

Power to the Faint

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Here's how I'd like to start today: I want to ask you to undertake a little bit of a, kind of a meditation exercise. I mostly want you to do some reflection, some silent reflection, as we are preparing to look at the Scriptures and what they might have for us. I want to start with a personal reflection. And if it helps you to close your eyes or fold hands, whatever it is, you can do that - you don't have to do any of those things, but whatever helps you to do this exercise, which is the following. I want you to just make a note of how you're feeling right now. You can do that, you can write it down, you can just acknowledge it in your mind, you can draw a picture, whatever works for you. But, how are you feeling right now? Are you feeling strong? Are you feeling happy? Are you feeling powerful or comfortable? No doubt there's a portion of people in the room who have that kind of feeling right now, but there's probably people in the room who are having kind of the opposite type of feeling. Maybe you're feeling weak, or downtrodden, or taken advantage of. Maybe you're feeling tired, or unsettled. Quite possibly you're feeling something in between there, or a little bit of both, or maybe something else altogether. And whatever it is right now that you're feeling, I want to tell you it's OK. This is just a chance for you to acknowledge it, hold it up in front of you, and say "I am feeling this way, that's how it is, that's the way it's going right now".

And then while you're in that kind of reflective state, I'm gonna ask you to go beyond yourself and take inventory of what you are thinking about God today. Right now. Not what you thought about God when you were a child, not what you hope to think about God tomorrow, but what you think about God right now: anything from there isn't one, to Jesus is a friend of mine. (Sorry we shouldn't insert humor into a meditative practice, I'll tell you that.) Now I'm going to be honest about this, because there's no use in giving an answer that you think is the right one, it wouldn't be useful to do that out loud, and it's not actually useful to do in your mind either, this isn't a pop quiz about theology, it's not a check up your doctrine, it's simply a chance for you to reflect on what's happening in your heart and mind today. So, what do you think about God, right now? Do you think of God as powerful? In control? Awesome? -- in the original sense of

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that word. Distant? Infinite? Probably some of you had those feelings, those thoughts. Or do you think of God as gentle and loving and sacrificial and close to you? Imminent? Once again, maybe you think some of both of those things, maybe it's a mixture, maybe it's somewhere in the middle, maybe it's something else altogether. As before, it's OK, this is a chance for you to acknowledge what you think about God, right now.

OK. So, you've reflected on your own feelings, current mood, current state, emotionally, and you've reflected on your current thoughts about God and whatever answer or answers you gave to those two prompts, I want to tell you that I believe today's scripture passage that I'm going to use -- one of the passages that's assigned to us from the lectionary for the fifth Sunday after Epiphany -- I believe that this passage will speak to you no matter what your answer or answers were to those prompts. Now, I always believe that the Bible can speak to us, that God can speak to us through the Bible, but I have to say that today I am maybe even a little bit more expectant than usual, if for no other reason than I kind of personally resonated very strongly with this text this week. I found to be very deep and poetic and potentially very powerful for us. So, I'd like to ask you if you will pray with me, that this will be the case for us as we look at this text today.

Almighty God, we are thankful to you for your words, and the words of Scripture, and we pray now that they would take root in our hearts and minds, that our souls would be like fertile soil, ready to receive the seed of your word, and ready to bear fruit to produce beauty and sustenance in our lives. We pray these things in the name of the Living Word, Christ our Lord. Amen.

Alright, so, the main passage of Scripture from this week's lectionary texts that I want to focus on today is from the prophet Isaiah and it's Isaiah 40 starting in verse 21. I'm going to ask you to grab a Bible and open to this passage. If you have brought one with you can find it, if you don't have one with you you can Google it on your phone, or you can use one of these red Bibles. And if you're using a red Bible you're going to go to page 582. And while you're finding that passage, here's what I think -- here's what I hope this will be -- this is my intent anyway, that this Scripture text will help us kind of go backwards through the reflection that we just did. In other words, we started by thinking about ourselves and then went beyond ourselves to thinking about God and I'm hoping that the text will illuminate some things about God for us that will then allow us to return to reflecting about ourselves and to see what connections we might find there, does that make sense? We walked in to this 'God place' through our own sense of personal feelings we're going to go back out the same way we came in.

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So, with that in mind I'm going to start off by reading just the first part of this text, Isaiah 40:21-26, and then later will read the rest. Here it is. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and see: who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing."

