

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

21Have 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? 22It 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; 23who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. 24Scarcely 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. 25To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. 26Lift 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.

27Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”? 28Have 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. 29He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 30Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31but 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Downcast

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Weary*

For half a century the people of Judah had been in captivity in Babylon. That is a long time. A lifetime for some. Those who had

been deported are either very old or they have passed on. Their children and their children's children are strangers in a strange land, cut off from their homeland. And they are tired of it. Tired of being second-class citizens, tired of serving the Babylonians. Tired to the bone.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Despairing*

Their parents and grandparents had relied on their own schemes, their political alliances, the strength of their armies and the armies of their friends. They had taken a chance and they had been wrong. They had miscalculated, made the wrong choice. They had disregarded the prophets of God who exhorted them to trust God alone, and instead put their faith elsewhere. And then they had seen that faith betrayed; they found themselves without hope. And what hope do the descendants of the hopeless have?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Withered and Abandoned*

And it gets worse still. Because of their misplaced faith, the Judeans and their offspring have not only been cut off from their homeland, they are cut off from God. They have made God their enemy, who unleashes upon them the consequences of their actions. They are withered and blown away like stubble. There is nowhere to look but down, into the pit of Sheol.

PROGNOSIS: Uplifted

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Called by Name*

But the one who brings princes to naught and rulers to nothing is not content to resort to annihilation. This will not be the last word, nor the last act. The one who sits above the circle of the earth descends into the pit, God-with-us (Emmanuel!) in our abandonment and hopelessness, and from nothing creates anew.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Waiting for the Lord*

This new creation begun in the pit is something to behold. What God promises to exiles of every time and place is new life through the one who chose exile and death for himself (see Philippians 2:6-11); he does this to call a great host out of exile in death to abundant and enduring life. Called into the vanguard of this advancing host, we fix our eyes on him.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Running, Never Weary*

And because he empowers us who were once fainthearted, and strengthens us who were once powerless, we are eager to show and tell ("Have you not known? Have you not heard"), spurred on by his presence and activity among us. We walk, we run, we fly into a future that is full of hope and promise, and find ourselves at home in all the parts of the world into which we are sent.