

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – February 4, 2018

[Isaiah 40:21-31](#) & [Mark 1:29-39](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions on Isaiah 40:21-31:

1. As our commentary below notes, we tend to isolate Isaiah 40:27-31 for preaching and for private devotional encouragement. But might these verses take on even more significance in the light of the entire chapter? How does the context of exile and restoration color your understanding and hearing of these verses?
2. One of the enduring questions of the Israelite experience is concerning God’s role in history. Does God control history? Yes? No? To some extent or in some circumstances? How? How does our answer to this question influence our understanding and hearing of verses such as these in Isaiah?
3. “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” These lines serve to prompt us to remember and hold on to that which we already know. What are the things in your own life and faith at this moment that you might just need to remember and reclaim?

Reflection Questions on Mark 1:29-39:

1. Did you notice in v. 30 that the woman Jesus heals is Simon Peter’s *mother-in-law*?! Generally, we think of the disciples as single young men, but here we have clear and direct evidence that Peter, at least, was a married man. Does this realization change anything in the way you think of the disciples? If so, how?
2. This passage highlights the two primary aspects of Jesus’ public ministry – proclamation (preaching/teaching) and healing. What is the relationship between the two? Is one more important than the other? Would it be a distraction for Jesus stay in Capernaum and continue to heal and exorcise? Is the ministry of healing and casting out demons actually part of his mission, or just the “set-up” for his proclamation?
3. What is Jesus’ mission? (See Mark 1:1, Matthew 4:23-25 and Luke 4:42-44 for textual examples). Consider the irony that as Mark’s readers, we know Jesus’ significance while his disciples do not. How/does knowing his identity change your response to his decision to move on from healing in Capernaum to proclaim his message?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on Isaiah 40:21-31 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "The Unweary Runner" – Feb. 5, 2012)

Imagine yourself in the midst of Isaiah 40's setting, as you read *aloud* the whole chapter, which introduces the second major division of the remarkable 66-chapter book of Isaiah: You and other survivors of your people are in exile in Babylon, hundreds of miles away from home. Your king is gone. Your temple is in ruins. Jerusalem's walls are destroyed, and wild animals roam the streets. Many family members and friends are dead or missing. Everything you hold dear is uprooted. Where is your God? You thought that Yahweh, the God of your people and of your ancestors, would have protected you from all of this, but it seems that the gods of the mighty pagan foreign oppressor Babylon must have more power than he. Do other gods indeed control the natural world and the destiny of nations? You *do* remember the word of the prophets who warned that Yahweh would bring judgment for your repeated idolatries, immoralities, and injustices, and especially for neglecting to trust alone in Yahweh. But if your God has punished *so* harshly, does he care for you? Where *is* God in this God-forsaken land? You are grieving. You feel profoundly discouraged. You are weary and weak in body, mind and spirit. As you anguish over these things with bitter tears and fears for yourself and for all you hold dear, you overhear the words of Yahweh: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to [them] [Hebrew: speak to (their) heart].... Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength ... [T]hey shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:1-2a, 31a, c).

In Isaiah 40, God announces forgiveness to his people ("her iniquity is pardoned" -- Isaiah 40:2 RSV and KJV), whose sins had led to the exile (Isaiah 42:24-25); and God sets the stage for their restoration. Speaking and hearing God's good news are central; e.g., see 40:1-3, 9, 21, 28. In 40:9, the people of defeated, downtrodden Jerusalem, a.k.a. Zion, are to be God's "herald of good tidings." This is one word in Hebrew, a participial form of *basar*; its Septuagint Greek translation is a participial form of *εὐαγγελίζω*, the word NT Greek uses to mean "to proclaim the gospel/the good news" by and about Jesus. For example, see Luke 2:10 and Romans 10:15 (which cites Isaiah 52:7). Note that the NIV of Isaiah 40:9 understands Jerusalem to be the *recipient* of good news. God invites his crushed people to hear and respond to his good news, and then to proclaim that same good news. Who can do it better than they?

What's the content of this *good* news since parts of our passage appear to be more bad news? People are but grasshoppers (Numbers 13:33) to the transcendent God (40:22). People are ephemeral grass or flowers which quickly wither away in the scorching wind of God (vv. 6-8; Psalm 90:5-6). Even so, "the word of our God will stand forever" (v. 8b and 1 Peter 1:23-25; Isaiah 55:10-11), and this word constitutes the *good* news proclaimed in verses 9 ff. In verses 22-24, the awesome heavens (worshiped by other peoples) are but a gauzy curtain-like tent where the Creator God lives. Even those kings and emperors and others who are powerful and most feared by human beings are mere lightweight trifles to God, who quickly plucks them up by their shallow roots and blows them away as though they were nothing of substance in a windstorm.

