

Calm in Turbulence February 4, 2024

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Scripture Readings

*Isaiah 40:21-31, Psalm 147:1-12, 21c, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39*

I do not know about you, but whenever I am on an airplane, and it hits turbulence, I find myself clutching at the armrests as if to steer the plane.

My little mind tells me that if I can hold on tightly, the aircraft will obey my wishes. It always escapes me that I am never in control. I am just a passenger at the mercy of the wind, the pilots, and the miserable food flights serve.

This week's Old Testament reading paints a picture of a community at a crossroads. They are wondering what is happening, and they have lots of questions on their minds. In Marvin Gaye's words, they ask, "What's going on?"

What they are seeing and experiencing does not match their expectations. Those of you who do online shopping know what I am talking about.

So, the people of Israel are at a loss. There is a feeling that the God they have believed in for a long time is neither acting nor measuring up to their standards. God is not doing as God had promised to do. Their enemies have thrashed them a couple of times. The land has widespread inequality; the kings they demanded have come as a mixed bag, some fantastic, others awful. And the Assyrian army is advancing from the East. How much trauma can a community endure?

So, in the face of these mounting challenges, they seek to build a case against this God.

I am sure each one of us has been in such a scenario where nothing we have believed makes any sense anymore. It could be a sickness, a stressful situation, losing a loved one, or tough economic times. These situations push us to question whether we are safe enough and if there is still God who claims to care for us.

We see the people of Israel asking similar questions. In verse 27 of Isaiah 40, they ask, "Why is my way hidden from the Lord; and my right disregarded by my God?"

They are not only accusing God of not seeing what they are going through but also of not respecting their rights. The tail is itching to wag the dog.

Yes, they have heard stories of how God took them from Egypt, where they suffered for over 400 years, with a promise of a good life in a land flowing with milk and honey.

But their situation, as portrayed in this text, looks more like they are in a land drowning in vinegar and lemon juice. What they have believed for so long looks like failure.

Our situation as modern-day Christians looks similar. A lot seems to be going wrong in the world. Be it wars, children being violated and killed, hatred in the name of national politics, international aggressions, neocolonialism, and hostile cultural divides. We end up with questions like if God is a good God, then why is there so much evil in the world? Why have we believed, yet all these things are happening against us? Instead of singing praise and worship, we are left singing blues.

The world seems stuck and helpless in the mouth of a monster. Whichever way we turn, there is some danger lurking in the background. The inherent risks remain whether you are Red, Blue, or purple. Middleton and Walsh capture it aptly in *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be*: "When you are in a dragon's jaws and look around, what do you see? You see teeth, the sharp white teeth of your captivity. Standing tall and sleek, gleaming with danger, ready to impale you." (Middleton and Welsh, 113). This is the situation the Jewish people perceived themselves to be in and in which we seem to be as God's creation today. We feel trapped and want to move on to a better life, which is thrust into our faces by traditional and new media.

When I am on the checkout line, there is always the assumption that the other line is moving faster. So, I leave my current line and move on to the next. But something strange happens; the line I just left starts moving. Every place I am in could do with some improvement, and redemption can only occur in the next place, so it appears.

Similarly, the Jewish people look at their neighbors, whom they consider pagans but who, by human standards, are thriving. How do you maintain your sanity in the face of such a reality?

You have been in church, but things are going from bad to worse for you, but your neighbor, who never even knows God, has never had a hospital visit in a single year. Is trusting God still worth it?

Middleton and Welsh state, "It's hard to keep your balance in a dragon's jaws. Although God is supposed to bless those who are faithful and pure in heart, it was the arrogant who prospered." (Middleton and Welsh, 113).

Worry not because there is a response.

The entire Isaiah 40 answers these uncertainties. The chapter opens with a word of comfort for the people but closes with a promise.

I am not sure if I want to hear the word comfort when I am hurting, uncertain, and a gun barrel is pointed at my face. In fact, I would not be listening because I would be figuring out how helpless I am.

