

“Pay Attention”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

(© 2019 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)

When you're tired and weary, pay attention to the Creator.

Isaiah 40:21-31; Colossians 1:15-17

January 13, 2019

That new screen

Today's sermon inspired the series of sermons that will stretch, with some breaks in the middle, from now through June. We'll be looking at the Apostles' Creed line by line. We began last week with "I believe in God the Father Almighty." Today we continue with, "...Maker of heaven and earth." Let's ponder God as Creator.

2019 is our 150th anniversary as a congregation. We wanted our celebration to have an arts component, so for ideas we turned to our own Clarissa Starnes, Associate Director of the Hickory Museum of Art, housed at the SALT Block.

Clarissa has arranged a Corinth exhibit at the Art Museum from February 9 to April 7. On Sunday, March 24, we'll have the premier showing of our history video in the Drendel Auditorium at 3 PM, with the art museum open for us from 2-6 PM.

We have a brief video for Clarissa to present your part in creating the Corinth art exhibit, but before we show it, I need to say a few words about our new screen location in the sanctuary. Some of you don't like screens or technology in the sanctuary at all, so we try to use video as little as possible at the Traditional service. When we do use it, we want the capability to bring it out and put it away quickly, and we want to be able to allow the technology to be virtually invisible when not in use. One of the complaints about the previous location was that it obscured the view of the altar and also hid the choir.

The new location behind and above the altar addresses most of these concerns, but you might need a little time to get used to it. Before we even raise the screen today, I want you to take a deep breath... and maybe pray a little too. May I also say that your

emotional reaction to it, positive or negative, fits perfectly into our theme of God as Creator? Your ability to see images and hear sounds is part of the wonder of God's creation. Your ability to like (or not like) what you see goes deeper. You can think and feel and choose because you as a human being are created in God's image. Whether you think our idea is the most brilliant inspiration ever or the dumbest idea in the history of the world, your capacity to think about it and talk about it is God-like.

Not listening?

The sermon title today is borrowed from *The Message* paraphrase of Isaiah 40:21: "Have you not been paying attention? Have you not been listening? Haven't you heard these stories all your life? Don't you understand the foundation of all things?" God sounds like a restless coach giving a half-time speech to a lackadaisical team.

Honestly, this seems a bit harsh, even more so when you consider the context. Isaiah addressed this message to a remnant of Israel that had survived centuries of spiritual and political decline, ultimately resulting in their decimation by the powerful Assyrians and defeat by the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonian strategy for controlling a vanquished people was exile of its survivors, demoralizing and then brainwashing them into the Babylonian system.

What message does the prophet Isaiah have for his people who are discouraged, defeated, despondent, and, as a result, de-energized? He believes they need to pay attention to what they've ignored. They not only need to remember God, they need a theological primer to get back to the basics of what they believe. For Isaiah, the way to bring yourself out of corporate and personal doldrums is to meditate on God as Creator.

Isaiah believes in God, the "Maker of heaven and earth." He's appalled that God's people have forgotten who God is, that they have allowed their circumstances to act as a total eclipse, darkening their world and debilitating their lives. Isaiah wants the exiled Israelites to pay attention. Paying attention is the right response to the Creator. Let's consider three aspects of paying attention.

Pay attention to your world

For Isaiah, belief in God as Creator is a given. He doesn't write this majestic poem to argue why we should believe God made everything. For Isaiah, believing in the Creator is self-evident, so he asks a series of rhetorical questions: "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: who created all these?"

Isaiah's knowledge of the physical world was obviously limited in comparison to ours, but his argument would be the same today. When you look around you, isn't it obvious that a God who made all this is unlimited in wisdom and competence? Verse 22

says God “sits enthroned above the *circle* of the earth” (emphasis added), seeming to advance his understanding far beyond the “flat earth” theorists of later generations.

