

“God’s Campout”
(sermon given 2/05/12 by Scott Jansen)
Isaiah 40:21-31

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[Prayer for Illumination] Awesome God of all the universe, help us to set aside our puny little worlds, and to catch a glimpse of Your majesty—through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray... Amen.

Scott Jansen (J): Instead of our usual scripture reading and sermon today, we’re going to do a little skit. My friend Steve Marcus and I will be playing the role of two scoutmasters at the end of a long day of leading a Boy Scout troop at a winter campout.... [Scott moves down to spot in front of communion table and sits. Steve moves to spot in front of communion table and sits. Steve moves Christ candle off of communion table, and sets it on the little wooden bench stationed between Scott and Steve.]

J: Oh good. You’ve got the fire going nicely. [Steve and Scott both warm their hands above the Christ candle.]

Steve Marcus (M): Yep, there’s a good thick bed of coals—should stay warm for a long time.

J: Oh, I meant to say earlier... good job with that archery lesson today, Steve. I know that Johnny was being a little too rambunctious. You were right to put the iron fist down on that one.

M: Thanks. It’s not always fun to have to be the “bad cop” disciplinarian.

J: Don’t I know it. But, you can’t be too safe with the archery stuff, so I appreciate what you did.

M: Sure.... And I liked what you did with the Orienteering activity—mixing the kids up, so they weren’t in groups with their friends. That worked well.

J: Yeah. I think so. Thanks.

M: [deep breath] Ah, this is the best time of day.

J: Absolutely. All the kids tucked away in their sleeping bags.

M: You think they’ll stay put?

J: Sure—it’s too cold to be wandering around in pj’s.

M: Yay. No more merit badges to teach.

J: No more shouting for attention;

M: Or hiding from the leaders.

J: Nothing but peace.....

M: It’s amazing what you can hear when all the humans are quiet.

J: Yeah, the waterfall, the owls. I even think I heard a coyote last night.

M: And the things you can see!

J: Yeah, you can't see stars like this when you're in the city. Or smell fresh pinetrees in the air.

M: So much beauty. I'm glad we get to camp out here once in awhile.

J: Oh, that reminds me. Time for my little devotional before I turn in.

M: Your little devotional????

J: Yeah, a boy scout is reverent. I like to just read a little scripture passage and think about it every night.

M: Sounds interesting. Can I join you?

J: Sure. Tonight the assigned passage is from Isaiah, chapter 40.

M: All right. So how does this work?

J: Well, I'll just read it and then we can talk about it.

M: Great.

J: Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he 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.

M: [interrupting] Wow, that's really freaky.

J: Now, you're not supposed to interrupt the scripture reading.

M: I know, but I just couldn't let that go by without commenting.

J: Yes, Steve, we all know you have a difficult time letting things go by without commenting....

M: Are you suggesting that I'm overly talkative?

J: I'm just agreeing with what you said about yourself....

M: OK, but you have to admit—that reading—it's like it was meant for this moment. It's talking about the glorious sky and how we are like grasshoppers living in tents.... And here we are, a bunch of boy scouts living in tents.

J: That's true. But in Isaiah's time, lots of people lived in tents. They were a lot closer to the Earth and nature.

M: Hmmmm. They spent a lot more time outdoors, looking at the stars, and thinking about Creation.

J: Right. So, this reading wasn't all that unusual for them. It's just that being boy scouts gives us an opportunity to get back in touch with their ordinary perspective.

M: So..., nothing too freaky or magical about the reading, huh?

J: Well, maybe the part about us being like grasshoppers.

M: Oh? How's that?

J: Well, grasshoppers do have a very surprising capacity for... making noise.

M: Fine. Just get back to the reading....

J: God 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 he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

M: [interrupting] Sure makes you feel small.

J: You're not going to let me read this all in one chunk, are you?

M: Sorry.... It's just that, when you sit out here looking up at the stars and thinking how vast are all the galaxies, and how big it all is..., it just makes you feel kinda'... small.

J: Well, maybe it's OK to feel small; as long as you also realize that all your fears and all your worries... they're also... pretty small.

M: From God's perspective, our whole lives are pretty short—just blips of time.

J: So, maybe I ought to get back to the reading then... before the sun comes up.

M: Fine, carry on my oppressive ruler—just remember that God brings all the rulers of the earth to nothing....

J: The Holy One says, "To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? 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. Because he is great in strength, mighty in power..., not one is missing."

M: "Not one is missing..." That's a great line to read after a day of orienteering merit badge exercises.

J: Yes, and there are more great lines to read after that one....

M: Now, you can't possibly say I was interrupting just there.

J: Oh?

M: God asked a question. God said, "To whom then will you compare me?" That's a question! How can someone replying be considered "interrupting?"

J: OK. So, what's your answer? To whom would you compare God?

M: To a Boy Scout scoutmaster.

J: And how do figure that one?

M: Well, according to Isaiah, God trots out all the stars each night and calls them all by name, and takes such good care of them that not one of them is missing.

J: I think that's kinda' metaphorical....

M: Sure, but don't we scoutmasters gather up all the little stars in our troop? Don't we know them all by name? Isn't it our number one priority to make sure that not one of them is missing?

J: OK. But I really think there is a difference in scale here.

M: Maybe so, but still, it's a fair comparison. Maybe being a scoutmaster gives us a passable idea of what it's like to be God.