However, God takes time to remind them that monarchs, oligarchs, and all the 'archs' mean nothing before God. They are like dust, here today and gone tomorrow. God seeks to reassure this community that what you see is temporary and has no permanent shelf life. There is a power above everything; on that power should our hope and eyes rest.

Isaiah details the mighty works that God has done from creation by putting everything created in its place such that none falls off. This testifies to a transcendent God beyond all that exists in human imagination.

Isaiah returns to when God spoke into the chaos and brought order at the beginning. It would appear that Isaiah is reading from Psalm 19: The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

In a nutshell, the prophet is telling the people that there is someone more significant than the chaos on which they have set their eyes. Your sights are placed on the wrong things and sideshows, Isaiah seems to be telling them.

This is true to us reading this word today. While science has done a lot in changing how we perceive the world, it has not been able to answer every question that humanity has. There are still a lot of dark areas in this universe, both literally and figuratively.

Isaiah reminds us that God made it all. Even the dragon in whose jaws we are dancing is under the authority of God. God is in charge of this airplane despite the turbulence. And God reminds us that this plane was manufactured with turbulence in mind. We are not helpless because the Lord is our strength and song and has become our salvation.

Conversely, God is also dearly close and personal despite being transcendent and in charge of this aircraft with all its marvels. God knows each star by name, numbers them, and none falls out of place. No human being has ever and may ever have a name for each star dotting the skyline.

But if you thought God is only personal in naming stars and keeping them in space, it goes beyond that.

God has a promise for those who have faith. God is close by when the world has beaten you down, and you are dancing in the dragon's jaws and trying to use your armrests to control an aircraft in turbulence.

This closeness by God is echoed in verse 28.  
When we are weary, God does not grow weary.  
When our understanding is limited, God's understanding is inscrutable.  
When we run out of power, God empowers us.  
When we are weak, God increases our strength.

God comes through for us in three ways. Isaiah notes that even young people shall stumble and faint, but those who wait in the Lord will mount with wings like an eagle.

Eagles are known to soar high above storm clouds.  
I am sure at one point or the other, you have been in a place where all hope was gone.  
But something unexpected happened and you found yourself out of that situation. You may think it was just by chance. It was not.

I have been in situations where I somehow found myself in and miraculously out of a storm. God carried me out of the situation on the wings of an eagle. Just like in our Gospel reading this week, Jesus healed Simon and Andrew's mother after they left the synagogue. It was immediate. Jesus moved to change the situation that was bothering her and the family. In a flash, the storm was gone.

I wish God worked only this way, but no. God works in different ways. Sometimes, we find ourselves in deep trouble and pray to God to take us out of it. But it never just happens. Instead, God promises that "they shall run and not be weary."

In this case, God does not take you out of the storm on eagle's wings but gives you the strength and energy to run through the storm. The storm remains; it does not obliterate you, but you somehow weather it. God does not change your circumstance but walks you through it. It could be a sickness or any other situation, but God promises to walk with you in the storm.

As the plane faces turbulence, you find yourself in there; you cannot change the turbulence, so you have to fly through it.

And my dear friends, when you have run and cannot run anymore, and you are like, God, I have had enough, I cannot do this, and I am ready to throw in the towel, God says, "No way! You are gonna walk. I understand you are tired, worn out, and discouraged, but I am with you in this storm. And we shall walk it together."

But even as you take this walk, you do not faint. God sends encouragement, maybe through a song, quiet moments, a Bible verse, or a prayer to help you get through. The situation you find yourself in has not changed; the strength to run is gone, but God gives a new wind to keep you going.

In all these three circumstances, the only constants are God and change. The critical virtue is waiting on the Lord. God could be changing the circumstance, changing you in the circumstance, but the constant is that God is in the picture.

In a world where all seems lost, let us desire to focus not on the storm but on the God who can take us out of it or walk with us through it, regardless of what our limited imagination tells us.

This airplane we find ourselves in was made with turbulence in mind. God is in control, so I do not have to be.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.