

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 sits high above the round ball of earth. The people look like mere ants. God stretches out the skies like a canvas- yes, like a tent canvas to live under. God ignores what all the princes say and do. The rulers of the earth count for nothing. Princes and rulers don't amount to much. Like seeds barely rooted, just sprouted, They shrivel when God blows on them. Like flecks of chaff, they're gone with the wind. "So - who is like Me? Who holds a candle to Me?" says the Holy One. Look at the night skies: Who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name - so magnificent! so powerful! - and never overlooks a single one? Why would you ever complain, O Jacob, or, whine, Israel, saying, "God has lost track of me. God doesn't care what happens to me"? Don't you know anything? Haven't you been listening? God doesn't come and go. God *lasts*. God's Creator of all you can see or imagine. God doesn't get tired out, doesn't pause to catch God's breath. And God knows *everything*, inside and out. God energizes those who get tired, gives fresh strength to dropouts. For even young people tire and drop out, young folk in their prime stumble and fall. But those who wait upon God get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles, They run and don't get tired, they walk and don't lag behind. Isaiah 40: 21-31

One of the things we do as the people of God is remember together. When we share joys to pray over often someone says, "You know [you remember] that person or situation we've been praying for?" We remember together that God answers prayer, and that God is with us, and the all the blessings we receive from God. Forgetting these things is referred to as "theological amnesia."

Yesterday Danielle Ica and Ralph and I went to the Los Rios District Revival in Fairfield. I'd hoped more of us from this congregation would attend because one of the things we do as the people of God is to remember together who we are. A large group of us who are praying and worshiping and talking together is a powerful reminder of who we are and the blessings God has given us. Pastor Ron Swisher is the pastor of Fairfield Community United Methodist Church and he preached at the closing worship of the revival. He quoted Psalm 16: "Keep me safe, O God, I've run for dear life to you. I

say to GOD, "Be my Lord!" Without you, nothing makes sense. The wise counsel GOD gives when I'm awake is confirmed by my sleeping heart. Day and night I'll stick with GOD; I've got a good thing going and I'm not letting go. I'm happy from the inside out, and from the outside in, I'm firmly formed. You canceled my ticket to hell - that's not my destination! Now you've got my feet on the life path.... Ever since You took my hand, I'm on the right way." Pastor Ron is an amazing preacher and a wordsmith, and he named the things that seem like a ticket to hell: desperation and despair and disillusionment and disgrace and disappointment and doubt and defeat and difficulty. And then he had us repeat with him, "You canceled my ticket to hell - that's not my destination!" We United Methodists gathered in the sanctuary of the Fairfield Community United Methodist Church remembered together that in spite of the formidable challenges that the church faces in the 21st century... God is good. God is present. God holds us.

One Sunday morning after a Reconciling Ministries small "listening group" - where people gather to share their opinions and their theological understanding of what it means to truly welcome and include all people into our congregation - some of us went to lunch to remember what information had been gathered. The full inclusion of our LGBTQ sisters and brothers into the life and ministry of the United Methodist Church is a crucial and challenging decision for us, and one that threatens to split our denomination. People on both sides of the issue are passionate, and believe that they speak for God. Someone at that Sunday lunch, thinking about the difficulty of listening to each other and loving each other in the midst of our differences, said, "It's so hard to be human." And we all toasted her with our water glasses: it's so hard to be human. And

because of that it's easy to feel alone and abandoned and alienated. And that's why we gather as the church: to remember. To remember that we are the Body of Christ called to love and serve the world; to remember that God is present in the world and in our lives; to remember that God loves all of us unconditionally and offers us unending mercy and forgiveness.

This poetic prophecy from Isaiah, that we've heard this morning, was written when the Israelites were in chaos, exiled from their land, the people in captivity to the Babylonians, the life they'd known destroyed. And in this hellish time, Israel had forgotten who they were, and they'd forgotten who God is. So the prophet Isaiah asked them, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Have you not understood?" And then Isaiah reminded the people of what they'd forgotten about God: that God is untiring, that God is present, that active in the lives of God's people. Yes, Babylon was a strong threat to Israel (remembering the strong threats Pastor Ron named... desperation and despair and disillusionment and disgrace and disappointment and doubt and defeat and difficulty.) These are real threats to life, just as Babylon was a real threat to the Israelites. The crisis and the trauma of the exile had caused them theological amnesia: they'd forgotten their faith-story, their faith-experience, their faith-journey... they'd forgotten the faithfulness of God, and the dependability of God, and the love of God. And because they'd forgotten they questioned the power and presence of God. As we do when we forget our individual and communal faith-story and faith-experience... we question the presence and goodness of God.

I went to Bosnia in 1997, two years after the Dayton Peace Accord was signed. In 1997 there was a heavy military presence in Bosnia and it everywhere were signs of

war: bombed out houses, bullet-pocked buildings, craters in the roads, and haunted faces and stories of people who'd been through hell. Before we went that first time to Bosnia our Volunteers-in-Mission team studied about the war, so we had some understanding of what had happened. Studying about war and witnessing the effects of war are worlds apart, I discovered. One of the ugliest things about this war was that it was religious, and "Christians" and Muslims were bombing the hell out of each other, and neighbors and families were killing each other. I learned that during the war Muslims - who were the minority and brutally targeted by Serbians and Croats - and many who were cultural Muslims (like many in America who are cultural-Christians) - many of them made a new commitment to their faith: deciding that if they were going to be killed as Muslims they would also live as faithful Muslims. They remembered their faith.

We aren't being targeted or killed for our faith in Christ Jesus, but we are being dismissed and disregarded and our numbers are diminishing. The church, now and in coming generations, faces a different kind of threat: that of disappearing. I think this threat is in large part because of our theological amnesia. We forget, so easily, who we are. We forget that Christianity is a practice, and not a set of beliefs. We forget that what identifies us (not just to outsiders but to ourselves and to each other) is how we love and how we serve. In United Methodist language these are called the means of grace (loving God with everything we are and being loving towards all other) and the works of mercy (serving those who need us). We forget to tell our faith-stories and our faith-experience to anyone and everyone who will listen, who expresses an interest. We forget how important it is for everyone to hear about the saving love of Jesus Christ...

how important it is to experience God's mercy... how important it is to have a place where we are welcomed, where we belong.

I think the most important word for us this morning from Isaiah's prophecy is "wait." Not the passive form of waiting, as in "I'm waiting for my children to call me" or "I'm waiting for my partner to notice my new haircut" but "wait" as attentiveness and awareness and expectation. The origin of the word "wait" comes from the same word as "watch". Isaiah told the Israelites, who were suffering under the Babylonians and suffering from theological amnesia, to wait on the Lord. He said, "Those who wait on 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."

How are you waiting on the Lord? How are you practicing your faith? How are you listening to God? How are you looking for God in the world? How do you love God with everything you are? How are you loving hard-to-love people? How are you serving people in need? In all of these ways you can "wait" on the Lord and receive new strength and new life. In all of these ways your faith can be revived, and you can be a witness to life in Christ.

At yesterday's revival Schuyler Rhodes, who's our District Superintendent, said that one of the things he treasures about United Methodist theology is our practice of an "open" Communion table. He reminded us that Jesus Christ is the host of this meal, that it doesn't belong to us, and that God's is present and active at His Table, and meets us here. There's a kind of divine magic (my words, not Schuyler's) in this act of Holy Communion. We meet the living God here; we remember who we are as God's people; we remember who God is; we receive hope and strength for the journey. Before we

come to the table, let's spend some time in silence, remembering and asking for help and forgiveness for our own theological amnesia. Amen.