

Mere Grasshoppers
Isaiah 40:21-31/Mark 1:29-39
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As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³² That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' ³⁸He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

When the movie "Remember the Titans" came out in the fall of 2000, I was in the 9th grade. For some of you, this will prove how young I am, a mere grasshopper. For many of the youth I work with, this will make me seem old. For some reason, I remember, in great detail, many of the movies that came out that year. Probably because as a 9th grader I had this newfound freedom of doing things on my own, without my parents, and with my friends. But it is "Remember the Titans" that sticks with me the most. Many of you are probably familiar with this movie, but for those who aren't, it tells the story of Coach Herman Boone and the T.C. Williams High School football team of Alexandria, VA during the fall of 1971. It was the first year that the school and team were integrated, and they also had their first black head football coach. The team had to work through a lot of racial tension and tough training sessions to become a united and well-oiled team over the course of summer training and throughout the season that ended in a state championship. Because of my deep affinity for this movie, I can't hear the passage from Isaiah that Davis read for us this morning without thinking of a particular scene in "Remember the Titans". Do you know the scene to which I am referring? It is actually the one that our Harbinger writer for this week- Brian Donlan references. It's the scene when the character known as Rev., who is the starting quarterback, quotes that passage to his teammates. And then later, a

teammate quotes it back to him, well, actually sings it back to him, as the teams strives to further unite and hone their skills?

“Even youths will faint and be weary...but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles...like eagles, y’all!”

I wasn’t raised to see color. I went to schools with a healthy mix of black and white. I got along with my classmates who had a different color skin than me. I ran track with kids of all shapes, sizes, and skin colors and we were a team. Coming of age in the 1990’s and early 2000’s, I was under the illusion that we lived in a post-racial society. That the events of the 60’s and 70’s that we see portrayed in movies like “Remember the Titans” solved things. That racism no longer existed. That violence and aggression and oppression against Black people was no longer a reality in the great United States of America. I was wrong.

As I went through high school, I began to notice cracks, disparities, widening divides. And when I went to college, I delved more into the history of our country and learned about the Lost Cause for the first time.

And then I moved to Atlanta to attend seminary where my eyes were opened to a whole new view of Black culture. A culture that was vibrant, active, and had something unique to offer society and important things to say. In the midst of these various realizations, I found myself wondering, Had I not known? Had I not heard? Had it not been told to me? Had I not understood? I felt like those Israelites in the time of Isaiah whose view of life had been skewed...distorted...misaligned.

The words before us today from the 40th chapter of Isaiah come from what’s known as Second Isaiah, written during the Babylonian Exile. We call it Second Isaiah because Isaiah is a LONG book, that, while having core themes throughout, was written over the course of many years and features three distinct voices responding to different moments in the history of Israel.

The community to whom Isaiah was writing in this section had lived in Babylon for a while and it seemed that they had forgotten some things about the God to whom they belonged. They had been conquered and taken to a new land and naturally assimilated into a new culture where there were other priorities, narratives, and “gods” to worship. Isaiah had an important, divine message to share with them, both about the otherness of their God and the closeness of their God. Have you not known that your God is the creator of the ends of the earth? Have you not heard that your God strengthens the powerless? Have you not understood that your God is so far above any earthly ruler? Has it not been told to you that your God does not tire of seeking to understand your situation?

Do you know Aesop’s Fable about the grasshopper and the ant? It was written in Ancient Greece around the time of the Babylonian exile. The collection of Aesop’s Fables is somewhat like the book of Isaiah – an extensive collection of writings that share common characteristics, but were written over many years by different people at

different times. In this particular fable, a grasshopper spends his summer singing while an ant collects food for the winter. When the winter comes, the grasshopper is unprepared and begs the ant for food. The ant refuses and the grasshopper dies. Did the grasshopper not know about the seasons? Had he not been told? Did he not understand what would happen if he did not store up food?

These days, I find myself feeling a lot like a grasshopper. Like there are things I don't know or understand. Like I am unprepared. Like there is a whole other world of experiences, perspectives, and realities waiting to be discovered. I also find myself feeling like a bit of an exile. I missed watching football with friends this fall. I long for dinner parties with friends instead of zoom happy hour. I even miss loading up a charter bus with teenagers and all of their stuff to go on a trip where we sleep 4-6 per room and share all the snacks. And, while I have led worship in this space a handful of times over the past year when some of you have been present, I have not preached in this sanctuary with you, the people of Westminster in the pews since February 26, 2020. Can any of you relate?

