



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
4 February 2018
Sermon: "Staying Alert"
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Mark 1:29-39
Isaiah 40:21-31

It was a Hail Mary pass! The Montclair High School Mounties had been undefeated all season. They were averaging forty-four points a game. They were ranked fourth in the state. Their star players were being recruited by the county's top colleges. The North Bergran Bruines were no match for this unbeatable team! Everyone knew it.

The Mounties held the lead throughout the first half of State Championship, and the eighty-thousand seat stadium was dominated by their parents, and siblings, and teachers, and friends, sporting royal blue-everything and cheering their boys on at the top of their lungs: "Montclair, Montclair!"

As the clock ticked away, the score was now thirteen to eight. With only a few minutes left in the game, the Mounties seemed to have this in the bag. The Bruines squatted at the 37-yard line with just one minute, twenty-four seconds to go. One incomplete pass. Two consecutive penalties. They were moving further and further from the End Zone. Their fate seemed inevitable.

With the game basically over, Montclair fans began to relax. Teenagers got up to buy their last hot dog. Parents threw away their trash. Aunts and Uncles headed to the car to beat the traffic. Even the Mounties players on the sidelines were getting jittery with the thought that victory was near.

And then the impossible. A miracle drive down the field. With only one second left in the game, the Bruines quarterback threw the ball and it landed in the hands of a Bruines high school junior standing right in the center of the End Zone. He held it close to his chest as they tackled him down. An audible gasp echoed throughout the stadium. The Mounties had lost.

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No matter how much we try, we can sometimes approach our faith as if it was our game to win or lose. We train hard throughout our lives and try to check off all the right boxes: We come to church each Sunday. *Check!*
Put money in the offering plate, greet our pew mates. *Check! Check!*
Help our neighbor with his groceries. *Check!*
Pray with our families before dinner. *Check!*
Babysit our classmate's cat – free of charge. *Check!*

We might do all this with the best of Christian intentions, but deep down inside we might still harbor the belief that this is somehow bringing us closer to ensured victory. If we do all of the right things, God will play along and provide.

But what happens when we encounter those “Hail Mary” upsets?
Unfathomable moments that unsteady our balance, shock us to our core,
leave us feeling defeated – or even forgotten.
The cancer that’s returned. The eviction notice. The job lost.
The pregnancy that’s ended. The rejection letter in the mail.
The inappropriate text at school. The cruel words said between friends.

And there are those global troubles too.
The pain of a planet that seems more than ever at odds with itself.
The concerns about today’s rhetoric that blatantly rejects and belittles so many.
The heartbreaking feeling that we are somehow moving backwards instead of forwards.

It is in life’s most devastating seasons, most painful upsets, when we can feel that we are losing the game. We can begin to question God’s devotion, even God’s presence, in our lives. We place blame. We doubt. We turn away. *I mean let’s face it, no one likes to lose!*

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Today’s text brings us into a time when the Jewish people had lost everything: their established community, their stability, their freedom, their home. Their entire world had been rocked to its core and there was nothing they could do to stop it.

After enduring years of oppression and war as empires fought to dominate their land, now Babylon had taken control and the Jews were sent far away from their homeland. Taking only what they could carry on their backs, these refugees were sent to live along the banks of the river. Here in this foreign place, they had no idea when or if they would ever return home.

They asked one another if this terrible loss was a punishment from God (had they done something wrong?). They shouted to the skies, confused why God had not kept them safe (were the emperors now more powerful than the Lord?). They cried out to God in lamentation, yearning for an answer, saying:

*“Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress. (Lam 1:3)*

Jewish exiles struggled to rebuild their battered faith: to maintain their identity, to pass along their traditions to the younger generations, to keep their heads in the game, if you will. No doubt, throughout these long years, God was feeling more and more like a distant memory and they were feeling evermore alone, betrayed, forgotten.

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Enter the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*“Have you not known? Have you not heard?”
22 It is God who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
23 who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.”*

The prophet’s poetic phrasing is meant to capture the ears of his weary listeners. He wants them to awaken fast to what they feel has been gone for so long. He wants them to believe that all hope is not lost.
Can you hear? Can you see? God is alive– all-powerful, ever-present – right now!

For Isaiah, there is indeed a connection between the world’s chaotic events and God’s divine activity. But not in the way that the exiles understand it to be so.

God is here, yes, but God’s intention is not to relinquish control to those human beings with the sharpest swords and the grandest armies. God is here, yes, but God’s desire is not to watch His chosen people continue to crumble and suffer.

