

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; Mark 1:29-39
5th Sunday after the Epiphany B; 02.04.24; G. Miles Smith+

I appreciated the time away to be in NC last Sunday so I could visit with my son and daughter-in-law and my granddaughter Ruthie, 6 months old. Jennifer had planned to go too but needed to stay home to tend to some important matters here. While I was there, my son took two days off and Ian and I had Ruthie all to ourselves all that time until Catherine was home from school. That time was really special. And I was reminded quite vividly that it definitely helps to be *young* to take care of little children! But, not having all that responsibility, I have had the opportunity to see more clearly what I could not so easily see when I was a parent taking care of Ian long ago—that *children are an incredible gift from God*. It is just hard to see that as a parent when you are doing diapers, and dressing them, and keeping to the feeding and nap time schedule, and trying to be your best self when they are awake so they can experience love and have a helpful experience of the world. But when you don't have to do *all that all the time*—then it is easier for little children to remind us...of God. But then, I'm a priest, so you might expect me to have that experience. But I don't think you have to be a priest, right?

The scripture today from the prophet and the psalmist share a common experience of being reminded of God in two other ways. And these have already been on my mind so much over the past few months. This really is a very practical matter: What reminds you of God—when you are not in church? The prophet quotes a complaint heard among his people: “My way is hidden from the LORD and my right is disregarded by my God” (v.27). And his response is immediately to refer to God “the Creator of the ends of the earth”. And when the psalmist speaks to the brokenhearted, he refers to God who “counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names” (v.4). What we find in the scriptures is a way of seeing such that the earth and the sky—and especially the night sky—reminds the faithful of God. As obvious as that was to people in the Bible—it is not so easily obvious to us anymore. If we can even see the planets, stars, and galaxies of the night sky, we are more likely to think of vast empty spaces of absolute cold, immense energy events, airplane lights, and satellites—all of which reminds us more of human science and technology and human aspirations. And it is also possible to see the night sky only scientifically and imagine oneself alone in a vast and purposeless universe (and hope that at least some aliens will finally land).

But biblical people--along with all ancient people--looking into the night sky, knew they were looking directly into *the heavens of God* and the gods. And the sight of the heavens was steady and close at hand. All you had to do was walk outside your little house or hut on an unclouded night—and *there were the heavens of God*. I don't think you have to abandon science to be able to resonate with that ancient sensibility. Folks today who need to be outside a lot or who want to venture out into the woods on their time off—while they may not connect this with being reminded of God—there is something of that longing there, I believe, that moves people. And, I experience, that *it is just as possible to be reminded of God outdoors, at any moment, anywhere*—as long as I'm not just staring into my cellphone...or otherwise captured by my own thoughts. |

Now, the other thing that reminded biblical people of God, was not nearly as obvious--and it still isn't. And it took biblical people *a much longer time too for this to really be clear*—even with the words from the prophets and the psalmist. Not only *could* we be reminded of God by—but *we should be reminded of God by—the faint, the weary, the powerless, the exhausted, the brokenhearted, the wounded, the lowly, the weak, the sick, and the possessed*. That people in such conditions should remind us of God *absolutely is not obvious*. And yet, it became clearer and clearer that it is possible, because, strangely enough...the God of Israel paid attention to the brokenhearted...and Jesus paid attention to the lowly and the sick. And so the early church, especially, learned to pay attention to them—not as a *burden* or a *problem*—but an opportunity *where they could join in the compassion of God*. This is so hard to imagine when we only see people in distress in *categories*--as medical problems, psychological problems, criminal problems, economic and political problems. And human suffering of course involves all those different dimensions. *But human distress is also, first, supposed to remind us...of God...of Jesus...according to the Bible*. That takes a whole different way of seeing. | So, when you are not in church, what reminds you of God? What would be on your list? Grandchildren? Animals? Art, literature, and music? The Bible invites us to also especially consider...the heavens above...and those of us hurting below.