

“Have You Not Known?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
February 4, 2018

Isaiah 40: 21-31

Fifteen years ago this weekend, I came and preached as a candidate to be the pastor of John Knox Presbyterian Church. It wasn't in this pulpit, of course; it was in the old sanctuary, with its all-brick pulpit, or what I liked to call the barbecue pit. On the first Sunday of February in 2003, we held a combined worship service, with communion, as we have today, and we began this journey together in ministry. I am deeply grateful that following that service, that congregational meeting was a unanimous vote, and I have felt humbled and honored to be your pastor ever since.

I will remember many things about that weekend here in Indianapolis. Many of you taking turns holding Heather in your arms - she had not yet turned one year old. And several of you entertaining Erin while Debbie and I were introduced to so many people. I remember many smiles and laughs and feelings of joy surrounding this opportunity for a new beginning. And I remember many saints of the past who are no longer with us today, but without whom we would not be together today.

The other significant thing I remember about that weekend was what happened the day before, on Saturday. I preached as a candidate on February 2, 2003, but on February 1, the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated upon re-entry into the earth's atmosphere. It had been seventeen years since the Challenger explosion, and following Columbia's disaster and the death of its seven astronauts, America's space program would never be the same. Indeed, eight years after Columbia, the space shuttle program would end with Atlantis' last mission.

I was particularly stuck in the days that followed the Columbia accident by an email which was sent by one of the astronauts, Laurel Clark, to her family and friends. It resonated with me in conjunction with the text we have read from Isaiah this morning. In her words:

“Hello from above our magnificent planet Earth. The perspective is truly awe-inspiring . . . I have seen some incredible sights: lightning spreading over the Pacific, the Aurora Australis lighting up the entire visible horizon with the city-glow of Australia below, the crescent moon setting over the limb of the Earth, the vast plains of Africa and the dunes on Cape Horn, rivers breaking through tall mountain passes, the scars of humanity, the continuous line of life extending from North America, through Central America and into South America . . . Mount

Fuji (in Japan) looks like a small bump from up here, but it does stand out as a very distinct landmark.

“Whenever I get to look outside, it is glorious. Even the stars have a special brightness . . . Thanks to many of you who have supported me and my adventures throughout the years. This was definitely one to beat all. I hope you could feel the positive energy that beamed to the whole planet as we glided over our shared planet (Laurel Clark, January 31, 2003).”

I found Laurel Clark’s observations very poignant and, at the same time, they jarred me quite a bit. I imagine all of us can become rather narrow in our view of the world, as far as its scope and breadth. We become focused on what is around us, and what presses in on us. What errands do we need to get done today? How are we going to pay this month’s bills on time? We worry about our children, our parents, our friends, our neighborhood, our church. The world can be quite small most of the time.

That is why Laurel Clark’s thoughts are so jarring to me. From her perspective, she was able to see so much more than her little corner of the world. She saw lightning and storms over the Pacific Ocean, and rivers flowing through mountain ranges. She saw in one sight the connected masses of land in the Western Hemisphere, and the distinct boundaries of continents like Africa. She and the other six astronauts were looking down on this world from a perspective none of us have had, yet one which we all should have when we consider our faith.

The God we are called to believe in is greater than our individual lives or our local community. As Isaiah writes, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? 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” (40:21-22). The God of our ancestors and our Savior, Jesus Christ, cannot be compared to any other: “To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One” (40:25). It is as if Laurel Clark witnessed what we know in faith, that “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” (40:28).

It is easy for us to suffer from amnesia. We are very good at remembering what we want to remember, and forgetting what we want to forget. It is easy to remember the times when life was good, when our worries were few, and our outlook on the future was rosy. Within those happy memories, we will often forget the challenges we faced, the obstacles we encountered, and the failures we experienced.

William Carl writes: *Theological amnesia is the kind of problem that causes us to fall apart every time crisis comes. It is what happens when you hear the dreaded “cancer” word or the doctor tells you they found a spot on your lung. Some of us whine. Others of us worry in*

desperate silence. Like the returning exiles, we wonder whether God hasn't gone off and left us altogether.

There is a kind of theological identity crisis in the church today. We do not know who we are as Christians anymore. We do not remember what we believe or why we believe it. No wonder we feel lost and alone. No wonder we have no idea how to talk with the world about our faith.

Theological amnesia is especially troubling when life goes well. How easily we forget God when everything is on track in our lives? We forget that God loves us and wants the best for us. This was Israel's perennial problem.

In many ways, this Isaiah text represents the same kind of theological slap in the face that reminds us how God really does reign over all nature and history, the one "who brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing" (v.23). Isaiah is trying to cure the world's amnesia. God has not forgotten you. Why are you forgetting God? We worry because we don't trust God. Trust God more and you will cure your worry problems (William J. Carl III, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 315-319).

The people of Israel had forgotten God. They had forgotten that God created all that was around them, all that had been in their past, all that would support them in their future. They had forgotten that God would not forsake them, and would bring them through this time of trial. Isaiah reminds them that those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength, will not grow weary, will not faint, will mount up like wings of eagles, and will be supported all their lives (40:28-31). Israel had forgotten, and Isaiah reminded them.

In our daily walk of faith, when our world can become very small, sometimes we need that slap in the face to help us get some perspective. When we begin to focus in on the petty things of life, sometimes it takes a crisis or a major life event to move us from seeing the world down here, and getting up above the atmosphere and viewing it from an astronaut's perspective. When we feel stuck in pain and grief and sadness, sometimes we need that still, small voice to remind us that we are loved - before, now, and forever.

I can tell you our of my own experience, when you are walking the journey of grief, it can feel very lonely. You see the world going along at its normal pace, and you can't imagine how others are not struggling like you are.

One of the things I always appreciated about both my father and my father-in-law was their willingness to write notes, emails, texts, and cards. In my reflection for my father at his funeral, I wrote: "Dad was a letter writer, a gift he learned from his mother. I imagine many of us gathered here today were the recipient of a card, letter, or email from Frank Mansell - probably typed, because his handwriting was awful!

But his communications reflected his caring heart, as he usually wanted to lift up something you had done to make his life special.” In cleaning out some papers a couple of weeks ago, I found a card that Debbie’s father had sent me last year for my birthday. These are all reminders that I will miss hearing from these wonderful men in the future.

I will admit that I have had real moments of wondering where was God in all of this. I have struggled to understand, to trust, to believe that this was really what God had in mind for us as a family.

(pulling out a box filled with cards) This box is filled with the cards and letters our family has received in the wake of our fathers’ deaths. They have come from many of you, from family and friends, from strangers we did not know but who knew these important men in our life. And in these cards and the words that are on them, it is as if God is saying, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? I am here. I am present. I love you.

“My love has been present throughout time, my love surrounds you in all that you see, my love refuses to let go of you, even when you forget that I am here. It is my love which will support you through the good times and the bad times. It is my love which will keep your life in the palm of my hand. It is my love which will save you from your sins, and restore our relationship as Creator and being. It is my love which measures your worth - and your worth is invaluable in my eyes.”

Have we not known? Have we not heard? The Lord is our everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth! Thanks be to God for his immeasurable love to us. Amen.