

Carefree and Caring

Sounds like a contradiction in terms; yet in many ways that is the fundamental truth of our lives, it is the basis of the call which lies at what our Lord wishes for us in this covenant relationship which God initiated so long ago. We are called into this relationship which was initiated by the Creator of the universe; the One that our scriptures tell us spoke the world into being; all things including all life. In our scriptures we are also told that this Creator not only created, but remains committed to this creation, desiring to be in relationship so much so that the promise that we would not be left alone was demonstrated in the mystery of the incarnation; the appearance among us as one of us. This gap between creator and creature is so vast that it will always remain a mystery, yet it is one that we are always trying to find ways to either explain or explain away. It seems that we as the finite creatures we are we do not like things which are infinite, things which remain out of our control. Yet there is also within us a longing to be in relationship with that which we can sense but cannot define. Many of the events of our long and troubled history can be explained by the tensions created between these two elements of our natures, and our inability to comprehend God's nature. The Isaiah passage we have before us this morning presents this wide difference eloquently. Isaiah is speaking to a people living in exile, a people who in many respects doubt the power of their God because they are living in exile; believing that because the Babylonians won a victory over their kings, that their God had also been defeated. The passage begins with Isaiah asking them these questions: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in?" As if that weren't enough of a grand picture to reduce humanity to the status of grasshoppers, the passage goes on to elaborate that God is "the one who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing." When the weather is nice, and you stand outside and can appreciate the vastness of it the night sky, even the small amount that is visible to our individual eyes and ears, you can grasp this view of the smallness of the individual or even humanity in the composite. When then viewed from the perspective of the one who created all that you can see, this can help to re-orient one's perspective because we do tend to think that we, as human beings are the center of all things and that all things are centered on us as if we created all and are all-powerful. It helps to do as these verses suggest: "'To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal?' says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes 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." Of course, if you continue in this vein to strongly you can begin to forget the other point that Isaiah and our scriptures constantly place before us. As this passage ends, Isaiah reminds the people, "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." Isaiah is telling his people in their despair that they are not alone, no matter the appearance; but they need to trust that the Lord will provide them the

strength for their walk. When you think about what the prophet Isaiah is trying to instill in those people living in exile, those people who feel abandoned by God, it is a feeling of trust that the God who established that covenant with them so long ago is still present. They have been in exile so long, have been surrounded by another culture for so long, that they have lost contact with their own traditions, so the prophet's voice is reminding them of the things that they once knew. As human beings we seem to have a difficult time finding the balance between understanding God's sovereignty and power and our place within God's kingdom. We seem to either assume too much or too little. In the readings I did for today, I re-read a sermon by the Rev. Michael L. Lindvall, retired pastor of The Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City. This Sermon was based on the texts we have before us today, his theme was that faith calls us to care and to be carefree. Within the sermon when discussing the Isaiah passage, he discussed this problem we as human beings have of over-reacting to the grand contrast of God's sovereignty presented in Isaiah by thinking that what we do may not matter. After all if we are like grasshoppers, totally transitory and cosmically insignificant, does what we do matter? Reverend Lindvall answered this question by telling these two "died and went to heaven stories" which I am going to retell as they are very apt. The first story centered around Jean-Jacques Rousseau who was an 18th century Swiss-French social theorist. His thinking was very influential, especially on the more radical leaders of the French Revolution. His works and thoughts had a profound effect on much of Western history. In the first pages of his last book, a book named, *Confessions*, Rousseau himself imagines himself having "died and went to heaven." He writes that he approaches the heavenly throne with his head held high—no bowing or praise for this guy, not a hint of fear or even awe before God as he nears the throne. He is carrying a copy of that last book, the very book the reader now holds. As he passes through the pearly gates, he writes, all of heaven actually turns to face Jean-Jacques. And get this: according to him, the heavenly host actually set aside their praise of God and fall silent so they can listen to Rousseau. This is not just unblinking hubris; this is the extreme of the temptation to overestimate your cosmic significance. Rousseau is so eternally important in his estimation of himself that he silences the angels, angels who turn to him for truth. Rousseau actually wrote this of himself. The other story Rev. Lindvall relates is also one written as a self-description of "a died and went to heaven" experience. This one is by Karl Barth who will be remembered as one of the greatest Christian theologians of the 20th century. Barth laid out what is called "neo-orthodox" theology and is probably the most significant theological work in a hundred years and much of modern theology is still done in the light of Barth's multi-volume work. He wrote far more than Rousseau, so as he imagines himself arriving at the pearly gates with his books, he arrives with his books not under his arm, but rather piled in a wheelbarrow. If you want to verify the need for this image, you can view them on a complete shelf on a bookcase in my office. To continue, when Barth passes through the heavenly gates with his wheelbarrow full of his life's work, the angels do not turn to him. The angels do not go silent to listen to Karl. The angels laugh. "In heaven," Barth said, "*we shall know all that is necessary, and we shall not have to write on paper or read more...Indeed, I shall be able to dump even the Church Dogmatics, over the growth of which the angels have long been amazed, on some heavenly floor as a pile of waste paper.*" Barth stands justified before God, not by his life's work, great as it was, but by the grace of God alone. These two stories about these two great human "thinkers" illustrate their totally opposite understandings of the way their life's work

mattered. Rousseau's view of his achievement is absolute. He and his efforts are relative to nothing transcendent, proportional to nothing beyond him, certainly not to God. He and his work are at the center of the cosmos. Karl Barth, on the other hand, knew full well that his life and his work mattered. He would not have poured himself into it had he not held the highest estimation of the importance of what he was doing. But for all the passion that formed his ideas, for all the effort that went into his writing, Barth's view of his life and work was in proportion to the vastness and eternity of God. That is to say, what he did mattered immensely, but when set next to the eternal truth of God, it was as nothing. That is perhaps a subtle difference, a delicate balance that we need to keep in mind as we strive to follow our Lord. The challenge for us is to find the balance between caring and carefree, between being confident in our place yet remaining aware of those who struggle. We must know how much it does matter what we say and do, especially as we claim to witness to the presence of our Lord among us, yet also remember that God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Our discipleship matters, but it should always remain centered away from ourselves and our tendency to make our actions self-serving. In Mark's narration, Jesus urgently begins his mission proclaiming God's reign near. He restores many in the village of Capernaum to health, needing to find a respite to restore himself he goes off alone; then he goes further abroad in the region. Jesus views his mission to bring God's reign not to one locale but widely; this vision of his mission meant the restoring to health and wholeness those he encountered, crossing borders and boundaries. There are several covenants listed within our scriptures. When God initiates covenants with humankind the terms are established by God. God makes promises, and often asks that we make promises in return. As scripture records the results of these covenants, God is always faithful, while the people rarely are, at least not for long. In the covenant promises God asks of humankind they usually revolve around two basic themes. First those entering the covenant are placing their trust in God, and God alone; second that their behavior then ensures the well-being of others. If we could actually manage to do the first of these two things, fully trust in God then we would be able to live our lives in a more carefree way, not caring about the barriers and boundaries established by the world? Would this then make us able to be more caring to those who are "other" to us? Since we have been set free of the burden of our sin through God's grace, is the gift of our freedom meant to be to bring God's reign near? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.