So, think about your answers to that second question: "what are your thoughts on God right now?" and consider what these verses say about God. And I am happy to congratulate all of you who had those first group of feelings about God: that God is powerful, and omnipotent, and omnipresent, and all of those omnis, you were right, everybody else was wrong, you win the prize, and you have been named "most likely to be Biblical". Congratulations to all of you!

Right, so this is the picture of God as the creator of all the universe, as very big, right, as way up high looking down. You know, you've been on a plane, right? You look out and you see the little tiny houses and the little tiny people and all that stuff. That's what God is pictured as being like all the time for all of the whole world: the ruler of all. God is pictured as being so powerful that just one little breath from God becomes a tempest, a raging storm that sweeps the rulers of the earth off their thrones like dried grass. A God who is unparalleled and without equal in the universe. But here's what we have to remember. We just read six verses of the Bible that gave us that particular picture of God. Now, I spent some time last night counting, by which I mean I googled it, and there are thirty one thousand -- thirty one thousand one hundred two verses in the Bible and we read six of them. So, I did a little math in my head, by which I mean I googled it, and it turns out to be 0.01% of the whole. Did you know you can google math and be like, "hey Siri, what's twelve plus twelve?" and then she'll tell you -- or use google, whatever. Oh, did I say...all the people listening on podcasts right now, it's like "dudup." OK google, tell the Android people that they have a problem too.

Anyhow, it's just a few verses out of a vast collection of books, right? And here's something that I have found very interesting, very important and actually sometimes kind of frustrating and confusing about the Bible is that we could look, and we don't have to look too hard, to find other verses in the Bible that paint a picture of God that looks a little different from the picture that these verses have just painted for us. Isn't that true? If you spend any time in the Bible to

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know that that's true. I mean very famously there's a kind of, it's like a thing that you have an Old Testament God who's mean with the lightning bolts, right? And kind of the Zeus-sys God and you have the New Testament God that's like buddy Christ and Jesus is a friend of mine and these two Gods don't seem to be the same thing. Right now I think that's actually a little bit overstated and I think there are very good ways to to begin to make sense of the differences we see. I'll give you a clue, Jesus is the perfect revelation of God's actual nature superseding anything we see anywhere else in Scripture, the Bible itself tells us that in Hebrews 1.

But it is kind of challenging sometimes and that's just on the big meta level if we went down to the to the micro level you could look at these individual pictures of God, individual images and descriptions of God in the Bible and find that they're very different from one another. So for example, is God an all consuming fire? or is God a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings? Somebody said yes, right. You're ahead of me, slowdown. And we could give lots and lots of examples that we can go through the Bible and find all the different descriptions of who God is and find that some of them don't— they don't quite make sense next to each other. They're not, I wouldn't say contradictions per se, but they're— they're hard to hard to square. So it can be challenging, and even quite painful sometimes, reading Scripture trying to understand God to find these— these competing descriptions.

So here's one of the big important things I would like to try to convey to you today. I want to give you a different way of thinking about that and that variety of images and descriptions of God. I would like to suggest that instead of thinking of that in terms of contradictions or of mutual exclusivity instead to think of it as a very broad picture of a God who actually defies expectation, who defies classification, who cannot be described in simple terms, who will not be pinned down under our thumbs to be just this little part of God's nature.

Those of you who have been around Artisan long time and know our foundational values, for example if you've taken the Journey Together class, which we're offering on Saturday 9:00 to 3:00. You will know that our first foundational value is what? It's awe and what do we say in our statement of awe? “We humbly recognize the sovereign power, reverent mystery and gracious wonder of God who is worthy of our worship and full devotion”. In other words God is way beyond our comprehension and no single picture of God is sufficient for our understanding. As a matter of fact every little picture that we get, every little new description that we get, although it is true is like a speck of sand— one more speck of sand on a whole beach that is God's character and nature. And that kind of bigness, that vastness that complete incomprehensibility is confusing and painful, yes, but actually I think it's also beautiful and inspiring.