God’s imagination, God’s devotion, God’s power is far greater than that. God is a complex visionary, a radical creator, a bold force for justice and love, a leader who is unmatched – One who can and will overcome the evils of the world.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?”

In a world with so many headlines that take our breath away, surely we – like our ancestors – experience moments of wondering if God has gone missing, if God has thrown in the towel and left us standing alone on the field. Life is hard and our pains are great. But Isaiah reminds us even now that we cannot be fooled by the limits of our own imaginations: by the timelines that we set, by the expectations we have, by the harsh words we hear spoken by others.

God is beyond human understanding and God is far greater than any human force. God is here and now – as God has always been – reaching out in compassion, pushing us from pain to new life, working tirelessly for peace and reconciliation. We need only awaken and see.

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During the Grace Covenant Youth Mission Trip to Charleston, our youth had the opportunity to visit Boone Hall Plantation. Boone Hall was once a place where hundreds of enslaved African Americans were forced to work day in and day out – growing crops like cotton, rice and indigo.

During our tour, our guide brought us into an old slave house that was furnished like a chapel. We heard that there, slave owners used God’s Word as a cruel tool to prove that

slavery was divinely ordained: those enslaved were meant to play by their masters' rules - to be obedient, to be silent, and to never rise up against them. For these enslaved persons, the God that was being taught to them was as cruel as their captors, but the God that they were experiencing for themselves was someone wholly different.

Late in the evenings, they would gather together; and although most were illiterate, they would share Bible stories from memory and they would speak about the Lord that they knew: a God of liberation (who frees those enslaved from bondage), a Savior of resurrection (who suffered so that all could be restored to new life).

Their hymns of praise became freedom songs. Lyrics gave clues about escape routes on the underground railroad: songs like, "*Wade in the Water, wade in the water children, wade in water, God's gonna trouble the water.*" And their instruments (such as drums) were used to send signals about planned escapes or uprisings.

In a time where God was being depicted as another white overseer, there to ensure their master's victory, they lifted up the God that they had encountered whispering to them during those long days in the fields. This was a God who could break chains and promise hope, even in the midst of an impossible reality:

*"Have you not known? Have you not heard?"
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
God who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because God is great in strength,
mighty in power, not one is missing.*

Isaiah's urgent message of God's power and presence could not be complete without expressing God's nature as well. The Prophet proclaims that God does not wish to accomplish Her work alone. God yearns, God needs God's people to awaken and take part.

Isaiah reminds us that the Lord knows us by name. God knows our various strengths and talents. And God invites us to be faithful teammates – working together – following the Lord's direction in order to bring about *tukkun olam*: the repairing of this broken, aching world.

There are no quick fixes when it comes to faith, no magical cures, God requires us to look beyond ourselves and to listen harder than ever before. God asks us to get our hands deep in the dirt, to clear our throats to speak out, to share more than we think we can, and to hold fast to hope till the bitter end - even if it seems like all is lost.

When we are sure that God is distant or absent, Isaiah reassures us that God has never been closer. And God is beckoning us towards a life that is faithful and foolish and full...and transformative.

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When Jesus gathered with his friends at table on his last night on earth, his disciples could not fully understand the loss that they would soon experience. Sharing a meal together, he asked them for only one thing: to remember.

“Take and eat this bread, and do this remembering me.”

“Drink this cup, and do this remembering me.”

Jesus knew that the road ahead would be devastating; and so like the prophet Isaiah, Jesus tried to awaken his disciples to the notion that even in the coming hours, days and years, through the pain and the torture, God would never be absent, but always here continuing the work for liberation, justice and peace.

And Jesus asked them to pass this message on, so that even today we can share in the feast and know that God is here right now – part of our very beings, filling us for whatever lies ahead.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?”

Friends, when it comes to our lives, we will surely face a slew of “Hail Mary” upsets. But the prophet Isaiah reminds us, and Jesus Christ shows us that this is not our game to win or lose.

We are on God’s field, where nothing is impossible, where hope is never lost. And we have everything we need – right here, right now – to believe that God’s kingdom is ever possible.

When it comes to the Lord, there are no un-won races, God gives power to the weary, strength to the faint, God stands above all empires and cries out for justice and peace. And what’s more, our unsearchable God cries out to each of us by name.

When we feel like we are losing, we need only look ahead. God has already set the course, run the race, endured the pain. And God is ready to carry us when we fall, comfort us when we break and empower us to keep running like never before.