

## **Unquestions – Epiphany 5B**

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. Who does not faint or grow weary, whose understanding is unsearchable. Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when God blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name. Notice by the time the prophet known as Second Isaiah is writing, during the Israelites' exile in Babylon (where they sat down and wept), it's no longer Adam who named all the animals – too much responsibility. It's God who names them. The biblical narrative evolved as the ancients realized just how far humanity was capable of straying from the peaceful progress of Creation. The narrative is still evolving to this day, in its interpretation, like it or not. And we're still straying. Genesis 1:28, for example, reads: "God blessed them, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Talk about cockeyed optimism! Nowadays, the human race

is fallin' on its face, and ev'ry whippoorwill wishes God would change his bill, and tell 'em it just ain't so no mo.

God, or Adam, named, for example, the ostrich. Actually the dictionary says it's from the Ancient Greek *strouthos megale*, big sparrow, which seems awfully understated. I bring up the ostrich for two reasons: One is the array of fascinating characteristics possessed by this, the largest of birds, also the fastest two-legged animal there is. With their acute eyesight and hearing, ostriches can sense predators such as lions from far away. When being pursued by a predator, they have been known to reach speeds in excess of 70 km (that's 43 miles) an hour; and they can maintain a steady speed of 31 miles an hour over many miles. They also lay the biggest eggs of anybody, with the possible exception of Brian Williams. When threatened, ostriches generally run away, but they can also cause serious injury or death with forward kicks from their powerful, sharp clawed legs. Each year, a number of ostrich ranchers in South Africa are killed by their livestock. Nuff said.

The other reason I'm interested in ostriches today is because of the myth we human beings have made up about them to make it seem like we're not the most blithely ignorant, reality denying species on the planet. This myth likely began with Pliny the Elder, the Roman leader and naturalist who wrote that ostriches, "imagine, when they have thrust their head and neck into the dirt, that the whole of their body is concealed." Ostriches do not bury their heads in sand to avoid danger. That would not result in a future for the ostrich species. They do however nose around for sand and pebbles to swallow to help grind up

their food; you and I might do that too if we had no teeth, and no blenders. Also, when hiding from predators, they lay their heads and necks flat on the ground, so that from a distance, they look like mounds of earth in the hazy heat of the savannah. But everyone in our culture thinks they know what an “ostrich mentality” is: patent denial and/or blithe ignorance of potentially useful, not to say vital information. The twin habit to this is of course making up things that we want to be true and declaring them to be useful or vital, so as to manipulate each other for economic, political or emotional gain. We have several words for this: campaigning, advertising, and public relations. We avoid, we resist, we manage the truth, in an effort to expand our importance and control over life. But it is to no avail. Have you not known? Have you not heard? To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

These questions are ironic; they are ‘unquestions.’ Isaiah knows the answers. Remember how the masterful cross-examiner Perry Mason, when he knew he had the villain caught in a skein of lies, would extract the final admissions with a series of questions to which he knew very well the answers: “Isn’t it true, isn’t it true, isn’t it also true...” Our old rule of three again. Or think of the cowardly lion: ain’t it the truth. That’s not a question either, it’s an opportunity to accept truth. In Psalm 139 we sing, “O Lord, your knowledge is too high, beyond my reach. Your thoughts are like the sand; to count them I must be eternal like you. Here, the psalmist tries to get in good with God: “Do I not hate those who rise against you? I hate them with a perfect hate!” But here Second Isaiah is telling us with his non-questions us what we already deeply know: we are, like the

grasses, gone. We are not here to imitate God. Our hope and our purpose can never be greatness. Our hope and purpose lie in self awareness, self examination, humility, moderation, peacemaking, healing, comforting, visiting, holding each other close, feeding, clothing, sheltering, forgiving, depicting, relating, entertaining, welcoming, and on and on.

These are plenty activities for a lifetime, as numerous as the sand themselves. Let God fight the star wars, make the big bangs, move the continental plates. When and if we've done all we can do to care for this planet and its inhabitants, when all of nature and humanity is nurtured and justly treated and reasonably happy; when our numbers are no longer wildly out of control and we're no longer obliterating other, inconvenient species, then we can all get together at a big potlatch to ask God what else we ought to be looking into, projectwise. But we have a long way to go and lots to do before that day dawneth.

The concept of patriotism has a different meaning for each of us. Some might veer toward the idea of 'Number One,' and even toss around the phrase, 'the greatest country in the world.' Others might think 'the greatest country in the world' is a dumb thing to boast: the writing on the wall, the pride before the fall. God's truth is it's also patriotic to want us to be healthy, realistic and responsible. It's patriotic to be concerned about the ways in which we are among the least great, and be passionate about changing them, things like immoderate consumption, mass incarceration, income inequality (the subject of the Trinity Institute conference we have here), the unavailability of medical care and our

environmental recklessness. Wanting to change those national characteristics is truly patriotic.

When we get up to heaven, let's say some angel at the pearly gates checking folks in as the legend has it. When we belly up to the desk there, and the angel says, "Where ya from, son?" We'd probably better think twice before saying, "I'm from the greatest country in the world," just on the off chance they were serious about all that 'last shall be first' business. Who really wants to get put into the remedial learning class, or worse. The goal is to have the presence of mind – and the track record – to say, "I'm from God's country... Ma'am." And by the way, even if we've led what we think are socially responsible lives; even if we can say with the best of them: "Back where I come from there are folks who do nothing all day but good deeds. They are called phila... er, phila... er, Good Deed Doers," Even if we're that good, perhaps it might be better to let that rest. I'm reminded of a New Yorker cartoon where the poor zhlub is standing expectantly in front of the pearly gates. St Peter, with his long white robes and long white beard peers into his enormous computer database screen dubiously: "Yes you say meek, but your record here says passive aggressive."

We all have our demons, big headed or sneaky shadowed devils though they may be. Pray God will help us bear in mind the grasshopper factor, and allow us to do what we really can do.