

**Sermon Series: God Is...**

**Sermon Title: Vast and Personable**

**Isaiah 40:12-18, 26-31**

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I recently finished reading *The Book of Joy*, a book published last year that documents a week that Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama spent together, sharing their wisdom on finding joy. One of the things that struck me is that these two men are such revered spiritual leaders, profound influences in the world who have accomplished so much, yet reading about their interactions with each other and even with strangers they meet, there is a sense that they are so down-to-earth, humble, able to relate on personal level without seeming holier than thou or like they're such a big deal. And as I was preparing for this sermon it struck me that perhaps the reason that seems so striking and remarkable is because, in a sense, and of course on a very small scale, it is reflective of God, a very Christ-like manner. In one of the exchanges between them, the Dalai Lama shares a Tibetan teaching that says, "Whenever I see someone, may I never feel superior. From the depth of my heart, may I be able to really appreciate the other person in front of me." And then he turned to the Archbishop and said, "Sometimes you tell me to act..." And the Archbishop finished his sentence "like a holy man." "Yes, like a holy man," the Dalai Lama repeated, laughing so hard like being a holy man was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. And Archbishop Tutu continued, "Yes, yes, I mean people expect that you would have a presence and behave properly. Not take my cap and put it on your own head. I mean, people don't expect that from a holy man." To which the Dalai Lama replied, "but if you think you are just a normal person—one human being out of 7 billion - you see there's no reason to be surprised or to feel like I should be something special. So whenever I'm with queens or kings or presidents or prime ministers or beggars I always remember that we are all the same."<sup>1</sup> Hearing those words, I can almost imagine Jesus saying, "such faith, such humility, I have not found in all the land of Israel." As we talked about last week, the vast and personal God does not stay inside the neat and easy boxes we often like to try to put God in... Jesus reminds us of this often in Scripture by doing things like pointing out great faith in unexpected people and places.

And this morning we are looking at the tension of God being both vast and personal. God's vastness—the bigness of God is clear in the passage we read in Isaiah. The God who can scoop up all the waters of the earth with one hand, whose span of the hand can measure the heavens or pluck up the mountains and put them on a scale. This poetic language brings to mind just how big God is. And yet we also believe and know that God is at the same time so personal. Acquainted with us intimately, perhaps more than seems comfortable. This is very clear in passages like Psalm 139: (Read Ps 139:1-18)

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Joy by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams . p. 207-208

This Psalm is all about the depth to which God knows us, and how inescapable it is that God does know us. As human beings we have both this incredible need to be known, but at the same time, often a fear of being known too well. We feel good when someone remembers our names, but a little uneasy when they start to know too much about us. Maybe we think it's cute when our best friend can finish our sentences, but are less than thrilled when our friends and loved ones know us well enough to see all our faults and insecurities.

So in the midst of these needs and fears, we hear the words of Psalm 139 and they seem both a comfort and a little disconcerting. Yes, maybe we like the idea of being known and loved by God. We cross-stitch on baby blankets "You knit me together in my mother's womb". But then other parts of the Psalm take things a little far. God is inescapable; there's nowhere we can go that God isn't already there...always with us; knowing every thought before we're even aware of it, knowing our days and actions before we've lived them. God is vast even in knowing us personally.

In Isaiah 40 and Ps 139, we glimpse both God's greatness and grandeur, God's unfathomable knowledge and power and vastness, **and** also the extent to which God has chosen to be bound up with creation—with us and the very minute parts of our existence. And it's a little hard for us to understand how God can be so big and yet also willing to be so involved in our lives, acquainted with all our ways.

And what is even more remarkable is that God is able to do this for each and every one of us—not just the powerful, not just the ones the world sees as important. In Isaiah 40:29 we hear the promise that God gives "power to the faint and strengthens the powerless."

God is big enough, creative enough, sustaining enough to keep everything in the universe going. Yet, God is personal enough to want to sustain **us—you, me, the guy who's given up, the girl who can't imagine taking one more step**. God knows us, searches us, is always with us.

There is mystery in that, a mystery as mesmerizing and even more unimaginable as the vastness of the sea. Oceans bring us to awe and wonder because they are so big, so seemingly unknowable, they seem to go on forever. One of the greatest adventures is setting out on the open seas—sailing across waters that stretch on for as far as the eye can see.

But thinking about God as vast might seem intimidating, cold, or impersonal. So let's consider its opposite. The opposite of vast is small, shallow, or maybe containable. Something we can fully know and understand. Something that is small, compact, handheld. Not exactly things we would rather that God be. When we have a giant sized problem, we don't want a God who is compact. When we look out at the night sky and consider the one who made it, we don't imagine someone handheld. But here's something else about the opposite of what is vast. Something that is small, handheld, understandable is something we can control. That is why we don't want to be known TOO well isn't it? Because if someone knows us too well they can control, manipulate, predict us.

