

God: Creator, Healer, and Judge

WNMC, Matins

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Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 12, 15-20; 1 Cor. 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Verse for Reflection: “To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One” (Is 40:25).

Hymn of Response: Hymnal #66 “O Worship the King”

Introduction:

I trust you took note of the verse for reflection in your order of service. God, the Holy One of Israel, asks an important question: “To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal?” It is a question that all of us should ponder. J.B. Philips, many years ago, wrote a book entitled, *Your God is Too Small*. I fear that all of us are in danger of not realizing that God is incomparably great, and abundant in power, and having understanding that is beyond measure” as David says in our reading from the Psalms (Ps 147:5) Indeed, in our very secular age, all of us are tempted to diminish God to such a degree that it would seem that we have no God at all.

Our lectionary readings this morning won’t let us get away this. They all address God’s probing question in different ways. And they all give the same answer - there is no one who can be compared to God, no one who comes even close to being an equal. I will be focussing mainly on our Old Testament readings. Your homework is to find out how this question is addressed in our readings in the New Testament.

God, the Creator and Sustainer:

What I found interesting in preparing this homily was that both Isaiah and the Psalmist address the question of the incomparable greatness of the Holy One of Israel, by reminding us that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists.

Listen again to Isaiah, just after he asks the question, “Who is my equal?” “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” (Is. 40:26). Then a few verses down, Isaiah again asks some questions: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? And then this: The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” (Is 40:28).

Psalm 147 consists of three sections, each of which starts with praising the Lord God. In the first section, the Psalmist, like Isaiah, describes the LORD as determining the number of the stars, and giving to all of them their names (147:4). In the second section, we read the Lord “covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, and makes grass grow on the hills” (147:8). Then, later in the Psalm, God is described as commanding the hail to fall, and the wind to blow (vss. 17-18).

So both Isaiah and the Psalmist highlight the incomparable greatness of the Holy One of Israel by describing God as creator and Sustainer of all that exists. But, for what purpose? Why this emphasis on the incomparable greatness of God? I find two reasons given in both of our readings.

God the Comforter:

If you look carefully at Psalm 147, you will find this declaration immediately preceding the verses reminding us of God's power in nature: the Lord God "heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds" (vs. 3). And then immediately following these verses, we are told that the Lord God lifts up the downtrodden (vs. 6).

It would seem that the Psalmist is quite deliberately linking his reminders of God's greatness as Creator with a message of comfort for those who are broken hearted and downtrodden. How can you be sure that God is a God of comfort and healing? Because God is the Creator and Sustainer of all that is. Because God is the incomparable Holy One of Israel.

That is why I used these very words to comfort the family of my brother this past weekend after he died of a heart attack a week earlier. I reminded the family that the God who created and numbered the stars, also cared for each of them as they were grieving the loss of a husband, a father, and a grandfather.

You see the same connection being made in Isaiah. Listen again to verse 28 of our reading. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth." (Isa 40:28). And then comes this observation: "He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (vs. 28b-29). Even able-bodied young men and women sometimes grow weary and even fall down exhausted and faint (vs. 30).

But, if we really believe in a powerful God who created everything that is, and who continues to sustain all of creation, then we will have the strength to continue on life's journey which sometimes is very taxing and tiring. If we really trust in this God, he will renew our strength day by day, and we shall be able to walk, and maybe even run and not be weary (vs. 31).

Do you and I really believe this today? Or do we see ourselves as so sophisticated, so enlightened, so scientific, that we don't need to believe in God as Creator any more? I want to suggest that our so-called sophistication is in danger of robbing us of the comfort that we need and that can only come from really believing in an incomparable Creator God who has no equal.

How we can reconcile science and Scripture, would of course require a 2-hour lecture, and I only have 8 minutes. So I move on to the second practical application of the doctrine of creation as found in Isaiah 40 and Psalm 147.

God, the Judge and Creator of Norms:

Isaiah uses one metaphor after another to describe this God who can't be compared to any other gods or idols. This God sits above the circle of the earth, and looks down on its inhabitants who look like mere grasshoppers, he says in verse 22. Continuing on the theme of putting the inhabitants on earth in their place, Isaiah goes on to say that this God also "brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing" (vs. 23).

Why this language of belittling the inhabitants of earth, and why the language of political reckoning and judgment? Isaiah is writing during a time of political turmoil. Judah is being punished for its rebellion by Sennechareb of Assyria, and Isaiah sees only more trouble ahead – the Babylonian exile is coming. So Isaiah is affirming once again, that in all the political turmoil of the time, God is still in control. The princes of Assyria and Babylon, can be overthrown by the mere breath of God, we read in verse 25. So, there is no reason for the people of God to despair, and he will in the end bring about justice, and he will in the end God will bring about justice.

It is in the middle of this message of political and moral judgment, that Isaiah has the Holy One of Israel ask this question: To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? And Isaiah goes on to make a connection between God as the moral ruler of all the inhabitants of the earth, and God as Creator and Sustainer of the earth. It would seem that the latter is introduced as a support for the former.

We see this same connection being made in Psalm 147. Listen to this summary statement in verse 6: “The Lord lifts up the downtrodden (our first theme); he casts the wicked to the ground.”

But what is the basis this judgment? It is his command; indeed, “his word runs swiftly,” we read in verse 15. The Psalm continues by making a dramatic switch from God commanding the hail to fall, and the wind to blow, to declaring “his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel” (vs. 17-19). The God who orders nature, also gives to humankind moral norms. The God who created physical laws also created moral laws.

These moral laws were given specifically to Israel, but the intent was always that through Israel these laws would be given to all nations of the world, as Isaiah describes so poignantly in the beginning of the book. In Isaiah 2, we have a picture of all the nations of the world coming “to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths” (Isa 2:3). So, once again, we see God as creator linked to something else, this time to God as moral ruler of the universe. And we dare not separate these two theological truths, as is all too often done today.

Conclusion:

May we be careful not to treat our belief in a Creator God as just a quaint tribal myth, but realize that this God, the Holy One of Israel and the church is indeed incomparably great, and a God who therefore can and does bring personal healing and moral order to a world desperately in need of both. Amen.