

“To Whom will You Compare Me?”

Isaiah 40:12-26 ¹

We parents are seldom aware of all the influences we exert on our children, and it's often interesting to pay attention to the things we ourselves remember from growing up. One of the many things my Mom did to encourage the spiritual journeys of her two boys was to play a record of George Beverly Shea singing Gospel Songs as we went to sleep.

The only two songs I remember from that record are “Ivory Palaces,” and “It Took a Miracle.” Some of you may remember them, too; and if you do, you may remember that “It Took a Miracle” begins like this: “My Father is omnipotent, and that you can't deny; a God of might and miracles, 'tis written in the sky.”

I expect that you're familiar with the word “omnipotent,” though I doubt that you use it very often. Together with “omnipresence” and “omniscience,” omnipotence is one of nearly thirty character qualities or “attributes” that theologians discuss about God.²

One of my most memorable encounters with God's omnipotence took place on Thursday, June 1, 2000. That morning, I felt impressed to have a quiet time in Scripture before leaving for work. Morning quiet time is unusual for me. I usually have my quiet time in the evening.

The prescribed Scripture for that day was Mark 4:35-41, where Jesus calmed the storm, and I was particularly struck by the disciples' astonished question, “*Who **is** this man, that even the wind and the waves obey him!*?” I was very grateful for this reminder, because before that day was out, I was engaged in the most dramatic and dangerous spiritual combat of my life. The details of that experience are not our focus today, but it is the question of God's omnipotence, God's omni-potency, that claims our attention this morning.

While the Bible doesn't use the word, “omnipotent,” the Bible certainly does teach the concept. Here are just a few examples:

Our Lord is great, vast in power; his understanding is infinite (Psalm 147:5).

You establish the mountains by your power; you are robed with strength (Psalm 65:6).

Oh, Lord GOD! You yourself made the heavens and earth by your great power and with your outstretched arm. Nothing is too difficult for you! (Jeremiah 32:17).

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:3)

[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and by him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 9, 2018, the Second Sunday of Advent.

² According to Wikipedia, these attributes are Aseity, Eternity, Goodness, Graciousness, Holiness, Immanence, Immutability, Impassability, Impeccability, Incomprehensibility, Incorporeality, Infinity, Jealousy, Love, Mission, Mystery, Omnipotence, Omnipresence, Omniscience, Oneness, Providence, Righteousness, Simplicity, Sovereignty, Transcendence, Trinity, Veracity, and Wrath.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attributes_of_God_in_Christianity

As we noted last week, the problem of evil is a huge challenge for those who believe that God is both Good and Powerful, as the Bible clearly affirms God to be; and this was the problem Isaiah addressed in what we know as Isaiah 40, from which today's text comes.

Remember that in this chapter Isaiah was addressing the Jewish people who were in captivity in Babylon. As they languished in captivity, those exiles were asking themselves, **“CAN God save us?” “Does God WANT to save us?”**

If the God of Israel had truly been omnipotent, they wondered, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, then why had Jerusalem been destroyed, and why were they in captivity? I imagine that those captives were doing what you and I would probably have been doing in similar circumstances. They were singing “Poor Me” and “Ain't It Awful” and completely ignoring the sin, rebellion and bad choices that had landed them in this predicament in the first place.

As we saw last week, in chapter 40, verse 10, Isaiah had addressed the question of God's power. In 40:11, he had addressed the question of God's compassion; and in the part of chapter 40 we consider today, Isaiah offered further exhortations about God's power.

The staccato questions of this section are a shorter version of similar questions in chapters 38-41 of Job. In order to get the full effect of that experience and of Isaiah 40, I encourage you to read those chapters this afternoon.

In both Job and our text from Isaiah, God's challenge was essentially the same: **TO WHOM WILL YOU COMPARE ME?** Isaiah mocked the idols of Israel and of Babylon, pointing out that they could not move, could not get up if they fell over, rotted if made of wood and corroded if made of metal. This mockery of idols was a theme to which Isaiah would return several times in the chapters to follow.³

Isaiah waxed eloquent in his praise of God's sovereign power, noting that even the Babylonian Empire was as nothing before God's greatness. In a fit of hyperbole, Isaiah wrote that all the nations of the earth are only “a speck of dust on the scales.” Even all of the proverbial cedars of Lebanon and all of the animals on a thousand hills would be an insufficient offering to acknowledge God's greatness. “*With whom will you compare God?*” Isaiah asked. “*What likeness will you set up for comparison with him?*”

Although Isaiah didn't use the word, he was actually talking here not just about God's **omnipotence**, but also about God's **transcendence**—that God is above and beyond the Creation, Other than the Creation. And here we experience a paradox—two truths that are both affirmed while fitting together somewhat awkwardly.