I think Jesus can. In our Gospel passage today, Jesus' ministry has really just begun. But he's on the move. Seeking to understand and be understood. On a mission to show and tell people about the ways of God...to help them see and experience God's transcendent and immanent love in a new way. In just ten verses, he moves from the community space of the synagogue to the more intimate space of home and finally to the private space of the wilderness. After his first time teaching in the synagogue he goes to spend the night at the home of two of his disciples – brothers named Simon and Andrew – where they find Simon's mother-in-law in bed with a fever. The word used in this passage for fever is *pyressousa*, meaning to be on fire, to be ill with a fever. Cuban scholar Ofelia Ortega points out that this is a fever that literally prevents her body from working. In an act that showcases both Jesus' divine power and his human compassion, he heals Simon's mother-in-law. And then the whole community shows up outside the door. Seeking to understand. Seeking to be understood. After Jesus has spent the evening attending to them and gotten some rest he rises before the sun to go and pray. To spend time with the Father. To refill his cup. To center himself. To further understand and find direction.

Thinking back to that iconic movie – Remember the Titans – I now recognize that there is a lot of Hollywood glossing up the real story. But through my 2021 lenses, I also see some lessons that can have meaning for us today. There are many moments throughout the film when the team isn't clicking. Passes are dropped, tackles are missed, anger and misunderstanding simmer under the surface. It's almost as if something akin to a fever has made them ill and prevented them from coming together to work as they should. The movie has several key moments key when space for understanding is created and healing occurs. One of these moments occurs during training camp when Coach Boone wakes the team before dawn for a run. Many

of the players struggle as the team tromps through the woods in half dark for hours. No one has any idea where this run will end until they break through the tree line and into a cemetery. They are at Gettysburg battlefield. Coach Boone reminds his players of the brutal racial history of the United States and he implores them to come together despite differences, to end the battle that has been raging for hundreds of years, to respect one another. Another moment is the one I referenced earlier when the words of Isaiah 40 are quoted. In that moment, the team, with no prompting from the coaches, takes it upon itself to gather and work through division. A third moment occurs when white co-captain Gerry Bertier realizes that his best friend and teammate, Ray, purposely missed a tackle that led to their starting quarterback, Rev, breaking his hand. Gerry clearly sees the racism and dishonesty that is hurting the team and kicks his friend off the team.

I think that we find ourselves in a moment right now. When there is a fever or fevers in society that are making us ill. And where a space for understanding has opened and healing can occur. There are literal fevers making us ill right now in the form of a vicious virus. And many people do not survive. There are more figurative, but very real fevers of racism, climate change, gun violence, mental illness, addiction, isolation. In Greenville specifically, we have a major affordability crisis in housing and people...children, are left without homes. Things are simmering, heating up, and we may not survive. But if. If we trust in Jesus. If we follow his example. If we take the words of Isaiah 40 to heart, we might have a chance. Let's take a look back at our Gospel Lesson for the day. If you have your Bible or phone handy, take a moment and pull it up – Mark 1:29-39. I'll be highlighting language from the NRSV version. Look at the whole passage if you can, and notice the movement. From the communal space of the synagogue in v. 29 to the home of Simon and Andrew by the end of that verse. By v. 30 Jesus is at the bedside of the woman with a fever and by v. 32 he is back at the front door with the whole community around him. In v. 35 he goes into the wilderness alone, but by v. 36 his disciples have sought him out. And in v. 39 he is traveling throughout Galilee preaching and healing, "for that is what he came to out to do." That is a lot in 10 verses. Just like a lot has happened to us in a little over 10 months. We've moved from the communal space we share here, to our homes where we lived/worked/learned simultaneously for months, to being at the actual bedside loved ones as they fought COVID (or wishing we could have been), to venturing to the safety of the outdoor air for gatherings with friends and neighbors, to maybe even retreating to the holiness of nature to save our sanity and enjoy respite. And now we're itching to get out and about. To go throughout our community and do what we're put on this earth to do...live our lives...be together...experience life. But I don't want this moment to pass us by without us seizing the moment. Without us making space for understanding and healing to occur. I don't want us, and I don't think God wants us to, gloss over the hard, the heavy, the painful. I don't think God wants us to be like the exiles who lost their bearings in a foreign landscape. I don't think God wants us to be like the grasshopper,

completely under-prepared for the next season. I don't think God wants us to be those middle-class white kids of the early 2000's, under the illusion that they lived in a post-racial society.

We can seize this moment. In a way that is holy. In a way that glorifies and follows Jesus. If we take the words of Isaiah to heart, one way is by acknowledging what we do not know and seeking to understand. By putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, by acknowledging that dismissiveness of someone's point of view can actually be an outright rejection of their lived experience in the world. An experience that matters. If we follow the example of Jesus, we will see how he made space for those around him and served them. But also how he took time for himself. To pray, to prepare, to quiet his heart. And that is what prepared him for the work God had in store for him. And God has that work in store for us, too. For we are his disciples in the way of Simon and Andrew, James and John. We've been called from our individual and specific lives to do the work of God in the world. But we've still got a lot to learn. Remember, we're mere grasshoppers. But the good news is that our God is the creator of the ends of the earth. Our God is the creator of each and every human being, including you and me. Our God is one of complete otherness and utter closeness to those created in his image. Our God became human and walked this earth – healing, teaching, seeking to understand and love and calling us to do the same. Thanks be to God. Amen.

