

# Knowing He Knows

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## **First Presbyterian Church**

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Let's turn together in our Bibles to the passage that Matt Lucas has just read to us from Isaiah 40. It is particularly verses 27-31 that I want us to focus our attention on together as we come to the end of 2007 and readjust our minds and our fingers to get used to the year 2008. As we turn to God's word, let's first of all, turn to the Lord himself to ask him for his blessing on our meditation together.

*Our heavenly Father, how we praise you tonight as we come again to the turning of the year and the end of days that are now old and past and the doorways that today are new and potentially fresh for us. How we thank you that you have been with us in ages past, that you are an unchanging God and that you have so much experience of working with and blessing and dealing with your children. There is for us, we sometimes say, nothing new under the sun and we know that there is nothing new to you. You know our foibles and our fears. You know our dispositions and our discontentment. You know the gifts and graces that you have given to us and the callings of our lives. Most of all, you have known us from our mother's wombs. You understand us through-and-through. We praise you that oftentimes in this past year, you have marvelously taken your word and, so it seems, made it so extraordinarily relevant to our lives and our conditions though none other has known it. We pray as we come hungry to feed upon the bread the God and thirsty for the living water that flows to us from our Savior, Jesus Christ, that as we come this evening in joy and thankfulness to the written word and then to the Word, Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, made visible in broken bread and poured out wine, that all of us, from the youngest to the oldest, from the simplest to the wisest, may be conscious that you are here and that with you tonight we have the privilege of communion in your word and in these signs. So, meet with us, we pray, for Jesus Christ our Savior's sake. Amen.*

Most of us who are Christians, I imagine, are familiar with, at least, three chapters in the great prophecy of Isaiah. Most of us are familiar with Isaiah 6 and its magnificent revelation of the holiness of God and the summons of Isaiah the prophet to preach faithfully no matter how sore it was to be for him and, indeed, it was very sore. The congregations under his ministry would dwindle and dwindle and dwindle. Then, most of us, I suppose, perhaps from childhood, have been familiar with the great 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah that looks forward to the coming of Christ and proclaims him as the Suffering Servant. Most of us, are familiar with, at least, two verses in this chapter. We might not so easily have been able to say, "Ah, yes, that's Isaiah 40, but most of us have heard the Messiah often enough to know the words with which Isaiah 40 begins and, indeed,

handles Messiah. It begins, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, says your God.” And some of us, I imagine, at one time or another, have found ourselves memorizing this promise that “God gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and are weary, but those who wait on the LORD mount up with eagles wings, run and are not weary; walk and not faint.” Of course, it strikes us tonight why both of these famous verses that we know by heart are found right in the middle of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 40.

Does that mean you don't need to look at any of the other chapters? By no means but in a very interesting way, those three chapters summarize the message of the whole book. Isaiah was called to feel the holiness of God and, therefore, to become a prophet who will preach about that holiness, who will have as his favorite way of describing God and most preachers do have favorite vocabulary, Isaiah's is: the holy one of Israel. Then, his word of judgment that will fall upon the people so that chapter 39 ends with a word of judgment when King Hezekiah is told that the rebellious people will be exiled from their own land and taken into captivity in Babylon and there in their need to be restored, Isaiah begins to speak words of true comfort about the Suffering Servant who will die for their sins and lead them, finally, out of exile and captivity back to the Father's house and to the Father's presence.

So, in a sense, the whole gospel is found here in the prophecy of Isaiah, but it's interesting that in the prophecy, you catch a sense that there are two halves to the story: there is the first half of the story where the people of God are deserting faith because of fear and Isaiah's constant message to them is that they will be strong and secure only as they trust in the Lord. But they are full of fears about the political situation and instead of trusting in the Lord, they give way to their fears. Then in the second half of the prophecy, how it is that those who have given way to their fears and enter a dark experience may be brought out of that darkness back into faith. In faithlessness, they find themselves in the far country. In the far country, they will through these words of gospel comfort, be restored to faith.