Yahweh asserts in 40:25: "To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One," (see 40:12-14 and Job chapter 38). The LORD is the incomparable one. This and the notions that the LORD/Yahweh alone is God and alone the Creator of the universe comprise keynote emphases of Isaiah, especially its second major part. See 44:8; 45:5-6, 12, 18, 20-22; 46:9; 65:18. Similar are Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Joel 2:27. Isaiah 40:26 asks, "Who created these?" -- the heavenly phenomena of sun, moon, planets and stars. With our light-polluted skies, many have never seen the vast Milky Way with its innumerable stars. It is the LORD who "brings out their host and numbers them." This means that only Yahweh can count the stars, "calling them all by name" (to name something is to have authority/power over something or someone). The basic meaning of the word "host," understood here as stars in some translations, from the Hebrew *tseva'ot*, is "armies." "Because [the LORD] is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing" (v. 26c). A NET note suggests that the numbering may mean God's calling the roll of his troops. By this understanding, rather than the stars and other heavenly phenomena's being gods and goddesses as pagan peoples believed, they are creations of God and but "soldiers" in God's army. Because the prophet believes that Yahweh alone is God, the Creator of all, he elsewhere mocks in Yahweh's name all those who make or trust in powerless idols: 40:18-20; 41:7; 44:9-22; 45:20-22; 46:5 ff.

We tend to isolate Isaiah 40:27-31 for preaching and for private devotional encouragement. But these verses take on special significance in the light of the entire chapter. See the many parallels to Isaiah 40:21-31 in Isaiah 40:1-20. And note all the contrasts within 27-31. Israel complains that God has disregarded them and abandoned them. But in the light of God's surpassing majesty and power, why would Israel suggest that God doesn't know them or care about their situation? If God can create the universe and make the starry heavens his dwelling place and be stronger than even the most feared human beings and nations, then he does know and at some point will act in Israel's behalf. God does not faint or grow weary or allow those who trust in him to continue being faint and weary. No longer will they weakly stumble along. But they will become like powerful eagles as they "fly" and run and walk with renewed vigor.

But there is one *condition*: It is those who "*wait for the LORD*" who will do these things (v. 31). The Hebrew verb is *qawah*. Unlike modern English where "waiting" often means passively or exasperatingly biding our time, *qawah* is eagerly awaiting, expecting, looking for, longing for and hoping for. In Jeremiah 29:11, God offers "a future with *hope*" (the noun-form of the same Hebrew root). (See Psalm 130; Romans 8:22-30; Titus 2:13.) Things may not yet fully be what we would like, but we place our confidence in God anyway and take one step after another.

Verses 21 and 28 associate hearing God's news with knowing and understanding -- if we truly hear, we will come to understand. And if we understand, we will know God's comfort and again trust God alone (rather than powerful human beings or other gods). We will be forgiven, restored to God and from exile, and reinvigorated. The majestic God who created us is alone the one who is strong enough to bring us back home. "[The LORD] will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young" (Isaiah 40:11 New Living Translation).

Commentary on Mark 1:29-39 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "The Mulligan Moment" – Feb. 6. 2000)

This passage is part of a large portion of Mark's gospel --1:16-3:12 -- devoted to Jesus' ministry and its opposition in Galilee. The passage details two events: healings at the home of Simon Peter (also called Cephas), one of Jesus' first and most prominent disciples (vv. 29-34), and Jesus' departure for a new phase of his Galilean ministry (vv. 35-39). This account is paralleled, in part, by Matthew 8:14-15 (only the healings at Simon Peter's), and Luke 4:38-44.

Jesus and at least some of his disciples have just left the synagogue in Capernaum, a town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. There, Jesus has astonished his listeners with his teaching, described as "having authority"(v. 22), unlike the teaching of the scribes, to which the people were accustomed. Neither Mark nor Luke records the content of that astonishing teaching; Matthew, however, sandwiches the Sermon on the Mount between his report of Jesus' teaching in the synagogue (4:23) and the crowd's astonishment at Jesus' authoritative teaching (7:28-29).