J: Hmm. Maybe I'll just read a little more and see what you think.

M: Go on.

J: Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"????? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

M: OK, but maybe, from the perspective of a twelve year old boy scout, the understanding of the scoutmaster is unsearchable.

J: You mean, like at the archery shoot this afternoon.

M: Exactly. The kids didn't understand why I was being so rigid about those rules.

J: Yeah. You may have come across to them like a mean old killjoy, but they just aren't mature enough to realize that you were doing all of that because you care about them....

M: Maybe it's the same way with God.

J: How so?

M: Maybe God does something and our immediate reaction is like the reactions of those twelve-year old boys. We leap to the conclusion that God is a terribly mean ogre intent on making us miserable.

J: When, all the while, God is just trying to keep us safe.... Hmm. It makes me glad to be a scoutmaster.

M: Why is that?

J: Well, not only do we get to campout and appreciate the glorious diversity of Creation, but now I'm beginning to see that God and us scoutmasters have a lot in common.

M: You mean... because we care for the kids, though they often don't appreciate that, and think that we're being cruel to them?

J: Yes, Isaiah says that we are like grasshoppers in God's eyes. But, it can be pretty taxing to love a bunch of silly grasshoppers.

M: Like us.... OK, but if we are just silly grasshoppers, how do we really know that God actually is on our side? Maybe when it seems to us that God is cruel..., maybe God actually is being cruel.

J: Well, if we stick with the idea that we are just silly grasshoppers, then we have no right to trust in our own private perceptions of things—whether we are perceiving God to be kind or cruel.

M: OK, but where does that leave us? How do we form any opinions about God at all?

J: Maybe, if we are humble, we set aside our own tiny little perceptions, and rely on the accumulated thousands who have known God in the past.

M: OK. And how do we discover what they have to say?

J: We call it “the Bible.” We read. And we learn.

M: Ah. Back to the Bible. Anything to get me to stop talking, huh?

J: Just answering your question....

M: OK, carry on. Let’s hear what else wise old Isaiah has to say to us.

J: He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted. But those who wait for the LORD... shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

M: Now, that part really is freaky.

J: What’s that?

M: The part about youths rising up with wings like eagles. Isn’t that what we’ve been working on all day?

J: Well, I have to admit, that does seem like an auspicious coincidence.

M: But, still, nothing more than a coincidence.??.

J: Well, I think it’s fun to imagine that God designed these words solely for us—to send a message directly to us. It’s fun, but it isn’t realistic.

M: Why’s that?

J: It’s back to the grasshopper thing. God is so much bigger than us. To think that God had these words written three thousand years ago, and that thousands of people labored to copy them and to preserve them, and that all of their work was done solely for our benefit—that just seems a little arrogant.

M: Why is it arrogant to think that God is talking to us? Why do you do your devotional every night, if you don’t think that God is talking to us? Maybe God likes talking (more than some somber old monk-types I know).

J: Oh, I don’t think it’s arrogant to think that God is talking to us. Not at all. What strikes me as arrogant is to think that all of this work by so many thousands of people was all intended solely for us. It doesn’t seem plausible that they would have sacrificed so much to preserve these words, if the words didn’t mean something important... to them.

M: So, it’s OK to think that God is talking to us, as long as we recognize that the message is intended for a bigger audience than just us.

J: Yeah. That’s what I think. We’re just grasshoppers. Let’s not think too highly of ourselves.

M: So, I like to think that God wants us to help the youth of our day to rise up with wings like eagles. I want all of our scouts to become eagles. But, what do you suppose these words meant... to Isaiah?

J: Well, Isaiah says that God will strengthen the powerless. And, Isaiah was feeling powerless. The Hebrew army was vastly outnumbered by the Babylonians.

M: Didn't the Hebrews lose that war to the Babylonians?

J: Yep. Complete and utter defeat.

M: So, how does that count as God strengthening the powerless?

J: Well, when they were still putting their hope in their little army, they didn't see themselves as powerless. But when their army was gone and they were slaves in Babylon, then, they really understood themselves as powerless.

M: And that's when God strengthened them?

J: It took awhile, but yes. Eventually, God strengthened them and brought them back out of exile and restored them to Israel. But not until they had set their hopes, not on their armies, but on God.

M: So that's why Isaiah says that "those who wait for the LORD... shall rise up with wings like eagles."

J: Yep. Many of the exiles died in Babylon. But some of them lived to return to Jerusalem. God's plans may not make sense from the perspective of one individual grasshopper. But when you look at the grand sweep of history, you see the faithful presence of God drawing humanity always toward a more compassionate form of society.

M: God strengthens the powerless.

J: Not always one by one, no. But, if you consider all the grasshoppers taken as a group, then, yes.

M: Or, if you consider both this life and one's life after death, together, then, yes. God strengthens the powerless.

J: Wow. Such profound thoughts coming from a guy who spent the day yelling at twelve year olds. Maybe God really is speaking to you.

M: Or maybe it's just the setting. Being out here in the wilderness. We're surrounded by things that God made instead of things that people made.

J: It does change one's perspective.

M: You can get kinda' mesmerized... just staring at the coals in a campfire.... Hmm. I wonder if God ever gets mesmerized like that.

J: Hmm. Maybe everything from the big bang right on through to this moment has all been like one big campfire from God's perspective.

M: I'm sure glad we get to go out on these campouts.

J: Amen.