On the one hand, the Bible clearly affirms that God's Being transcends the creation and does not emanate from the creation. God is not a product of natural causes, nor is God an impersonal force of some sort. Concepts like “First Cause” and “Prime Mover” do not begin to describe the fullness of our personal, Triune God; and this is important, because if God is not transcendent, then God really does not have the power to change us or our circumstances.

Again, though Isaiah didn't use these words, he was arguing that because the God of Israel is the *Source* of all that is and not its *product*, God has a Grand Design for Creation and is able to intervene in the processes of time and space to accomplish that Grand Design. God's repeated question, “**To Whom will You Compare Me?**” boldly affirms that there is one—and only one—God. All the rest are posers, idols, and impostors.

³ 41:6-7, 42:17, 44:9-20, 46:5-7, 48:5.

But if God is *only* transcendent, then God neither knows nor cares about what is happening in our personal lives. Such was the god of the Deists, the “watchmaker” god who wound things up and simply observes creation from a great and imperturbable distance. Emphatically disagreeing with such a view, Isaiah’s message—and the message of CHRISTmas, is that God is both great enough to be *able* to help and near enough to *want* to help.

My friends, **God’s Name is not just Yahweh, I AM WHO I AM** (*Transcendent Deity*). **God’s Name is also Immanuel, God WITH US** (*Immanent Deity*; Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23).⁴ And it is at this point that we, with the exiles in Babylon, come face-to-face with the question of what it is that we REALLY BELIEVE.

The ideas of God’s transcendence and immanence have fallen on hard times in our day. Those who subscribe to the religion of Philosophical Naturalism—and they are far more numerous than you might think—teach that nothing exists beyond the space-time universe that we know . . . except perhaps space-time universes that we haven’t discovered yet. There is most certainly and definitely no Transcendent Being of the sort that we who follow Jesus call “God.” Such folk tell us that if miracles were to exist, then they would have to come from something outside our Nature, and Naturalism affirms that there is no such Something.

But if Naturalism is really true, then no matter how we may perceive it, we humans actually have no freedom whatsoever, because everything we do is the inescapable result of complex chains of cause and effect reaching back into infinity. Philosophically, this is called “determinism,” and the Determinism *required* by Naturalism means that we have absolutely no reason to consider even our own thought processes to be valid, because they are totally, completely, predetermined. In a Naturalistic worldview, the idea of human freedom is only an illusion.

This is actually a Big Problem—bigger, even than the Problem of Evil—because unless our reasoning is valid, then no science, no knowledge of any sort, can be True. Interestingly, René Descartes’ famous statement, “*I think, therefore I Am,*” is the Achilles heel of Naturalism, though he did not intend it to be so. Our ability to reason, together with our universal and persistent conviction that this reasoning has substance and validity, is the key that opens the door to Transcendent Reality, and it opens that door whether we want it to or not.

If we wish to accept our own thinking as valid, then sooner or later we must admit a prior Rationality that exists absolutely on its own. This Rationality is the Source of our own thought. As C. S. Lewis put it, **Rationality “is the little telltale rift in Nature which shows that there is something beyond or behind her.”**⁵

I’m a little sorry to destroy the house of cards in which our Naturalist friends live, but it’s crucial for them to know that if they want to claim any validity whatsoever for their own

⁴ See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed., trans. J. W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

⁵ A miracle is most emphatically not something that breaks the laws of Nature. Rather, a miracle is “an event which is not producible by the natural causes that are operative at the time and place that the event occurs” (W. L. Craig). Miracles occur when God allows the realm of Super-Nature to intersect with Nature. This intersection adds things to Nature’s chains of cause and effect that weren’t there before.

The underlying reason why persons hold to Naturalism instead of Supernaturalism really has nothing to do with miracles. The reason why persons refuse to accept the possibility of God’s existence is that if there really is a God, then there really are objective standards for our lives, for which we are—and will be *accountable*. That’s the real reason.

thinking and reasoning, then they have opened the door to the Transcendent, to the greatness and awesome power of God. That's what Isaiah was arguing for in today's portion of Isaiah 40; but such a conclusion doesn't really move us beyond the Deists and their "watchmaker god."