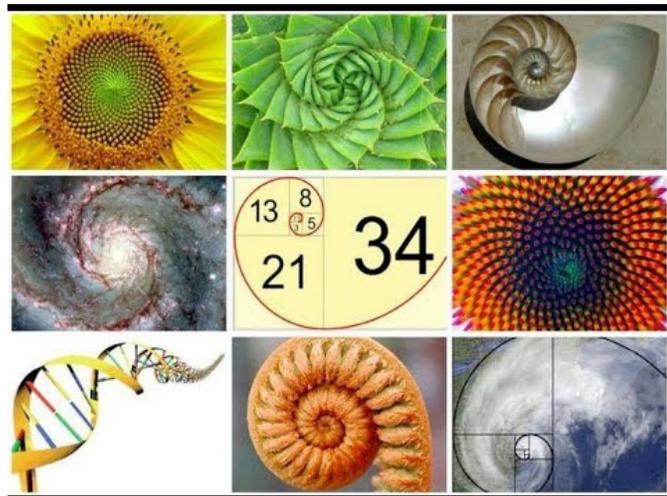
Size. A number of people have shared with me examples of what Isaiah could not have known. In 1977, Charles and Kay Eames produced a now-classic [video](#) titled the “Powers of 10.” The video starts with a picnic on the shores of Lake Michigan, then moves away in increments of “powers of ten” until it arrives at the edge of the universe. The video returns to the picnic and begins to magnify the scene in “powers of ten” until it gets to the level of atoms and even quarks. Paying attention to vastness and smallness points to the Creator.

Animals. [The Riot and the Dance](#) is a video by Christian biologist Dr. Gordon Wilson. Compelling images of creatures in turmoil (“riot”) or at peace (“dance”) with their varieties of size, habitat, appearance, and behavior are magnificent indicators of the Creator.

Physics. In a [sermon](#) four years ago, I referred to Eric Metaxas’ book *Miracles*, in which he notes the four fundamental physical forces of the universe – gravity, the electromagnetic force, the weak nuclear force, and the strong nuclear force. Physicists say these forces were established within a millionth of a second after the “big bang,” and Metaxas notes that if the ratio between gravity and electromagnetism had varied by one part in 10^{40} , the universe would not exist as we know it.

Patterns. The [Fibonacci Sequence](#) starts with numbers and math, but displays a pattern across God’s world from stars to plants to animals that seems inexplicable in its connection except for God.

So here’s Isaiah, writing more than 2500 years ago, saying, “Pay attention!” Look around you. Of course, we have to admit that not everyone who “pays attention” follows with “I believe!” I’ll be honest enough to tell you that it has worked both ways. A scientist like Francis Collins can begin as an agnostic or skeptic and come to profound faith by paying attention to the world.



For others, as science explains more, God is less necessary. I see the skeptic’s unbelief is just one more evidence of the Creator. Let me explain.

Pay attention to your mind

Clarissa said we are created to create. So let's move from the idea that we can pay attention to the world and see the fingerprints of creation to the fact that every time we create, whatever we are creating, we put the Creator on display.

Poetry is word art. Isaiah 40 is a carefully crafted poem, which is evident in most of your Bibles because poems are typeset differently than prose. If you turn in your Bible to Isaiah, you'll notice that most of it is poetry. Hebrew poetry is symmetry – parallel or contrasting lines. I've often heard the argument that human creations like poetry become an argument for God because poetry requires a poet, and creation requires a Creator.

That's true, but it's not exactly what I'm saying. I'm saying that the act of creation is a God-like act. Human creativity points to a Creator who made us in his image. I can understand why people look at the islands of Hawaii or the drift of the continents or the expansion of the universe and conclude that given enough time such things could develop. It is a much greater stretch for me to believe in macroevolution (one species developing into another, higher, form of life), but let's assume for the sake of argument that could happen.

What I can't grasp is how evolution could lead to the uniqueness of what it means to be human. Chimpanzees share 98.8% of their DNA with humans, which validates my point. The difference between us and them cannot be contained in 1.2% of our DNA. Something else is happening.

Can you imagine a chimp coming close to writing Isaiah 40, or Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken?" If you gave a billion chimpanzees a billion years, could any one of them paint what Michelangelo painted on the Sistine Chapel? Could they design this building or figure out where to place a screen? If they walked in this room today would any of them care where the screen is, or what it's hiding? Would they be either delighted by technology or frustrated by its place in our sanctuary?

In N. T. Wright's book, *Simply Christian*, he notes four "echoes" in our world that point to a "voice" that caused it – the longing for justice, spirituality, love, and beauty. No chimpanzee is writing a book about any of those echoes.

People cry out, "Where is God?" when they can't see justice or can't sense God or when love falls apart or when they look around and see ugliness, but my response is that you wouldn't even be asking those questions if you weren't created in God's image.

