



First United Church of Oak Park

It's Complicated

Isaiah 40: 21-31

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Does anyone else read or hear this passage from Isaiah and just sigh a huge sigh of relief? Listen again to this slightly altered and shortened version...

Have you not been paying attention?

Have you not been listening?

Haven't you heard these stories all your life?

... GOD sits high above the ... earth,

... stretches out the skies like a canvas —
like a tent to live under.

... The rulers of the earth count for nothing.

... "Who is like me?

Who holds a candle to me?" says The Holy One.

Look at the night skies:

Who do you think made all this? ...

GOD calls each star by name

... and never overlooks a single one.

Why would you ever complain ...

or, whine ... saying,

"GOD has lost track of me.

GOD doesn't care what happens to me"?

Don't you know anything? Haven't you been listening?

GOD doesn't come and go. GOD *is everlasting*.

GOD is Creator of all you can see or imagine,
knows *everything*, inside and out.

GOD doesn't get tired, but energizes those who are weary,

And strengthens those who feel weak.

For all people get tired, stumble or fall.

But those who wait with GOD will renew their strength.

They will spread their wings and soar like eagles,

They will run and not get weary,
they will walk and not get tired.

Can I get an AMEN?!

Phew! God has got this. Thank goodness for that because most days, I know I don't. Especially over the last 10 months.

Nothing can make you feel quite so powerless, helpless, and without control, as the uncertainty, loss, and changes of a pandemic; it seems that in such a situation as this our faith has the potential to either be strengthened and what gets us through, or be shaken to its core. I can see how one might go either way.

Our siblings, brothers, sisters, have suffered. People near and far in our immediate families, our church, our community, our country, and our world, have:

- Endured deaths of loved ones.
- Lost their jobs.
- Feared for their life.
- Fought their addiction all over again.
- Died by suicide.
- Coped with isolation.
- Struggled with their mental health.
- Wondered where their next meal would come from.
- Wrestled with drastic changes to day-to-day life.
- Grappled with how to be a parent, teacher, and human.
- Made all kinds of sacrifices.

If you told me right now that you no longer believe in God or that you were at least seriously struggling in your relationship with God, I would completely understand. I would hope to listen and hear more, to know the pain and struggle you have felt and hope that you would know you're not alone.

Yes, I can see how this is one of those times where you might change your relationship status with God to "it's complicated." I, too, have been there.

There is one other time in my life where I often felt powerless, helpless, without control, lived with uncertainty on a daily basis and was witness to extraordinary loss: when I did my unit of CPE, my clinical pastoral education experience. CPE

is a requirement for ordination in the PCUSA, for which you intern as a chaplain in a hospital. I had never talked to God so much as I did during those months. I had never been so close to so much grief and loss and death as during my time in CPE, but I had also never witnessed such faith in others and seen the face of God in so many people.

But I can't recall a time that I saw someone turn away from God. When a 20-year-old boy died in a car accident, his family wailed in grief, but prayed — they turned to God. When a newborn died during birth, his mother named him Emmanuel, God with us, and we prayed — she turned to God. When an elderly man took his last breath, his wife held his hand, kissed his forehead, and asked me to pray — she turned to God.

This doesn't mean that they didn't — or that we won't — turn to God with questions, doubts, or even anger in our times of grief, struggling or suffering. We can turn to God with fury, rage, cursing, shaking fists, and middle fingers — it's OK, God can take it, and I'm willing to bet would feel and know your honesty and the trust you must have in your relationship to be able to react that way. But however much anger you direct toward God, I believe God will respond with that amount of love, but doubled.

When I look around at the world, and consider all that has been suffered and endured, all that continues to harm, exhaust, and cause grief, I feel that sorrow. It is a grief that hurts my heart, a pain I know in my soul, but for me, it would be harder, more painful to live this life without God. Without something that is everlasting, without something or someone who knows us each by name, who will give us rest, strength, and hope, who can handle our grief, our anger, and respond with love. Someone who despite a pandemic, I don't need to be socially distanced from, who I can actually feel closer to, who on the days when I am losing it, or feel like I never had it all together, I can just breathe, hand it over to God, who will say, "I got this." Because the reality is I never really had control anyway.

So may this passage allow you to breathe a sigh of relief, to hear and know that even in these truly difficult times our faith can be a powerful source of strength, comfort, energy, and peace. Amen.