

Sermon – Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

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5 Epiphany – Year B

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“A Great Big, Very Small God”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Three weeks ago, I landed at the airport in Minneapolis and made my way to my rental car. I started the drive west and found the local broadcast of the Minnesota Vikings playoff game against the New Orleans Saints, tuning in with about five minutes to go in what was becoming an absolute nail biter. As I made my way through the western suburbs of the Twin Cities, a desperate heave made its way from Case Keenum’s hand into the arms of Stefon Diggs – and the play now known as the “Minneapolis Miracle” was on, Diggs sprinting 61 yards to glory and victory as the clock expired. I kept the radio on throughout the postgame show, listening to the local hosts interview their beloved Vikings. To a man, each of them was at a loss for words, and stumbled into explaining the play as an act of divine providence. So Diggs, for example: “My quarterback gave me a chance, and God gave me everything else.” God, it seems, had willed the Vikings to victory. Of course, this same God let them get pummeled by the Eagles the very next week, but so it goes. And who will God have win the Super Bowl tonight? Well, the answer is right there in today’s scriptures: “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles.” But enough joking around about God and football: we all know that God is a baseball fan.
2. Of course, most of us don’t believe that God is in the business of deciding the outcome of sporting events. It would seem that God might have more pressing matters needing divine attention. On the other hand, I’m

sympathetic to athletes who, in the glow of victory, give thanks to God. Giving thanks to God is, generally speaking, a pretty good impulse to cultivate. What this really points to is our difficulty comprehending just how it is that God is involved in this world, in our lives. There are certainly those who believe that God is scripting every moment of human history; on the other hand, there are those who profess that if there even is a god, that god is entirely removed from our day-to-day lives. But most of us, I think, live somewhere between these two polarities. So where is God at work? And how? Our scripture readings for today, aside from any assistance in Super Bowl prognosticating, help point us in the right direction.

3. In our Old Testament reading, we hear Isaiah speaking a great big word from a great big God: "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" God is the One who sits enthroned above the heavens, ruling over a world in which the people – especially those princes and rulers who wield petty powers – are little more than grasshoppers. Who can equal the strength and the majesty of such a God, and who can outlast or overmatch the One neither faints nor grows weary? This God is not One to be trifled with, and this is exactly who and how the people needed God at that moment in time. These words from Isaiah are spoken to the people in the midst of their exile, at a time when it seems that God is either powerless or uncaring, for why else would the people have been left to flounder in Babylon? Isaiah declares, however, that even if God's ways are hidden from humanity for a time, God will not remain silent forever. No, God is on the march and will lead the people home, bending the long arc of human history to the divine will. It is this God – this great big God – who continues to be on the march against tyranny and oppression, in favor of the weak and powerless, on the move in the struggle against systemic racism and cultures of sexual abuse and everything else that seeks to hold us captive. God's ways might seem hidden, or slow, but rest assured, Isaiah, tells us: God is on the move, with power and might

4. But God is not on the move alone. The end of the Isaiah passage today makes that clear. God is not simply going to steamroll those who find themselves in the way, like so many grasshoppers stepped upon, accidentally or otherwise. Those who wait upon the Lord, we hear, shall be lifted up. And so it is that we find the great big God of the universe shrunk down into our shape and form in Jesus Christ, as he walks into Simon's house, approaches his mother-in-law, and lifts her up, healing her from her fever. The God who keeps the stars in their courses also has time and healing just for her. She is filled with gratitude and begins to serve Jesus and his disciples. Now, to be sure, we don't want to read this as Jesus restoring a woman to women's work (and honestly, couldn't Andrew have made the sandwiches?); no, Jesus restores her to human work, that of showing thanksgiving to God by serving one's neighbors. The power of God is displayed in Christ as an uplifting compassion, restoring this unnamed woman to God's story, fitting her story, her vocation, her life, into the ongoing story of God. God is both the creative, powerful force that shapes history *and* the personal, incarnate Jesus who lifts us up out of sin and suffering and death to give us a place in God's story. So much of what we suffer occurs because we have dislocated ourselves from God's story; in Jesus' healing touch, we are restored.

5. Earlier this week, my family made the trip up to Wisconsin to see Erika's grandmother, Kay. Grandma Kay is dying. She entered hospice care this past Monday. We, with many other family members, spent the day in conversation, giving hugs and sharing tears and laughter. At one point, I took a stroll around the facility and discovered a grand piano. There was a sign on it, asking that people not play the piano unless they have been trained at a professional level. My immediate thought was how sad it was that Grandma Kay was confined to her bed, for she *was* a professional pianist, a woman who delighted in the power of music. But the piano was 50 yards and a lifetime away from Kay now. But yesterday, we received a video. There was Grandma Kay, in her wheelchair instead of on a piano bench, oxygen tank

alongside her, sitting at the piano playing – from memory – Edvard Grieg’s “Wedding Day at Troldhaugen,” the same piece she had played when Erika walked down the aisle to join me at the altar on our wedding day. In a way, this changes nothing. Kay is still dying. But alongside that truth is another truth: God continues to lift her up, to connect her to her vocation, to give her a place in the divine story, and to heal her in ways that transcend physicality. Because finally, the God who sits enthroned above the heavens in power and glory is the same God who was nailed to a cross for the salvation of the world, the same God who will walk out of the empty tomb so that none of God’s people would be lost, the same God who has taken Kay – and you – by the hand, lifting you up.

6. And that, it seems, is enough. Maybe God is deciding who wins football games. Then again, probably not. God has bigger things to do – and seeks to do many of them through you: lifting you up to be the ones who stand against injustice, raising you up to feed the hungry, pouring love into your life that you would share that love with others. How God is at work beyond that is often a mystery, so we go back to what we know. That the creator God is the crucified God who comes to us today in small bites of bread and a little bit of wine, (who enters Fiona’s life this morning in new ways today through a little bit of water). May you be renewed in your baptismal vocation today, lifted up once more by the risen Christ to love and serve others. I’m not sure exactly how God works all the time. And that’s okay. Christ is alive, and at work in you, and that is more than enough. In response to this promise, I hear echoing the last words Grandma Kay said to us from her hospice bed: “Give thanks and praise God.” Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.