The "synagogue"(v. 29) appears unceremoniously for the first time in the gospels in this passage, belying the revolutionary change in Jewish thought and worship which had already taken place by the time of Jesus. Scripture reading, study, prayer and exhortation became the shape of Jewish worship from this time on, replacing sacrifice as the primary act of devotion. With the destruction of the first temple in 587/6 B.C., the synagogue assumed central importance in Jewish religious and civic life, serving not only as a location for worship, but also as a social center for activities that formed integral parts of Jewish identity (such as communal meals, reception of religious visitors and legal proceedings).

The first literary and archaeological evidence for Palestinian synagogues appears in the first century, and the remains of over a hundred synagogues have been found in Palestine, the overwhelming majority in Galilee and the Golan region, the locale of the events recounted in today's lesson. Jesus' teaching in a Galilean synagogue on the Sabbath represents the fruition of centuries of the gradual democratization of teaching and sacerdotal authority in the religion of biblical Israel, a development fraught with both

opportunity and conflict. The evangelists' report of the crowd's reaction to Jesus' teaching captures both aspects of this religious development.

Simon Peter's marriage (v. 30) is implied in passing also by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:5 (who uses the reference to defend his own foregoing of a wife, explained in 1 Corinthians 7:8), and the fact that the word "mother-in-law" occurs in the New Testament only here and in a quotation from Micah 7:6 (in Matthew 10:35 and parallels) strongly suggests historical accuracy underlying the gospel accounts. Neither Peter's mother-in-law nor his wife is known by name.

The unspecified "fever" which has incapacitated Peter's mother-in-law could have as its cause any number of ailments, and the lack of attention paid to the cause and effects of the fever is paralleled by a similar brevity in depicting the healing actions of Jesus: "He took her by the hand and lifted her up"(v. 31). Although the gospels consistently take considerable pains to focus the attention of stories about Jesus' healings on their religious and theological -- as opposed to their ritual or mechanical -- aspects, the healing account of Peter's mother-in-law is noteworthy for its absence of ceremony.

Not only does Jesus forego such gestures as laying his hands on the sufferer (as in Matthew 9:29 or Mark 6:5) or employing such auxiliary substances as saliva and dirt (as in John 9:6), he doesn't even speak to the ailing woman, as he does in most other healings, including his raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-43 and parallels), which the present account most closely resembles. Jesus' gesture of taking the hand of an afflicted person is also found in Mark 9:27 (the account of the boy with an unclean spirit). The notice that "she began to serve them" is meant to indicate the woman's complete recovery, mental as well as physical.

As word of Jesus' healing powers spreads, people suffering physically ("all who were sick") or psychologically/ emotionally/spiritually ("or possessed with demons") were brought to him for relief (v. 32). "At sundown" suggests that they were brought after the Sabbath restrictions on labor and walking had passed. The "they" of verse 32, who brought the suffering to Jesus, could refer to the townspeople in general, or to the disciples in particular, who may have been appointed to this task.

Jesus' success is indicated not only by the observation that "the whole city was gathered around the door"(v. 33), but, more importantly, by his refusal to allow the demons he exorcised to speak. He ordered them silent "because they knew him,"i.e., they recognized him as the Messiah (as Luke makes explicit in his account of this event, 4:41). The theme of the "comprehending demons" runs throughout the gospels (e.g., Mark 1:21-28 and parallels), and is one of the theological paradoxes of which the evangelists are fond.

Jesus' frequent injunctions for those with whom he has interacted to remain silent -- formalized in New Testament scholarship since 1901 as "the messianic secret"-- remains something of a mystery. Such injunctions are frequent in Mark (e.g., 1:44; 3:11-12; 5:43; 7:36; etc.), and they are issued to demons, the healed, and Jesus' disciples. Although many explanations may account for Jesus' reticence to have his messianic identity widely known, it seems that Mark intended the secrecy to protect Jesus from the overwhelming crowds (see 7:24) or hostile opponents (see 9:30-32).

Not unrelated to the latter concern was the well-known proliferation at the time of Jesus of "divine men, "miraculous wonder-workers and healers who turned out, with disappointing frequency, to be notorious frauds (such as Alexander the false prophet, satirized in the second century B.C. by Lucian of Samosata; see David R. Cartlidge and David L. Dungan, Documents for the Study of the Gospels [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980], 293-298). It would be entirely understandable if Jesus wished to dissociate himself from such publicity-seeking charlatans.

After this period of intense activity, Jesus got away and found a place of peace and sanctuary -- a "deserted place" where he prayed (v. 35). Simon and his companions hunted for him, found him and reported, "Everyone is searching for you. "From this brief time of retreat from the pressures of life, Jesus began the next phase of his Galilean ministry, saying, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do"(v. 38). Refreshed, he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message and casting out demons.

Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).