Acknowledging the Transcendent acknowledges God's power, but it does not take us to the LORD GOD who also "protects his flock like a shepherd" and "gathers the lambs in his arms" (Isaiah 40:11). For that, we need something more. For that, we need the Eternal God to become flesh and to dwell among us (John 1:14). For that, we need Advent.

You may remember the phrase "shock and awe" that began to be used during the First Gulf War. That phrase probably originated with two military strategists named Harlan Ullman and James Wade. Also known as "Rapid Dominance," "shock and awe" is "a military doctrine based on the use of overwhelming power, dominant battlefield awareness, dominant maneuvers, and spectacular displays of force to paralyze the enemy's perception of the battlefield and destroy its will to fight."

In response to human sin and evil, our transcendent God could have used Shock and Awe to get things back in order. God could have employed Rapid Dominance to crush us with "overwhelming power, dominant battlefield awareness, dominant maneuvers, and spectacular displays of force."

But our God, the same God of Isaiah 40 and Job 38-41, the God of All Authority and All Power, chose a radically different strategy. *Yahweh-Immanuel* chose the counterintuitive path of redemptive Love. *Yahweh-Immanuel* chose to live as we live, to suffer as we suffer, and to die in a way that we who follow Him will not have to die.⁶

Augustine noted long ago that "The omnipotent God, Primal Power of the world, being Himself supremely Good, could not permit anything evil in His works, *were He not so all-powerful and good as to be able to bring good even out of evil.*"⁷ That's what happened at the Cross, and that's what God brings about in our own lives.

The exiles in Babylon asked, "CAN God save us? Does God WANT to save us?" And Isaiah shouted, **"YES! Comfort my people! Prepare the way of the LORD! Behold, here is your God!"**

And as you and I journey through Advent in the year 2018, we ask those very same questions: "CAN God save us? Does God WANT to save us?" And the Spirit of God shouts, **"YES! The Word became flesh and lived among you, full of grace and truth!"**

My friends, no matter what the Naturalists think, we do not live in a mechanistic cosmos ruled by determinism. We do not live in a random universe ruled by chance. We live in a divinely-planned Creation ruled by the God of the Exodus and of Advent and of Easter. And this Transcendent/Immanent God, *Yahweh-Immanuel*, will do things in you, in me, and in us that we would have never dreamed possible . . . if we welcome His involvement in our lives.⁸

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever! Amen (Ephesians 3:20-21).

⁶ Brian Blount, *Invasion Of The Dead*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), pp. 90-91.

⁷ Augustine, *Faith, Hope, and Charity* (Enchiridion), translated by Louis A. Arand (Newman, 1955), pp. 17-18.

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (William B. Eerdmans, 1992), p. 175.

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One: *¹² Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand or marked off the heavens with the span of his hand? Who has gathered the dust of the earth in a measure or weighed the mountains on a balance and the hills on the scales?*

Many: *¹³ Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or who gave him counsel? ¹⁴ Who did he consult? Who gave him understanding and taught him the paths of justice? Who taught him knowledge and showed him the way of understanding?*

One: *¹⁵ Look, the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are considered as a speck of dust on the scales; he lifts up the islands like fine dust. ¹⁶ Lebanon’s cedars are not enough for fuel, or its animals enough for a burnt offering. ¹⁷ All the nations are as nothing before him; they are considered by him as empty nothingness.*

Many: *¹⁸ **With whom will you compare God? What likeness will you set up for comparison with him?** ¹⁹ **An idol?—something that a smelter casts and a metalworker plates with gold and makes silver chains for?***

One: *²⁰ A poor person contributes wood for a pedestal that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not fall over.*

Many: *²¹ **Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning? Have you not considered the foundations of the earth?** ²² **God is enthroned above the circle of the earth; its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like thin cloth and spreads them out like a tent to live in.***

One: *²³ He reduces princes to nothing and makes judges of the earth like a wasteland. ²⁴ They are barely planted, barely sown, their stem hardly takes root in the ground when he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind carries them away like stubble.*

Many: *²⁵ **“To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal?” asks the Holy One.** ²⁶ **Look up and see! Who created these? He brings out the stars by number; he calls all of them by name. Because of his great power and strength, not one of them is missing.***

One: The Word of God for the People of God.