And while God is reliable (the psalms are full of praise for God's reliable, steady, faithful love) God is also too big to control. Beyond us. That is where the language of heaven is helpful. Heaven is not so much an up there in the clouds, as Jesus shows us. Jesus says the kingdom of God is at hand...at your finger tips, in your midst. NT Wright says that in the Bible heaven and earth overlap and interlock but language about Heaven is the barrier of holiness that makes God near but out of our manipulation. God is no puppet, no genie, no soda machine or ATM. God is vast.

When we think of vastness, we often think of the ocean. But Isaiah says that God holds all the oceans, all the waters of the world, scooping them up in one hand. That is God holding in hand, controlling as compact, small, handheld, the vastest thing we can think of. God is so vast, it like God can hold our very concepts of the vastness in a crevasse of one hand!

Of course when we think of vastness we are not just thinking of great in size—not the literal images of Isaiah 40. God's being, God's love, God's essence is vast. One of my favorite hymns puts it this way: Oh the deep, deep love of Jesus. Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free. Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me. Underneath me, all around me is the current of your love.

Amen! God's love, the love of God in Jesus is vast. Beyond limit. You can't contain it, you can't stop it; you can't cover its size. You can simply experience all you can, let it wash over you and surround you. And if we think about Jesus—the one who came to show us that God is personal, in some ways knowable and relatable, we can see that Jesus was also vast, mystery.

The same vastness that provoked Jesus to withdraw from the crowds was also why he couldn't turn them away when they tracked him down. Jesus' love was vast enough to be able to love enemies. Vast enough that he could say woe to you the powerful, the rich, the self-righteous, but was always extending the invitation of relationship, forgiveness, and discipleship. You and I can't understand Jesus for this. We think, if he wanted to heal all the people, he shouldn't want to withdraw from them. If he wanted to teach them to love one another, he shouldn't have called out people's hypocrisy like he did. If he prevented the adulteress woman from being stoned, he shouldn't have told her to leave her life of sin. We want Jesus to be tame. We want Jesus to always be predictable. But as CS Lewis says of Aslan in the Chronicles of Narnia, "he's not safe, but he's good. And he's king" Jesus is not always predictable, but he's reliable. He's not just got a few stock ideas, feelings, or sayings. He's vast! He's deep!

And that means we can't control or manipulate God. We see that in verses 27-28 of Isaiah 40:

*Why do you say, Jacob, and declare, Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, my God ignores my predicament"? Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The Lord is the everlasting God; the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn't grow tired or weary. **His understanding is beyond human reach.***

God's vastness is beyond our understanding. We can't comprehend it, and we can't always comprehend God's ways. Later in Isaiah 55, we read:

*"My plans aren't your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans."*

As Pastor Jason Byassee used to say to us all the time, "if you can understand it, it's not God". And for some of you left-brained, logical, mechanical thinkers out there that might be a little scary. You want to rationally understand God. And yes, God does give us a mind and there is a place in faith for us to use our brains. Despite what some may think, the church can handle some scrutiny, and God can handle our doubts. But let me ask you, what is a world that does not provoke you to awe? A boring world. Worship of God is where we stand in awe that all of this, all this vastness, is bigger than we are, deeper than our brains can go without losing breath and drowning. We don't have to fear God, in all God's vastness, because in Jesus, God is revealed as completely loving, completely good and dependable to be these things.

And best of all, God is these and does everything possible to open the way for us to be in relationship together. God knows us so well, and as we accept that and seek to know God's heart, God reveals more and more to us of who God is and what God is doing in our lives and our world. We never know fully, we don't cover every cubic inch of that vast ocean; we don't need to, because it is all good. We don't know all there is to God but God is available for relationship with us. God chooses to become vulnerable and be known.

In Jesus, we see that God incarnate, Emmanuel, God with us did not come as one totally closed off and on a pedestal. God in Jesus got down about as low as he could go. Born to a poor, unwed mother in an occupied kingdom, in a town with a bad reputation—the kind of place that people thought was no good, and that some governments and leaders wouldn't want people immigrating from. God got so personal that God was born into a people who had been enslaved, known exile, and were still living under the thumb of the Roman Empire. Into this culture, Jesus came as a servant, one who called fishermen, tax collectors, disreputable women, the poor, the leper, the weak, even children ...all could come to know and be known by him. He came into humanity and loved all of humanity, even knowing that many would betray him, misunderstand him, and eventually kill him.

And all of this is good news because it means that the One who holds the whole world, holds us too. The One who created everything and created us, is infinitely creative and can guide us through every storm, every trouble, every trial, bringing new life where we thought it impossible.

Though we grow tired, weary, and faint, God doesn't. And God gives strength and power to the weak and powerless. Be glad God is vast. Give God praise for being bigger than your problems, your progress, and your programs. Give God glory for being better than you could have hoped for in your wildest dreams. Be grateful that the maker of heaven and earth is not only big, but deeply, deeply good, a vast ocean of goodness, and bottomless grace. Be glad God is vast, because God in God's vastness did not become wore out of your and my sin, God did not become too hurt to draw near to us to deliver us, God was vast enough to come closer than our very breath in Jesus to invite us to once again walk with him in the garden and to wisely order this world. This is our calling, and this is the God we worship and adore, worthy of all our praise. Thanks be to God. Amen.