It's fascinating to me, at least just in this juncture of our church life, it's fascinating to notice the particular way in which Isaiah's addresses the people. You'll notice he does it several times in chapter 40 and right through to chapter 41. In chapter 40:27, “Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel,” and the same in 41:8, 41:14, 41:21. This constant repetition of the double name of God's people: Jacob, Israel, Israel, Jacob, as though by the very language he was using to the whole people, he is conjuring up the memory of the wonderful things that God did in the life of Jacob as we called him recently, the Chief of Twisters and how he gloriously worked in his life and restored him from fear to faith, marvelously transformed him from Jacob the Twister, to Israel, the man who became a princely figure before God. It's almost as though by using these names, Isaiah is sending a kind of message by innuendo: God can do this again for his people and, therefore, God can do this again for you.

But he does so as these last few verses of chapter 40 are before us this evening, you'll notice that Isaiah helps them along by doing two things, two things that always help us

along, two things that help us along not least at the end of the year and the beginning of the unknown of a new year to help us to walk by faith and not by sight. These two things quite simply are: first of all, he analyzes the nature of their fear and secondly, he encourages them in the way of faith. There is a great lesson there for you, incidentally. When you find yourself fearful, the thing you are most likely to do is to try to run away from your fear but, you see, the thing that the prophet/pastor does for us here is to say, "Whoa! Whoa! Wait a minute. The first thing we need to do is to analyze the nature of our fears if we're ever gloriously to be delivered into the way of faith."

You'll see in verse 27 what their fears were as he analyzes the nature of their fear. "Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God?'" They are saying either, "We are hidden from God," and the very tense that he uses suggests the idea, "We are done for. We are permanently veiled from the sight of God. God doesn't see," or, "God doesn't know." Either that's the case or, "God knows and he's showing us singular disinterest in our need." So, either he doesn't know or he doesn't care. I mean, it's an ancient version of one of those arguments that are often used against the existence of God, isn't it? "If he really loved us, things wouldn't be this way." Or, "If he was really all powerful he wouldn't let things be this way." So, he can't be all good or he can't be all powerful or perhaps both. Or, in the life of the Christian believer who wouldn't be given to putting it that way, it's a description of the Christian believer who finds in his or her life that he or she is no longer able to make sense of the providences of God.

You can't go very far in the Christian life, at least you can't go very long in living in a real dynamic Christian fellowship, without being close enough to people to discover that there are many things happen to many Christians that those Christians aren't able to make sense of and you would be foolish to sit down beside them in their time of darkness and crises and say, "Let me explain all this to you." You would be blind to say that. There are many things in the Christian's experience that don't make sense to the Christian where he says, "I just cannot put these pieces together and make Divine sense of them. Is my life hidden from God? Doesn't he see what's happening?" Or, "Does he see what's happening and not really care about me?"

You doubt that that's God's way and you need to return to the simplest of the gospel stories, one of the best known of the gospel stories that we've all loved if we've been in the church any length of time and know the gospel. We've loved this story as long as we've be in it. When Jesus said to the disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee," and they piled into the boat. Whatever they were thinking and I imagine some of them were thinking, "We are foolish for doing this. Why would we fishermen who can smell storm in our nostrils follow this Galilean carpenter into the boat when he says, Let's go over to the other side?" As they sail into the Sea of Galilee, the storm comes up that makes fishermen who have lived the whole of their lives on this lake and know its every inch cry out to him in despair of their lives, "Don't you care that we're perishing?"

Now, you pause that moment and bring one of these disciples outside of the boat to examine what is happening here. What's happening here is this: we were obedient to the letter to the Lord Jesus Christ and everything has gone wrong. Don't you dare think of telling one of these disciples, "You know, if you'd only been obedient to the Lord Jesus, you would never find yourself in a storm like this?" They would say to you, "The very reason we were in the storm was because we were totally obedient to the Lord Jesus, even against our better natural judgment we were obedient to him." So, there are many times in the life of the Christian believer or at least in the lives of some Christian believers when everything seems to turn to sand and they wonder whether God really sees, whether God really understands, whether God really cares.

Now, what's happened? What's happened when I find myself in that situation? Can't you think of situations where you say, "I cannot understand what God is doing here"? I'm thinking of a situation myself tonight where I have not the foggiest idea. I have Christian hopes and expectations but why God should allow certain things to happen, I cannot put the pieces together. As I try to put the pieces together, they break the heart and you know situations like that. Some of you have been in situations like that where you've said you're too polite, "I'm too polite ever to say it," except if you've walked the fields on your own and you've cried out to God and you've said, "O God! O God! Don't you see? Don't you care? I can't put the pieces together. What's going on here?"

