

“When Life Falls Apart” GPPC 2-4-18
1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Isaiah 40:21-31

When I was a kid I used to watch a TV series called “Kung Fu.” Anybody remember it? Set in the old, Wild West, the lead character, Caine, was played by David Carradine. An orphan, Caine had been born in China, and had grown up in a Shaolin monastery where he became a priest and martial arts expert. Unfortunately, when Caine was a young man, his teacher, Master Po, was murdered by the dastardly nephew of the emperor. And after Caine took deadly revenge, he fled to the United States where he tried to find his family, especially his half-brother. So each week we watched him make his way walking across the Wild West, encountering prejudice, doing good, and all while searching for his family.

As is the practice of all true, good guys, Caine was a peaceable man, always refusing to fight unless it could not be avoided. And typically each week we kids had to slog through almost an entire episode before somebody finally did something wicked enough for Caine to have to do some Kung Fu and beat up the bad guys. Caine would whip up on

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them with various kicks, blocks, and punches. As an act of Christian stewardship, you probably should go and YouTube one of the fight scenes after church today.

We also saw flashbacks of Caine growing up in the Shaolin monastery, training to fight, and learning wisdom from Master Po. He was always telling Caine something profound and his nickname for him was “Grasshopper.” “Grasshopper, you must learn to control your anger, or it will control you.” It was all so mystical, but we kids just wanted to watch the fights.

This morning we read Isaiah also talking about people as grasshoppers. He first writes these words to Israel, more precisely the remaining tribes of Judah. They’ve been defeated and taken into captivity by the Babylonian Empire, and now they live in exile. It is a sad, depressing time for Israel. To put it into modern terms, imagine if Russia were somehow able to defeat the United States and take us into captivity for a few decades. Imagine how we would feel.

So we might expect the prophet to exercise some gentle compassion here. “This is terrible. You must be in awful pain. Let me

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hold your hand. Do you need a hug?” These are kind responses, faithful responses to an individual. But they are not what Isaiah offers here as he speaks to Israel and to us.

Instead, he provides a two-part response to what has happened. The first part is about who God is and who we are. And it starts with a series of questions.

“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?” What is Isaiah doing here? He is making an appeal to Israel’s memory. Don’t you remember? Don’t you remember about God? As someone has said, “Faith is an act of memory.”

Well, what about God? What is Israel and what are we to remember? Isaiah answers his own question. “It is God who sits above the earth, and the people down below are like a bunch of grasshoppers. God stretches out the heavens like a curtain, spreads them out like a tent to live in.”

So we start to get this image of God who is above everything, looking down upon God’s creation, and the people down there, tiny like

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little grasshoppers. But there's God so vast that the heavens above are just something God hangs up like a curtain and spreads out like a tent.

Isaiah continues. He says, "God makes princes and rulers amount to nothing. They're like itty bitty plants, sprouts, barely grown up out of the dirt. And God blows on them (psst!) and they shrivel up and are blown away." Guess those rulers are not so impressive after all. Suppose they're not so powerful after all either, no matter what their press releases claim. Psst!

In fact, says God, "Who are you going to compare me to? There's no comparison. I don't have any *real* competition."

Now, the Babylonians worship the stars and the planets as their gods. But our God, the real God says, "Look up in the sky. Who *created* those *things* up there, sun, moon, stars, and the like? Who made them? You know. I did. And I bring those things out, they serve me. I count every one of them. I call them by name. 'Come along, Orion! There you go! Good boy! You too, Ariel! Good girl!'" "You see," says God, "I am great and powerful. And none of the things in the heavens go missing. They belong to me, and I know where they are."

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Again and again, Isaiah reminds the people of God who God is, because faith is an act of memory. That's one reason we come in here week after week—to remember. That's one reason we have our children in Sunday school and in worship—to learn and later to remember the most important subject in the world--God. It takes repetition. Because you can only remember what you have actually taken the time to learn in the first place. And, as Isaiah says, we are so forgetful.