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Let me explain what I mean by using an example and I'll actually choose an example that comes from our other lectionary reading. One of our other lectionary readings from the day, if you were here for the call to worship, you heard Psalm 147 and I'm going to give you two verses that are right next to each other in the psalm verse three and verse four. I asked a math person and those two numbers are right next to each other. Excuse me, Psalm 147:3 says "he heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds". Psalm 147:4 says "He determines the number of the stars he gives to all of them their names". Now, I don't think it would read that and go well those two things are made so exclusive, they can't be both true but you would agree with me, right? that those are very different types of pictures of God in very close proximity to each other in the Scriptures. But my suggestion to you is this: If you put those two things together it's not a contradiction it's actually an incredible divine mystery. It's a vision of God that is beautiful and rich and has greater depth and meaning precisely because it's so different and varied.

So the task of understanding Scripture of understanding God through the Scriptures is not— it's not a finite contained task, it's not something that if you just study hard enough for a few weeks or in a few years you will get. I expect to be spending the rest of my life studying the Scriptures and finding new revelations of God's nature in these pages. And once you get past the "Oh no! I wanted certainty, I wanted completeness, I wanted full understanding" part of your life you can move to the next phase of your life which is, "Whoah" right? It's a beautiful thing.

So let's return to that passage from Isaiah and I'm going to pick up right where I left off in verse 27 and what I want to do now is not only notice how the the description of God, the picture of God seems to evolve a little bit but also hold up our pictures of ourselves in the light of this picture of God that we get in the Scriptures, right? Remember we're going to back out the way we came in, we thought some more about God now we're going to start to think about ourselves a little bit more too. So starting in verse 27 reading through 31: "Why do you say 'Oh Jacob and speak oh Israel my way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God'" So in other words, why are you saying that God is distant from you? Why are you saying that God isn't fighting for your rights? And don't get too confused by the Jacob and Israel stuff it's a— it's a Jewish text that we can take it for ourselves in our own way and then he goes on, the prophet here to start to use the phrase that he used at the very beginning of this passage from today "have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God the creator of the ends of the Earth he does not fainter 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." And here's a verse that I memorized when I

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was a little kid “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”.

So think back to that very first part of the reflection that we did, all that time ago, all those minutes back then. And I want to say congratulations to those of you who thought of yourself as maybe weaker or more powerless or more downtrodden because according to this text you were right, all the other people were wrong, you get a prize and you now have been voted most likely to be Biblical. Obviously this is making a joke about all of that but here's the thing: I hoped it would give you a way to see this beautiful reality that I see in this writing which is similar to what I saw in the Psalm where these two pictures are next to each other and they— they reinforce each other and amplify and magnify each other. Here's what I see holding the second half of that text next to the first half of it— that the God whose breath is a tempest that blows away the rulers of this world as if they were dried up grass is the same God who gives power to the faint, the same God who strengthens the powerless. So that means, all kidding aside, that if you are feeling weak and powerless today the God who set the stars in the sky, who tells you go outside and look up, who made those? who gave those their names?— that God stands with you, that God is for you and with you. That God wants to strengthen you. And even more than that it means that it is precisely in this very weakness that you are most prepared to meet God, that you are most ready to receive God's blessing.

This, by the way, is something that is quite consistent in the scriptures. The idea that God stands with the powerless and the weak and the oppressed. God does not comfort those who are already comfortable in the Scriptures. And then, in fact, God tends to make those of us who are comfortable start to feel a bit uncomfortable. God's design and intent seems to be to disrupt those who are comfortable. Meanwhile God comforts those who are hurting, binds up the wounds of those who are broken-hearted. You see it in passages like today's Old Testament readings the Psalm, the prophet and you see it in the ministry and teaching of Jesus himself. Jesus who spent almost all his time among the sick and the poor and the sinners and with women and with groups of people who are thought of as less than. The same Jesus who taught that you have to lay down your life in order not to lose it, which is a great mystery and which probably would have been even harder to understand if he had not demonstrated what it meant by laying down his own life for your sin and mine and for the sins of the whole world. It was this truth I believe that led some of the New Testament authors to write baffling statements like the one I referenced a couple weeks ago that says we should rejoice in our sufferings. That statement, that we should rejoice in our sufferings and I feel like so much abuse has been done by people of faith with that that text. How many of you heard something like this or believe something like this: You should rejoice in your sufferings because God is the author of your suffering and whatever God does is good, all your works are good and so you

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should probably just grin and bear it whatever you happen to be going through. I received that message in my life of faith many times and I reject it. I do not believe that God is the author of our suffering. I do not believe that the New Testament instructs us to rejoice in our sufferings because they are by definition worthy of joy because God did them to us. I believe rejoicing in our sufferings is something that we should seek to do because it is precisely in our suffering that we are ready for God to come near to us.

Here's the problem with that concept. The problem with that concept is that when you are in the middle of suffering is the hardest time to understand it. If you are fortunate right now to be between times of suffering, if you have some suffering in your past and you have the benefit of some distance, you may be able to say that you noticed how close God was to you in that time. And then you may be able to hope that the next time the suffering train makes the stop in your city that you remember it and be able to apply it in the midst of your pain. And so I say people who have experience no suffering in their life have a really hard time with spiritual work. So understanding that if you are in the midst of suffering right now it may be hard for you to get that, to let that message break through. That may be what we call cold comfort— to think that suffering draws us closer to God. You may think: “I would trade a little distance from God for the suffering to be over”. All of those things are valid things to say, read the Psalms you will find one that can that expresses that exact thought— you'll probably find lots of them. But if you are suffering today, if you are feeling particularly weak or powerless, if you are feeling excluded or if you have been cast aside or kicked away or pressed down, if you are feeling like the world wants nothing to do with you or if you are feeling like your luck ran out a long time ago and you're wondering if you ever see it again know that the God who created the universe is ready to be close to you. In fact already is and that sometimes what is needed is a shift in perspective.

By the way, and speaking of things that are hard to receive when you're in the midst of it, I believe this also holds true for people who are wrestling with really deep doubt today. When you're in the midst of that it can be particularly hard to know God's presence but having been through that kind of experience and many days feeling like I'm on the other side of it and some days feeling like I'm not, I can tell you that my understanding and knowledge of God and my ability to trust God, which I think is the true definition of faith as opposed to just checking off boxes of things that you're supposed to believe, all of that increased on the other side of an experience of doubt for me. And so I know that if you're a person who's doubting that that can be just as painful as any tragedy and so I believe God wants to be close to you and comfort you in that as well. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

Here's what I want to do, I want to give you a moment to reflect on this. I'm not going to feed you a prayer or ask you to repeat after me but I suspect that there are some people in the room

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who have a little— have need of a little time with God, to say to God: “That's me. I am the weak and powerless one right now” and to cry out to God and to reach out to God and to call on God. I'm not going to pretend to know exactly what that would be for you so instead I'm going to give you a moment of silence to offer that prayer whatever it might be and then I'll conclude following that.

So like to do something now that I don't usually do in sermons, very very very rarely do I this do this kind of thing but I think today might be a good day to do it, which is to ask you if you've had a particular experience with God in these past few moments to indicate that physically in some way. So this is important to me because I'm trying to speak to those of you who feel weak and powerless and brought low and I want to ask you to express with your bodies in whatever way is comfortable for you or possible for you that you are receiving God's comfort in that time. And so perhaps most commonly you would ask you to stand up if you if you want to stand up, if you want to raise a hand you can do that, if you want to make some other physical gesture whatever seems appropriate for you go ahead and do that. And then after we're standing and or raising our hands or whatever going to do, I want to offer a prayer for the maybe just the one or two of you in the room who had that experience but maybe it was more. So would you do that now respond with whatever physical gesture seems right for you and then I'll pray for you, thank you.

OK let's pray for those who are standing or raising hands. Gracious God you have the promise to come near to those who are hurting. I pray for these who have expressed a response to this passage of Scripture, to this message that your spirit would be clear to them, that your presence would be real to them, that they would know today and tomorrow and for the rest of their lives that in this moment you were close. That in their powerlessness in their weakness and in their suffering they were able to know you more. We pray that that would be a turning point. That today would be the start of something new in their lives. That your grace and power and mercy and love and tenderness would all be taking root in their hearts and minds in a new way. We pray for these things in Christ our Lord. Amen.

So if you stood or is a hand or made a gesture, I would love to hear from you please do talk to me or or send me an e-mail reach out to me I would love to hear more. Now I'm going to invite you to come and receive communion. This great symbol of strength in this great symbol of weakness, the symbol of resurrection in the symbol of death. The body and blood broken and poured out for the forgiveness of sins, for strengthening your weary souls is here on our table. And we'll sing some songs and there'll be a member of the prayer team but I want you to come and receive this gift of grace. Take a piece of bread and dip it in one of the cups, receive it as

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food for your souls as an act of unity. May it be for you the body and blood the real presence of Jesus in these common elements. Come and receive His mercies and then.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com