Many: **Thanks be to God!**

The *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*

The experience of the Holy often results in attempts to appease or to understand this Power. Such responses, however, are secondary to the actual experience of the Transcendent. Rudolf Otto coined the word “numinous” from the Latin *numen* (“divine power” or “spirit”) to refer to that quality of the Holy that remains after subtracting its ethical and rational aspects. Otto maintained that numinous experience is “perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined.”¹

Beasley-Murray observed that “what distinguishes one religion from another is the clarity and grasp it has on the nature of the *numen*. Numinal language, not moral concern, provides religion with its autonomy and unique subject matter. Morality is a derivative concern. A holy person is primarily one who is sensed as belonging to a higher order of things, to mystery and wonder.”²

What remains as the numinous when morality and rationality are removed? Otto described the core of the Holy as the *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*.³ The *Mysterium* is that which Otto elsewhere referred to as *das ganz Andere*, “the wholly Other.” The *Mysterium* is super-natural, being “that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny,’ and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.”⁴

The *Mysterium* has two aspects, the *Tremendum* and the *Fascinans*, the first being repellent and horrific, the other being attractive and intoxicating. The *Tremendum* is characterized by the three-fold qualities of awefulness, overpoweringness, and energy or urgency.⁵ The *Tremendum* has to do with absolute inapproachability, with a shudder that penetrates to the very core of one’s being. To experience the *Tremendum* is to experience “the terrifying and repelling fear of standing before an abyss of annihilation, the desperate feeling of unbridgeable distance between one’s finitude and the infinite, and the consuming sense of judgment by an unconditional claim for justice.”⁶

The *Tremendum* represents the experience of being in the presence of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). The very construction of the tabernacle in the wilderness and of the Temple in Jerusalem was such that the people were separated from and protected from the divine glory. There was good reason for this, because when the apostle John later met the risen Christ in his glory, he “fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17).

The awefulness of God is only half the story, however. Tillich pointed out that the “divine ‘fire’ produces life as well as ashes.”⁷ Standing in tension with the *Tremendum* is the *Fascinans*, the attraction which balances the terror. Truly to see God, to experience the

¹Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed., trans. J. W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 7.

²Stephen Beasley-Murray, *Towards a Metaphysics of the Sacred*, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion Special Studies Series, no. 8 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1982), p. 14.

³*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴Otto, p. 26.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 13-24.

⁶Beasley-Murray, p. 46.

⁷Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation; Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 224.

holy, the *Mysterium*, is to taste “a reality so magnificent that the human self longs for the Holy to be all in all, totally transforming existence in the fullness of its light and being.”⁸

The *Fascinans* involves awareness of finitude resting in the Infinite, of being in the presence of the Source of all creativity, of experiencing the resolution to the human quest for ultimate meaning.⁹ The *Fascinans* is costly, presenting one with ultimate demand (therefore being very dissimilar to “wish fulfillment”), yet it is such that when a person found it, “he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:46).

The Christian gospel makes the audacious claim that the *Tremendum* and the *Fascinans* were (are) united in the Person of Jesus Christ. John exclaimed that “the Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory [*Tremendum*], the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth [*Fascinans*]” (John 1:14). Entering into relationship with God through Christ—entering into relationship with the Holy One, is truly an experience of transformation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Indeed, the discovery of life in the numinous realm evokes such radical change that it is referred to as being “born again” (John 3:7). Once experienced, numinous life becomes the supreme value. Nothing can compare to it. In Otto’s view, experiencing atonement or personal salvation means to receive a covering shield against the *Tremendum*, such that one dares approach the *Fascinans*, and so that one will not be consumed when standing before God on the last day.¹⁰

Though the experience of the Holy is potential in every event, no matter how “ordinary” or “mundane,” this experience often remains potential, in that access to the numinous cannot be had on command. Further, Otto emphasized that conceptual understanding of or belief in a Reality beyond the senses is a very different thing from the actual experience of the *Mysterium*, noting that “it is one thing to have ideas of ‘the holy’ and another to become consciously aware of it as an operative reality, intervening actively in the phenomenal world.”¹¹

While awareness of the numinous dimension of experience may be cultivated—one’s perception may become more finely tuned—the experience of the Presence is chiefly a gift. The numinous consciousness must be “awakened” by the Spirit of God.¹² There is certainly a place for searching after God’s presence (e.g., Jeremiah 29:13), but the experience of the Holy is not so much finding as being found.



⁸James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 90.

⁹Beasley-Murray, p. 46.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 17.

¹¹Otto, p. 143.

¹²Ibid., p. 60.