. Many passages of the Hebrew Scriptures are focused on idolatry, and the constant call to repent and return to YHWH, Israel's one true God, who is the mighty I AM, and the God of our own ancestor Abraham. Here then is what Isaiah has to offer to his people, and for those who are desperate for a word from God it is truly a word of hope. As we listen for our own word from God this evening, let us ask God to reveal to each of us all the things in our lives that are scattering us or making us feel cut off from our community of faith. Let us invite God to show us everything in our lives that has become an idol for us. And let us pray that we too find comfort in the knowledge and truth that God is in control.

As you might expect from a prophet, Isaiah's message is powerful and has the tone of complete confidence in God. His exhortations sound incredulous as well. But let's remember that when we are in a place of deepest distress, we too need to hear a voice of certainty that can break through our fear and strengthen our faith. We have all experienced such times, me included. So from the opening lines of Isaiah's proclamations "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?" we hear God's voice through His prophet. Isaiah reminds us of what we should already know: God *is* always there for us, whatever is going on in our lives. Let's jump ahead to the end of the passage to hear what God does for each of us when we turn to Him in faith. God gives power to the powerless. When we wait for God, we will also be strengthened in our walk of faith and our walk of life. And what about the answer to our prayers, pleas, and questions? Yes, God hears all of our prayers, yet as Isaiah tells us, "his understanding is unsearchable." In other words, just like the exiled Israelites, we don't always discover why events or circumstances turn out the way they do. However, as Ralph Waldo Emerson says, "The whole course of things goes to teach us faith. We need only obey. There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word."

Listening and the humility to hear and obey. This is a tough call for many of us. We actually like to do much of the talking, and even when we hear what God has to say, we don't always like it very much! It becomes a kind of battle within us, especially if what we discern God is calling us to do or be is something we don't want or like, or something that totally surprises us. Our battle is really about the answer to two questions: what do *I* want versus what does *God* want? Isaiah has come to let us all know, in no uncertain terms, that whatever we think, God actually is the supreme and sovereign creator and ruler of the universe. The prophet shares a true vision of what life in God is about. In the process of that sharing Isaiah gives us a strong prescription for corrective lenses, and a renewed perspective about worldly rulers.

This passage from Isaiah sounds rather a lot like Job's encounter with God and Satan. As you will recall, in the face of terrible loss and disease Job never loses his faith, despite the advice of his dubious friends, and eventually gets to talk to God directly. That is when even he realizes that his perspective is a little off, and that is a lesson for all of us. Isaiah has this to say about God. God is beyond time; God is all-powerful, and all knowing; God is without equal; God is the creator of all in

heaven and earth, including heavenly beings and earthly beings; God does not grow weary; God cares; and God has the desire and the means to redeem all things. In a nutshell, God really is God! Isaiah also has a lot to say about people in general and the rulers of the world in particular. Simply put, you and I propose nothing in God's sight. Having said that, we sure know how to find a multitude of ways to put our idols ahead of God, to doubt God, complain to God, and then demand from God our rights and privileges! In turn, God tenderly cares for us, loves us beyond all measure, and cherishes you and me, as children of infinite worth and value. As for the rulers and princes of the earth? They too propose nothing in God's sight. However powerful they might seem, according to God's will, they wither and blow away like chaff. God alone redeems all the circumstances of our lives to serve His purposes. Or as the apostle Paul says, all things work together for good, for those who love God. The truth is that in the narrow focus of our lives, time-bound and limited as we are in our humanity, we frequently cannot see or understand the big picture. Only God has that clarity of perspective. The corrective lens to our own limited vision, which is too often accompanied by grandiose notions of power and control, is like a bi-focal corrective lens. One part of the lens is humility that gives us the strength to surrender our lives to God. The second part of the lens is faith in our sovereign Lord and God.

Ultimately, when we give back our power to God, our Lord gracious grants us access to His power. Similarly, when we exhaust our own limited resources trying to go our own way, and finally submit to God, we are strengthened beyond our wildest dreams. Here is more good advice from Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which flows into you as life, place yourself in the full center of that flood, then you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment." Our reconciliation with God in Christ Jesus comes through humbly acknowledging how we have allowed ourselves to become scattered and distracted from God. It means intentionally asking God to help us set aside our own idols – in whatever form they take -- in order to worship God alone, and keep God as the center of our lives. In our reconciliation, we will suddenly find a portal of access to God's power that heals, redeems and blesses each of us with abundant life. God's power extends beyond us as well to heal and redeem the whole of creation. This amazing process of cosmic renewal was set in motion through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord, and in faith, you and I eagerly await its final consummation. How then can we respond to such love and hope? How can we respond to God's all encompassing graciousness? We do it personally. We do it together in community. We do it by lifting up our hearts in joyful and grateful thanks, giving ourselves back to God as a sacrifice of thanksgiving, to the glory of His Name.

Amen.