

## Sermon for Evening Prayer<sup>i</sup> The Fourth Sunday in Advent

### Lessons:<sup>ii</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the fortieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.<sup>iii</sup>

“Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who hath directed the spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed [SHOWD] to him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing. And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering. All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.

“To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him? ... Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in: That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity. Yea, they shall not be planted; yea, they shall not be sown: yea, their stock shall not take root in the earth: and he shall also blow upon them, and they shall wither, and the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble. To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith [SETH] the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth. Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God?

“Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither

is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the seventh Verse of the third Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians.<sup>iv</sup>

“... Therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith: For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith? Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Second Lesson:

“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand  
and marked off the heavens with a span,  
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure  
and weighed the mountains in scales  
and the hills in a balance?”<sup>v</sup>

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.  
*Amen.*

### **Homily:**

In the Church, we regularly recite prayers and read passages that make reference to the majesty of God, or to His omnipotence, or to some other powerful attribute of His existence. Every properly-constructed Collect begins with the recitation of some quality or action that is ascribed to God and as Anglicans, our worship services are more than well provided with pithy, literate, and poetic Collects. Indeed, they are one of the glories of what some are calling “the Anglican Patrimony”.

These descriptive phrases for the Deity make a fine sound as they run trippingly off the tongue, especially when they are couched in the rolling periods of Cranmerian English. Thus when we have said them with appropriate stateliness, we can congratulate ourselves, hugging to us the comforting assurance that we have duly gathered and, arrayed in all the most proper vestments, have indubitably made suitably Church-like noises.

This is especially easy now, in the final week of the Advent season, as the momentum of our current activities impels us ever more strongly toward the familiar, well-loved, and uniquely Church-like celebrations of our most central Christian holiday, that is, Christmas. These reassuring sights and sounds are more than sufficient warrant to justify our convictions that we are, indeed, God’s favored people and, as befits such especially blest folk, we are well and truly launched on another highly successful Church year.

In all this hurly-burly of outward distractions and inward self-congratulation, it is no wonder that we very seldom pause to reflect on what we are actually saying when we recite these familiar and reassuring turns of speech. The opening words of today’s Second Lesson are a prime example of how our familiarity with the ideas and syntax of prayers and of scripture too often leads us to skip over the meaning of what we are saying and reading.

“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand  
and marked off the heavens with a span,  
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure  
and weighed the mountains in scales  
and the hills in a balance?”<sup>vi</sup>

To understand what God is here saying to the Israelites, out of the mouth of His prophet Isaiah, we need to look at the place where these words occur. They begin what is approximately the second third of the fortieth Chapter of the Book of Isaiah and in the first third of that Chapter, the portion that is not included in today’s Lesson, we find these famous and, quite literally, prophetic lines:

“A voice cries:  
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’”<sup>vii</sup>

This, of course, is the famous announcement of the coming of Israel’s Messiah, which John the Baptist, quoted as the sign and explanation of his prophetic mission as the Forerunner.<sup>viii</sup>

But to the despairing, it is not enough to declare that the means of their redemption is at hand. It is as though a nurse were to tell a patient, lying grievously ill in hospital, that a new medical specialist will be coming to consult on his case. Weary of being poked, prodded, thumped, and illuminated by little lights, the patient may respond, “And what can HE do that the others haven’t already done?”

Then the nurse may quite reasonably try to comfort that patient by giving a summary of the new specialist’s credentials, of his medical school and postgraduate training, board certifications, and so on, as a way of instilling some hope for the outcome of his care.

And that is what Isaiah is doing in the latter part of his Chapter 40, the part that forms our Second Lesson today. He is reciting God's credentials as the Creator, reminding the people of Israel in poetic terms that none of them had the slightest power to bring into existence or to form the great features of the natural order.

Certainly they were not the ones who lay down the rivers, lakes, and oceans, nor did they erect the vault of the sky nor form the earth nor raise the mountains and the hills. But God alone has done this, for as Isaiah says,

“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 dwell in;  
who brings the princes to nought,  
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.”<sup>ix</sup>

Isaiah's implicit argument is, of course, that One Who is so powerful as to be the Creator of all that we can perceive must, therefore, have more than sufficient ability to direct the destinies of one small, insignificant nation. Thus the troubled Israelites can rest secure in the knowledge that the Lord of all Creation is watching over them, prepared to fulfill His promises of their national redemption.

In case this message of divine power is less than utterly clear, Isaiah repeats it in unmistakable terms:

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
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 to him who has no might he increases strength.”<sup>x</sup>

**Conclusion:**

We, like those ancient Israelites, can rest secure in God's promises to us because we, like they, can be assured He has more than sufficient power and ability to fulfill them. The difference between us and those ancients is that, since the coming of Christ, we know what they could not then have known, namely that the redemption God was promising to bring was a redemption not from secular political impotence but from personal spiritual loss, chaos, hopelessness, and despair.

Yet these internal ailments are even more difficult to cure than would have been the external ones on which the Israelites' attention was fixed. So we, even more than they, need the comfort of knowing that God's healing power is infinite:

“Even youths shall faint and be weary,  
and young men shall fall exhausted;  
but they 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.”<sup>xi</sup>

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister<sup>xii</sup>  
December 19, 2010.

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<sup>i</sup> “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>ii</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>iii</sup> *Isaiah* 40:12-18, 21-31 (KJV).

<sup>iv</sup> *I Thessalonians* 3: 7-13 (KJV).

<sup>v</sup> *Isaiah* 40: 12 (RSV).

<sup>vi</sup> *Isaiah* 40: 12 (RSV).

<sup>vii</sup> *Isaiah* 40: 3-5 (RSV).

<sup>viii</sup> *St. Luke* 3: 4-6.

<sup>ix</sup> *Isaiah* 40: 22-23 (RSV).

<sup>x</sup> *Isaiah* 40: 28-29 (RSV).

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<sup>xi</sup> *Isaiah 40: 30-31 (RSV).*

<sup>xii</sup> *Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA; Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection; Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.*