I conclude, then, that hate is as much evidence of God as love. Doubt as belief. Sin as righteousness. Chaos as order. Despair as hope. Isaiah asks Israel, "Why do you complain? Why do you say, 'My way is hidden from the Lord?'" If Isaiah's readers would

pause to think about it, they would recognize their frustration is evidence within their own minds that there is a Creator.

One of the beauties of Isaiah's poem is how it ties creation to the holiness of God. Verse 25 asks, "'To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?' says the Holy One." Because there's a Creator, holiness matters. Because we are created in God's image, we are moral beings. It was this factor that seemed to be pivotal for Francis Collins, even though he's best known for his science. Drawing on the thought of C. S. Lewis, Collins noticed that all humans have this sense of morality. "What we have here is very peculiar: the concept of right and wrong appears to be universal among all members of the human species (though its application may result in wildly different outcomes)" (*The Language of God*, 23).

I'll come back to the end of Isaiah 40 at the end of this sermon.

Pay attention to the unseen

Colossians 1:15-17 adds a number of key points about God as Creator. This is yet another poem, another example of Word Art. (The NIV unfortunately doesn't typeset it as a poem, which I don't understand.) This masterpiece was either written or borrowed by Paul. It doesn't matter. It's a work of genius devoted to one topic: Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the first and greatest being in the image of God. When you see Jesus, you see God in high definition. In comparison, the rest of us humans are 1960s black and white episodes of "I Love Lucy" brought into your home by rabbit ears.

Paul concurs with the prologue of John's gospel that Jesus is the Creator. Think of Jesus as God with hands. He releases the Big Bang, he carves the river beds and shapes the mountain tops, he paints the vivid colors on exotic birds and tropical fish, he fashions the human form from the dust of the ground and breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. "In him all things were created," Paul says.

I focus on his next thought, that the comprehensiveness of the Creator's work includes both "visible and invisible." He goes on to speak of "thrones or powers or rules or authorities," which seems to be a classification of spiritual powers – demons. Maybe you're skeptical about whether such beings exist. How do you know when so much of the world is invisible?

On a macro scale, a [NASA web site](#) says 68% of the universe is "dark energy," and 27% is "dark matter," meaning that only 5% is "normal matter," like earth, that is visible to our eyes. Five percent! As the article says, maybe "normal matter" isn't so normal after all!

Even the stuff we can see and touch, from rocks to water to our own bodies, is made up of atoms which we now know, even though the Apostle Paul could not have

known, is mostly invisible too. According to [Science Alert](#) your body is 99.9999999% empty space. Tell that to my bathroom scale after I eat a donut sundae, right?

There is a mystery about all that is invisible. The mystery about how protons function has a nickname: the “[proton spin crisis](#).” Maybe scientists will discover a scientific explanation someday, but my guess is that even if they do, they’ll discover something else they can’t explain. Ultimately, I’m going with what Paul says, that it’s Jesus who holds it all together!

Why it matters

As it explains the points of the Apostles’ Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism constantly asks, “What does this mean to me?” The catechism says understanding God as Creator results in patience, gratitude, and hope.

The word art we call Isaiah 40 ends at the same question. Isaiah’s answer to why it matters that we have a Creator is that wonderful plaque-able verse, Isaiah 40:31. It’s unfortunate that we take it out of context. Only in context do we realize that verse 31 is Isaiah’s conclusion to a poem about God as Creator.

Notice how often the words “tired” and “weary” occur in verses 28-31. There are two concepts involved – internal exhaustion and external circumstances. You can be “tired” because your body is worn out or “weary” because life keeps battering you. God is never tired or weary. Youths grow tired and weary. Paying attention to your Creator is Isaiah’s number one remedy for your tiredness and weariness.

There are also two kinds of life situations that wear us out. There’s the unusual, the extraordinary, which Isaiah calls “run” in verse 31. Then there’s the daily, the mundane, which he refers to as a “walk.”

Isaiah says that we will “run and not be weary” and “walk but not faint” when we “hope” in the Lord. In some translations it says “wait” or “trust.” The Hebrew word can be translated those three ways. They’re all connected. When we pay attention to the Creator, we trust, which leads to hope, and enables us to wait. That re-energizes us.

So Isaiah is speaking to the Babylonian exiles who have quit trying because they are so discouraged. Through them he’s speaking to us. When we’re “tired” and “weary,” we want to say, “Who’s got this? Who’s in charge?”

Isaiah answers, “Haven’t you heard? Don’t you know? Have you not been paying attention? The Creator!” I believe in the Maker of heaven and earth. Amen.