

"A GRASSHOPPER THEOLOGY"

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Isaiah 40:21-31

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Some years ago I remember there was a campaign started by a group of atheists in the UK in response to some advertising done by a Christian organization that said that non-Christians would burn in hell for all eternity. Buses were used to promote what the atheists contended was a positive, philosophical advert. This is what was put on the side of the iconic UK double decker buses, "There's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life." I like that fact that the atheists qualified their statement with the word "probably." I guess you want to hedge your bets, just in case you might be wrong!

What bothers me about these ads is that there is an inherent presupposition which I believe is false and left unchecked, would only serve to further that false presupposition. The words of the ad campaign suggest that if there is a God, it would be cause for worry and it would prevent us from being able to enjoy our lives. Does that correspond to your experience?

As I said earlier, the ad campaign was aimed at countering the narrative of a judgmental, angry, vindictive God who wants to punish, who to believe in would cause us anxiety and worry and strip away any sense of joy in life. I get that there are people who want to push back against this depiction of an angry, vengeful, vindictive God, I know I would. But conversely, if we were to stop believing in God, would that truly lead to a life of non-worry and enjoyment? Does non-belief in God lead to a reality of, "Don't worry, be happy?"

Tell me, do you worry today? Do you find yourself worrying about the pandemic and all its effects? Are you worried about the increase in political polarization, in Canada and around the world? Does the continuation of violence, ethnic hatred, oppression and war worry you? Do you worry about the sustainability of our planet given the cost of our present lifestyles and its effect on our planet? Are you worried because you or someone you know, someone you love, is not well, either in body, in mind or in spirit? Are you worried for your children, your grandchildren, for your parents, grandparents?

Now tell me, is that worry caused by your belief in God? If you aren't able to enjoy life to the extent that you think you ought to be able, is that because God is preventing you from doing so? Isn't it really the other way around?

Our text this morning comes to us from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah was written in a time of great worry for the people of Israel. The people of Israel had been captured by their

enemies. Many of them lived in exile in foreign lands. The people of Israel certainly would not have been able to live carefree lives of enjoyment. In exile, God's people worried and doubted. In their joylessness, they doubted whether their God truly was God or whether the power of their enemies had exposed their belief in God as being unwarranted. Isaiah, understanding their fears and worries, writes to correct their misdirection and to alleviate their doubts.

The 40th chapter marks a turning point in the book of Isaiah. For the first 39 chapters the tone has been one of warning and judgment. But here, in what is usually called Second Isaiah, the tone shifts dramatically. The prophet moves from warnings of impending doom and judgment to pronouncements of God's fidelity and promise.

And Isaiah also confronts the claims of those who would challenge the supremacy of the one who is the Everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. 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 the Lord who sits above the circle of the earth, to whom the inhabitants of this planet are like grasshoppers. The Lord spreads out the heavens and brings princes and rulers to naught and nothingness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when God blows upon them, they wither and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal, says the Holy One. Look up to the sky, who do you think created all the stars of the heavens? And who calls them each by name and who is the one whose power ensures that not even one of them is missing?

Truly the Lord, truly God is the Holy One for whom there is no equal. And maybe in the face of such glory and power we do worry about our grasshopper status. How can we be confident and enjoy life when in the big scheme of things, we're just insects, creations which are so delicate and so prone to fragility? And so it may be understandable that the Israelites complained before the Lord, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God." The truth is that sometimes we are grasshoppers and the world around us is fraught with peril and danger and we wonder where God is in our fear and worry.

This week the Provincial Health Authority mandated that masks need to be worn by all students in middle schools and up, with certain exceptions. But there is still no mandating of masks for primary school students, which leaves many teachers unhappy and anxious. We also heard of the extension of the ban on cruise ships in Canada for at least another year. For those businesses who rely on tourists to survive, this is another nail in the coffin. And the news reminds us daily of the delays and cutbacks in the amount of vaccines that Canada is receiving. We wonder about our aging parents, will they receive the vaccine in time, and even if they do, will it make a difference with all the new variants going around?

Do we worry? Of course we do. And it's not just the present situation of the pandemic that causes us to lose sleep. Many of us would gladly give up our wealth if we could regain the health that we once had. Many more of us would forsake material possessions to know harmony and stability in our relationships, with our spouses, with our children, with our families and friends. What price is there on peace of mind and a contented heart? We worry and our worries often keep us from living life to the fullest but I would suggest, contrary to the atheists' claim, that it's not God that causes us to worry, but rather the lack of God that leaves us restless.

There's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life. Don't worry, be happy? Really? It's a fool's bargain. The truth is that we are imperfect and we will worry, about all sorts of things. We will suffer and we will struggle with enjoying life as God intends for us. But says Isaiah, "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 faint or 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; 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."

I don't know how much you know about grasshoppers, I suppose farmers know much more than the average person. Grasshoppers have wings but they can't fly like eagles. But they can really jump. If people could jump like grasshoppers we would be able to leap more than 40 yards. Imagine how useful that would be for someone playing in a Super Bowl! And yet, grasshoppers also have tiny brains and if you were on a field with lots of grasshoppers, you could actually step on and crush countless grasshoppers before they had a chance to leap away. Grasshoppers aren't creatures that we envy or yearn over. But sooner or later, we all feel like grasshoppers, especially when we're confronted with things that seem so big, so out of our control, so beyond our capacity, sometimes even when we come up against God and God's inscrutable ways. We just don't get it or understand it.

The good news is that when we feel like grasshoppers, when our world is fraught with peril and danger, when we worry and are prevented from knowing God's full intention for life, we are reminded that God is with us, God loves and cares for grasshoppers. The good news is that God, our God, the everlasting one, the Creator of the ends of the earth, is with us. He is the one who does not faint or grow weary and he will renew our strength and raise us up on wings like eagles. Because of God we will run and not be weary, we will walk and not faint.

Paul Hanson, in his commentary on Second Isaiah writes, "The fundamental lesson of Isaiah is the lesson of God's oneness and uniqueness, which alone prepares the human heart for the entrance of God. It is the lesson that cultivates out of human powerlessness, not helplessness and despair, but openness to the power that alone can save God's power. It is the lesson

reiterated by Kierkegaard, “The purity of heart is to will one thing.” So long as the human heart harbors other ultimate loyalties besides God, it is lost in a sea of chaos. (Paul D. Hanson, Interpretation – Isaiah 40-66) What is there to enjoy about life if there is no God? The idea of, “Don’t worry, be happy,” suggests that being free of God will somehow allow the atheist to make the most of this life since there won’t be anything after death. But I would argue that the atheist who doesn’t hold out hope for anything more lives ultimately disengaged from the world. If this life is all there is, how is suffering ever redemptive, how do we make sense of pain? To pretend that we can stop worrying and enjoy life is to relieve ourselves of the responsibility of living. It is the person who knows and is sustained by hope, the hope which comes the power of the one who alone can save, the power of God, it is such a person who is able to fully engage life, even with all its worries and anxieties, and still emerge hopeful and generous, because their strength is not their own, but comes from God, the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. The one who does not faint or grow weary, and whose understanding, no one can fathom. The one who gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

May we enjoy this day and all your days, just as God has meant for us, even in the midst of our worries and our anxieties, not because we are perfect, but because God is.

And to God be the glory, now and forevermore, Amen.