

February 7, 2021. Rev. Kathryn McGinnis

Have you ever heard of Blue Monday? In 2005, a UK travel company, Sky Travel, dubbed the third Monday in January as the most depressing day of the year. They named the date “Blue Monday.”

They argued this date to be the most depressing because of many factors: the winter weather, enough time has passed since Christmas that the Holiday cheer has left, some people are in debt from the holidays, and by that day, most of our New Year’s resolutions have failed. Not to mention that date falls in the height of some’s seasonal depression.

Now, we’re a couple weeks past that date, but perhaps for us, those who work in the Church, the added stress of preparing for Lent doesn’t exactly help. And all of this is escalated by going through it in isolation – after already months and months of isolation.

This time of the year is tough for many of us – and it can leave us desperately looking for hope.

Our scripture for this morning finds the Israelites in the midst of the Babylonian exile – displaced from their home, from Judah – desperately looking for hope. Life in exile- life in captivity in Babylon – was a painful reality.

The Israelites were forced to leave their homes and were scattered as their temple was laid to waste. They became refugees from the very land that held promise. Held their covenant.

And our scripture for this morning opens with a somewhat rhetorical, possible harsh answer to that search for hope in the despair of exile by Isaiah. “Have you not known? Have you not heard?”

In other words, why do I have to tell you this – you should already know.

Isaiah reminds the Israelites of the mighty power of God – the creator of the universe. And then he contrasts that - the mighty power of God verses their own powerlessness.

We, God’s created, in the grand scheme of God’s created universe, are as small and insignificant as grasshoppers in the field.

As Verity Jones writes, “Isaiah makes it sound so obvious and good: the God who creates all of this, who is greater even than the rulers, can certainly take care of the smallest among us!”

But what is it about our own insignificance that is supposed to give us hope?

What is it about our own powerlessness that comforts us?

And why does Isaiah seemingly throw this at us in a way that presumes our ignorance?

When I was in my high school and early college years, I, like many – maybe even some of you – struggled with my own identity and image and confidence. I was so preoccupied and obsessed with what others thought of me that in many ways it consumed my life. Throughout the struggles of embracing who I am, one piece of wisdom I received seemed to stick: It was that if we only knew how little other people actually thought about us, we would never spend so much time obsessing over what they thought.

Our own insignificance. My own insignificance. It seemed to set me free: free to embrace confidence, pursue dreams and ambitions, free to fail, to succeed, because I was but a grasshopper – insignificant in the glory of God’s creation. Who cared what I did or didn’t – history did not.

But Isaiah takes this hope in insignificance and pushes it further: our hope is in both our insignificance to the world but also the significance to our creator. How wonderful, if unexplainable, to be beloved by a God who is equally transcendent – beyond and above us – and equally immanent – close and within us.

Perhaps Karl Barth describes it best when he states that “the Lord God can be God and act as God in an absolute way and also a relative, in an infinite and also a finite, in an exalted and also a lowly, in an active and also a passive, in a transcendent and also an imminent, and finally, in a divine and also a human. God does and is this because sovereignty is transcendence and immanence.”

The Israelites in the Babylonian exile described by Isaiah lost hope because in the depths of their despair – in the depths of their lowest moment – they felt trapped by the insignificance and ignored by God. And Isaiah reminds them – Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the

everlasting God, (literally the God of Forever) the Creator of the ends of the earth.

The Lord their God is greater than any exile, is greater than any foreign ruler or power – yet so close and tender that God knows them each by name.

They need only wait – God is with them. There is no moment in history, no despair so terrible, no person or peoples so insignificant that stands outside of the power of God.

It's seems to be a universal truth that we when are in the depth of our despair – our insignificance seems to trap us, and we forget that God is with us that when we break, God is the one to put us back together – we need only wait.

We, like the Israelites in exile, want God to act instantly and in big, significant ways, that we forget the power of insignificance. But waiting is hard.

In an increasingly instant world that craves gratification and instant satisfaction– what are we to do with the words of Isaiah. For those of us who struggle with depression and anxiety – and an increasingly large number of us do – perhaps this hits a bit too close to home. When the thick blanket of depression weighs over us – we want nothing more than to have God to reach down and simply remove it. Instant gratification.

When anxiety consumes our every thought and action – we want God to just press a mute button and silent it. But it doesn't work like that – it never does and never will. Instead, we must wait.

But like our faith, like our trust in God – waiting is never passive. We forget that God meets us in the small, seemingly insignificant ways.

In the phone call from a loved one that lifts our spirits, in the run that boosts our endorphins, it's in these small acts that seem insignificant while we wait – when they're repeated over time and with patience – that we find transformation.

Just as a runner trains by doing something so insignificant as putting one foot in front of another. Repeated over time with patience – it transforms into something so significant as a marathon.

So too, does God's love for us in the midst of our despair transform our lives.

And Isaiah is right – by the end of the book of Isaiah, the Israelites are back in Judah. God has not abandoned them. They were not insignificant to their creator, despite like us, being but grasshoppers in the majesty of creation.

Blue Mondays will come and go every year. But in their depths, when we are desperately search for hope, we must remember this: our hope is in both our insignificance to the world but also the significance to our creator.

In our God, who is powerful enough to create the universe yet intimate enough to know us each by name. we need only wait. Thanks be to God. Amen.