That's the analysis of their fear and very gently Isaiah is coming along and he's saying to us, "Now listen, you're becoming confused about God's character. He does care and perhaps you're becoming confused about God's disposition towards you. He really is good." And in the verses that follow, having analyzed the fears of these people, he now begins to give them marvelous encouragements for their faith. You notice that the first thing he does is to ask questions. I think we Christians are very bad at asking ourselves questions. We don't want to be thought a little loopy and so we don't talk to ourselves nearly enough. Christians need to learn to talk to themselves, to preach to themselves. If the only preaching you ever hear in your Christian life comes from this pulpit, you're in a sad and sorry condition. You need to be preaching the gospel to yourself all the time. You say, "I've responded to the gospel." Well, you may have responded to the gospel, you need to go on preaching the gospel until your last breath to yourself.

Isaiah comes along and he sees this melancholy and he says, "Now, let's preach ourselves out of this," and he begins to ask a series of questions. He says, "You're saying my way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God. Let me ask you a question, have you not know? Have you not heard?" You see what he's saying? It's interesting. He says, "Not only have you not known but have you not heard? Have you never heard about the Bible," he's saying to them. "Have these things that you've heard week after week, year after year, have they never really done something to your soul? You know what mothers now say and children now say to each other. You haven't heard me." Nothing more irritating for a wife to say, "You haven't heard me," to her husband and a husband to respond verbatim. If you want to know the reason for that since I'm a husband, I will tell you after the service is over. There is a reason and you ladies need to know that

reason but not just now. I'm in enough trouble just now without giving the reason just now. It doesn't come with all the authority of God's word.

But, you see, that's half the problem in my Christian life, isn't it? I kind of heard it but I didn't really hear it and Isaiah is saying, "Listen, my friend, God is saying to you, Hear me. Let it sink down into your soul," and what he's actually doing, this is so important for us, there will be somebody here tonight for whom this could be the most important thing you could hear in 2007: when this happens, you need to go back to first principles. That's a great lesson in the Christian life: you need to go back to first principles and that's what he's doing here. He says, "Now, let's go back to what we've heard and then let's apply that to our lives here and now." This is how we're to live, you see, beloved, by listening to the general principles we're given in Scripture that teach us about God and his ways and his dealings with his people and then to say, "Now Lord, how is that going to apply in my life? In the way you work in my life? And the kind of thing that you do among your people?"

You see what he does: he first of all reminds them of God's glorious character and then he teaches them something about true spiritual experience. What does he say about God's glorious character? Well, he describes it in these magnificent words, he says, "Haven't you known? Haven't you heard? First, the Lord is the everlasting God." What's the implication? He, therefore, works on a completely different timetable from your timetable. Isn't that the case? "God, why are you not doing something now?" Answer: "Because I've all eternity to do it and I'm not just planning for your comfort for Thursday morning, I'm doing something that will last for all eternity." You see, God is operating to a totally different timetable from the timetable to which you and I want to operate.

"Oh," he says, "reflect on this: he is the everlasting God and reflect on this: he's the Creator of the ends of the earth." Now, what's the implication of that? He's not just working on a different timetable that helps me to put my little timetable into true perspective, he's painting on a far larger canvas. God paints his pictures on a canvas the size of the universe and onto that canvas he paints in your little life. What is it we've been hearing now for years about some butterfly in Japan flapping its wings and a tsunami appearing on the other side of the world? They say that's true, that's physics. Is that right? There are physicists here, a geophysicist or somebody who knows about butterflies can tell us that's actually true? Tiny in this world, tiny things can transform everything. But you see, my friend, you look at your life and you see the little things that are near it. God's not painting your life on that canvas at all. It shouldn't surprise you that some of the things God is doing in your life completely mystify you if you're one of those butterflies flapping his wings and the influence is going to be on the other side of the world. Now, you see, that could be a frightening thing. I'm just a little butterfly in this massive world and butterflies don't last too long but it's a glorious thing, isn't it? To think that what God might be doing in your life might be something that, in ways you will not see until eternity, influences the ends of the earth.