Frankly Isaiah switches to scolding by quoting and mocking Israel's complaints. "We're hidden from God's sight. God doesn't make sure we get treated with justice." And if you think about everything that has happened and that Israel has been taken into exile, Isaiah's mocking seems a little harsh, doesn't it?

But Isaiah doesn't think so. He just launches into the same questions. "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" And maybe the people want to say, "Yeah, we've known and we've heard alright. And we knew and heard the first time you said it too. But life is hard right now. We're so beaten down that it's difficult to remember what you're saying."

So Isaiah has reminded Israel (and us) who God is and who we are. And finally Isaiah comes to the second part of his argument—what God does when we're in trouble. He says, "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth." In other words, the difficulty you face, even the enemies you face, all are temporary, but God is everlasting. And no matter how overwhelming what you're dealing with seems, God is the Creator of everything and everyone.

Furthermore, says Isaiah, you're not going to see God getting the vapors and fanning God's face. "Oh, my! I feel dizzy." No. God doesn't get faint or tired, he says. And God's understanding is beyond our even approaching.

God "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."

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Despite all that Israel has been suffering, and even though the people sometimes think God does not see their distress and will not act for their justice, God *does* see and God *will* respond.

And God will do the same for you and me. The key, says Isaiah, is to “wait for the Lord.” “Wait for the Lord.” It sounds nice, but what does it mean? The Hebrew verb for wait originally meant to twist and stretch, maybe the way we might imagine a rope twisting and stretching. So maybe what we are to do in waiting is to stretch from whatever challenge we’re facing all the way back to the anchor of our memory of what God has done for us in the past. Maybe that’s it. Stretch from challenge to faithful memory—wait for the Lord.

Because we know life falls apart sometimes.

We don’t get the grade we wanted, or we’re bullied, or we’re stressed out by school or family.

We don’t get the job we had hoped for. Or we get fired.

We’re treated unfairly simply because of who we are.

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We see a world in which the weak are ground into the dust while the powerful feast and dance, tyrants lie and thrive and decent people agonize.

We are the victims of crime.

We love someone who does not love us back. Or we love someone who no longer loves us. And there is this aching in our heart.

We make an embarrassing and public mistake. Failure and shame follow us like a shadow.

Our once vibrant health departs and our lives revolve around test results and doctor visits.

The person we cherished dies and there was more we needed to say and the plans we'd made vanish, and the voice we had counted on is silenced.

What would you add to this list? What would you add?

Life falls apart sometimes. What do we do fellow grasshoppers?
What do we do?

“Wait for the Lord,” says Isaiah. Like a rope, stretch from whatever we are facing, stretch all the way back to the memory of who

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God is, and what God has done for the world and us, and hope for what God will do.

Like the Psalmist, offer God our unvarnished prayers full of whatever emotions we are feeling. We don't have to clean things up as we talk to God.

Read scripture, especially certain Psalms, the gospels, and some of the great passages of assurance in the Old and New Testament. I'm happy to recommend some readings for you.

Gather with other Christians in worship, study, and fellowship. Talk to a counselor or a pastor. Know that we are not alone. Stretch. Trust. Wait for the Lord.

And then see what God will do. Either God will improve whatever we're facing (and maybe use us as instruments to improve it!) or God will give us the ability not only to endure but to laugh again, to soar, to mount up with wings like eagles, to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint. Maybe God will send someone to help us. Or maybe God will grant us an insight or a strength we had never expected. Sometimes it takes a long time, but we wait.

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I do not know what trials you face this day, nor do you know what I face. But we believe in God who *does* know. We believe in God who not only sits above us and beyond us, who creates and sustains every moment, who blows away the rulers as if they were nothing, but also who comes close to us, just a breath away, breathing life and love and hope and joy into us, sometimes when we least expect it. And at last, our God, the real God, finally will make all things perfect and new. So grasshoppers that we are, mount up with wings like eagles. And fly.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal