

“Have You Not Known?” / Isaiah 40:21-24, 28-31 / 5 February 2012

“Have you not seen? Have you not heard? Have I not told you in countless ways down through the years of your life? I’m going to take care of you. Everything will turn out okay—in the end. The day is coming when you will fly, fly like an eagle! Don’t you remember whose you are, and who I am?” We all forget ourselves from time to time. We all forget vitally important things that we’ve seen, and heard, things that have been told to us from the very beginning. We forget.

Once at a meeting of presbytery, I chanced upon an old friend I hadn’t seen since our seminary days. Now, I call him a friend not because I know his birthday or his middle name, but because he and I used to hang out together in the computer lab and talk about people. Other students would come in to check their email, then they would leave, and he would turn to me and start talking about them. Now, I’m not a gossip, but lemme tell you about guy! He was a gossip. He and I didn’t own laptops, so we had to do our homework in the computer lab at all hours of the day and night. And though we never went to the movies or a coffee shop together, we had a computer lab friendship. We sat there and wrote our papers for the greater part of some days, discussing the other students who filed through, and the seminary professors, and our lives, and our even beliefs.

I was surprised to see this old friend, years later, at a meeting of presbytery. He’s not from around here, and I hadn’t had any news of him for almost a decade. But there he was, and so I made my way to him—with my big old signature grin—and called out his name, perhaps a little too enthusiastically, and he looked at me with one of those guarded smiles that says, “I’m supposed to know you.” Now, it’s true that some of my soldiers have deserted their post since I last saw him, and so I long ago decided to dismiss the whole company. But on the whole, I’m recognizable as the person I was a decade ago. And even when he did identify me, he still seemed strangely aloof. Life hadn’t been everything he’d hoped for back in seminary. He still hadn’t found a church to hire him. He still had all his student debt, but no satisfying work, no career, to show for it or to help him pay it off. But more, I sensed in him a reserve that I once discovered in another seminary classmate who landed himself a prestigious, “big steeple” church. It’s an unsmiling indifference that seems to say, “We might have been chummy years ago, but I have to be restrained and serious now that I have become who I have become.” In both cases, someone I liked had lost track of himself; where did the joy go? And it occurred to me sadly that some people choke on the failure of their dreams, while other people choke on the realization of those dreams. Either way, it’s just so easy to forget who you are, where you’ve been, why you made some of the pivotal choices you once made. Life can get in the way. It even turns happy people into serious, ashen-faced professionals, adults with appearances to maintain, and disappointments to cope with, and people to satisfy or impress. We all forget vitally important things...about ourselves.

Or the same sentiment in the words of the Prophet Isaiah to the Jewish exiles, being held captive in faraway Babylon: “Have you not seen? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Yes, you’re homesick. Yes, you’re discouraged now. But consider all that you and I have been through since the time I called you to be my own special people. Remember how I’ve gotten mad at you, but never forsook you. Do you think I’m going to change and forsake you now? No! You’ll mount up with wings like eagles. Don’t lose sight of yourself. Don’t forget your joy. I’m still your God, and you are still mine. Never forget”

Michelle and I used to play on a pub trivia team named “Gray Matter.” We were good, but never the best. One night we almost won when there was a series of bonus questions about the African nation of Nigeria. Yours truly came through looking like a real authority on all things Nigerian. Nigeria and I go way back. I’ve come very close; I’ve seen it across the bay, but I’ve never set foot on Nigerian soil. All the same, we have longstanding issues, Nigerian and me, and I’m convinced that those “issues” are going to come to a head someday. When monstrous, crowded, chaotic, polluted Nigeria looks across the border at peaceful, green, happy little Cameroon and decides to wage war, Africa-style, that’s when Nigeria and I will finally have to sit down and have a little heart-to-heart. Now, I’m not making fun of a desperately poor country, really I’m not. But try to imagine what life would be like in a place like this:

Imagine a place where most people only live to be about 45 years old. In such a place, I could only expect about three more years of life. Imagine a place where AIDS, malaria, typhoid, meningitis, and hepatitis are rampant, but medical care is hard to come by. Imagine a place where people killed each other just because they were from different towns, a place with bloody bands of Muslim extremists, a place where the desert is spreading, threatening to swallow the whole country. It’s a place with a population half that of the United States, but only a fraction of the landmass to live on, a place where the farmland is disappearing at an alarming rate. One in ten babies doesn’t survive birth, not to mention the mothers who die during delivery, and many children die before their third birthday. It’s a place ruled by their military where there’s no hope, really, to get ahead in life unless you’re ruthless. Almost everyone is dirt poor.

Okay, now I will make fun of Nigeria just a little bit. This is true: Nigerian courts several years ago held a goat—yes a goat—as a suspect in the case of a stolen car. Witnesses say that a man stole the car, wrecked it, and magically turned himself into a goat so as to escape prosecution. The judge held the goat without bail in hopes that his magic powers would eventually wear down, and he’d turn back into a prosecutable human. It never happened. Can you imagine living in a place like this? How will they feed themselves in ten years, the way the population is exploding? How will they avoid a nightmare future of pestilence, warfare, famine, and drought? How can they be anything but angry and scared all the time? And yet, a study of 120 nations, conducted five years ago, found that Nigerians are the happiest people on earth. They’re the least prone to depression, the least prone to suicide, the least prone to anxiety! They’re more likely to have a healthy self-image, a bright view of the future, and a strong network of family and friends to support them in bad times and in good. Nigerians are happy people. But you and I, while seated at the richest banquet table known to history, you and I manage somehow to be unhappy. We are prone to depression, and anxiety, and anger. We don’t feel safe in the world, despite the fact that most of us can count on about 85 years of healthy life, two or three meals a day, good medical care, security, job satisfaction, respect. We don’t feel safe in the world that we’ve fashioned for ourselves. We feel frightened, and exposed, and at risk, and lonely. How can that be? Have you not seen? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning that you, of all the earth’s people, ought to be the very happiest, for we are certainly the most blessed? There are more people in the world today who live like Nigerians than people who live like us. Forgetting is a rich person’s luxury. And forgetting makes us scared.

You'll occasionally hear a person saying, "I don't know what I did wrong that God is punishing me like this." What you almost never hear a person saying is, "I don't know what I did to deserve a steaming hot shower every morning. Every morning, I stand with my coffee cup full in a luxurious, hot stream of indoor water, and I wash myself clean. Not a broomstick's length away from me, beyond the wall of my house, it's thirty degrees. But here I stand, and if I chose to stand here for twenty minutes, nobody would come and stop me. I could stand here till the hot water gave out, then I could let the water heater reload and do it all again. What did I do to deserve a gift like that?" You don't hear a person saying, "I stood at the sink and peeled a dozen potatoes today, and wow am I grateful!" And yet, aren't there thousands—perhaps millions—of people in this world who would dearly love to be able to do that, to stand on their own two feet? To peel potatoes with their own two hands? To have a dozen potatoes to peel?

Have you not seen? Have you not heard? Has it not been whispered to you down the long years of your life—that God is good, that even in hardship, you are loved, that you are never alone? You have seen. You have heard. But then you forgot because we can't live in a state of unending wonder and gratitude. We let other things slip in to take our attention, like rush hour traffic, and our child's performance in school, and those old longings that never got met. But occasionally, we're visited with those brief, wondrously beautiful moments of realization, when it occurs to us, "You know, things are good. I'm blessed, and healthy, and well." Those moments fade as quickly as they appeared, and we forget. We lose a part of ourselves. Mindfulness is the key to contentment.

Once long ago, on a road trip to the beach, I was traveling with some friends who had a four-year-old son, Michael, who was always saying the most grownup things. He was a testy child, very cute but easily provoked. We had traveled some distance in silence, when Michael sighed deeply and said, "Today's a good day. Nothing's bothering me." What if enough really was enough to make us happy? What if we really did count it a good day when nothing's bothering us, when we had full bellies and an absence of pain? Shouldn't that be enough to make us happy? Isn't it enough to prove God's loving presence down through our years? "Have you not seen? Have you not heard? Have I not told you in countless ways down through the years of your life? I'm going to take care of you. Everything will turn out okay—in the end. The day is coming when you will fly like an eagle! Remember whose you are, and who I am." Yes, you have seen and heard, again and again. Now live gratefully, live joyfully, a life of courage and hope. Don't lose yourself in unimportant things. Share the good that you've seen and heard. This world cannot steal your joy except by your consent. Never forget. Amen.