So he's saying, "See your life in a different way. Put the portrait into a different frame and it will seem altogether different. Then he says, not only this, but he doesn't faint or

grow weary. You know, one of the things that has irritated me most in my life is that I've got to go to bed and sleep. That has always irritated me but I've got to go to bed and sleep. My mother thought at first I was just being naughty and I probably was but I just wish I didn't need to go to sleep and I've begun to think, "I think that's a sinful wish, Sinclair because you're not God. You need to learn that you're dependent. You need rest." But he is unwearied, he does not sleep or slumber, he doesn't faint or grow weary. What does that mean? It means his patience will outdo your impatience. He is a patient God and we're so impatient with him. Think, some of you, some of you have told me you were in middle years before you came to faith in Jesus Christ although you were in churches all that time. Do you know how patient God has been with you and how impatient you are with him? I don't just mean those of you who have told me that.

He is without weariness and he exercises a longer term patience than we do and his understanding, says Isaiah, is unsearchable. O, what wonderful words. His understanding is unsearchable so why would I think that I should appear in his presence and say, "Unless I understand what you are doing, I'm not going to trust you." Don't you think he would lean over the parapet of heaven and say, "If you don't trust me, you've really no idea who I really am." He is doing things beyond our wildest – don't people sometimes think that heaven will be so unutterably boring? That think it's an endless opportunity to join up all the dots in the universe and see how God's wisdom has been far greater than our wisdom?

When we begin to apply this to ourselves, we see as Isaiah says, otherwise, "youth shall faint and be weary and young men shall fall exhausted." Now, it's interesting here, youth is just the ordinary word for a young man but the language of young men carries the idea of people who have special strength or have been specially trained or perhaps even specially chosen. I mean, it's okay for a young man to feel weary but some who have done more than basic training at Fort Jackson ought not to feel so weary on the journey. He's saying, "But in this world, young men faint and are weary and even the cream-of-the-crop fall exhausted." See them at the end of races in the Olympics. "But those who wait upon the Lord renew their strength." They receive supernatural power and "soar as on eagles wings." They are able to keep going, "they run and they are not weary," and they are able to progress even in the most difficult terrain where you need to walk, "they will walk and they shall not faint."

How? Now, here's the paradox, here is the paradox to spiritual advance in 2008: by waiting on the Lord. Everything in the world tonight conspires against waiting: your cellphone, your email, your telephone, the newspapers. Everything conspires against waiting. But he says that it's only those who wait on the Lord who renew their strength. Does that mean that we ought to go home tonight and just go to bed early and wait passively? No, actually, this is one of the most active verbs in the Bible. What's the picture? The picture is, when's the next Olympic games? The picture is: the final of the 100 meters at the next Olympic games and the gun is in the starter's hand and if you get a close-up view of these athletes, what are they doing? They are waiting but they are waiting with every muscle tensed for the gun to go and it's because they have the ability to wait and to respond at the right moment that they get to the finishing tape and win the

prize. That's what he's saying. He's saying, "This isn't a passive waiting. This is a waiting on our tip-toes, a straining of every nerve we have in our Christian lives as we hold onto the Lord even in the darkest hour." But what are we doing? We are waiting in expectation that the moment will come when God will fire the pistol and it will be time to go and the way will become clear and we'll begin to be able, piece-by-piece, to run and to walk and to serve the Lord.

Perhaps there will be a day in 2008 where the words that Rhoda was singing at the beginning of the service tonight will be the most important words in your life, "Wait patiently for him and he shall give you your heart's desires." O, rest in the Lord, wait patiently for him. Doesn't that remind you of something Jesus said? It's meant to. He said, "Come to me you who are weary and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest for your souls."

*Heavenly Father, how restless we are by nature, how dissatisfied often we confess ourselves to be with your ways, how full of fears. O Lord, how full of fears we are for ourselves, for those we love, for our situations, for our futures, for our world, but you have no fear. We come to you tonight to pray especially as we now gather around the table and around our dear Lord Jesus Christ, that each of us will be able to rest in you and find in him and then in our lives, our heart's desires fulfilled. We ask it for his sake. Amen.*