

Less like a Golden Retriever
A Sermon on Isaiah 40:21-31 by the Rev. Philip Major
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My wife and I share our home with a mysterious creature. She is a handsome little black cat, named Onyx. Kathy adopted Onyx from the CNY Cat Coalition back in 2016. She was a full-grown, adult cat when she was taken to the Cat Coalition by someone who had found her living on the street. We think Onyx is nine or ten years old. Onyx is fierce and elusive and mysterious.

Though she weighs less than four pounds, Onyx will not hesitate to chase the biggest tomcat in the neighborhood out of her yard. One day I heard a loud sound from the sun porch. It was so loud, I was sure a large flower pot must have fallen off a shelf. But when I walked into the sun porch there were no broken flower pots on the floor, only Onyx hissing through the window at a very unwelcome visitor to her backyard. She had launched herself, all four pounds, against the glass in an attempt to chase him away.

Onyx is elusive. Whenever our grandchildren come to visit, Onyx disappears. She hears the sliding door of their van close shut and we catch a glimpse of her tail as she practically flies down the steps into the basement. Onyx chooses which people she will engage with, and when.

For the first four years I lived in her house, Onyx paid almost no attention to me. I would try to give her treats; Onyx viewed them with suspicion and refused to come near me. It's only been in the past year that Onyx has decided I am a good person to have around. She won't sit on my lap, of course, but she will throw herself down on the floor in front of me, encouraging me to scratch that place on her back she cannot reach.

Onyx is mysterious. It is more or less impossible to bribe her. Even when Kathy gives her treats, sometimes Onyx turns and walks away. Some days Onyx refuses to sit on Kathy's lap, preferring to sit on the floor. Onyx likes to be let out of the house first thing in the morning, before dawn. Sometimes she will prowl the yard for an hour or more. We never know exactly where she has been.

Onyx is very different from some other pets you might have in your house, for instance, a Golden Retriever. There is a reason why Golden Retrievers have been one of the most popular dog breeds for decades. A Golden Retriever is friendly, intelligent, and easy to train. A Golden Retriever will be happy to play with the children in your house. A Golden Retriever comes out of the house to greet your friends when they visit. Onyx is more or less the opposite of a Golden Retriever.

Sometimes people approach their relationship with God as if God is a bit like a Golden Retriever: friendly and predictable. We might consider the possibility that our relationship with God is less like having a Golden Retriever around the house and more like living with an elusive, mysterious little black cat.

We like to feel like we are in charge. We like to think we have discovered the secret of how things really work. We make attempts to explain God's actions and the way God works in the world. We even attempt to explain what is going on in the mind of God.

The ancient Hebrew people seemed to have made similar sorts of mistakes. They had it pretty good for a few hundred years. According to the Hebrew prophets, the powerful folks, the people who owned the large plantations and who ran the Temple, were especially confident in themselves. They felt like they were in charge of their world. They were treating God more or less like an elderly Golden Retriever, like a friendly animal one can easily outsmart. Then everything sort of fell apart about 600 years before the time of Christ.

This was the situation for the people of Israel when a prophet gave them oracles, words of the Lord. We heard this oracle, this poem, from the 40th chapter of Isaiah a few minutes ago: *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?* Yes, the people have been told from the beginning, but no, they have

not understood. They thought they were in charge of this relationship, as if God were some sort of divine Golden Retriever, as if God was someone who would respond to their commands to run and fetch and retrieve.

God is not like a Golden Retriever. *God is the One who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. You are praying to the One who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal?*

As in every place and time, some of the people of Israel were selfish and cruel. They cheated others. From what the prophets say, it seems the wealthy people, the people who were in charge, were the most selfish. The people who ran the Temple lied to the people to secure their power. The people who owned the farms and the people who owned the shops cheated the poor people who were buying simple, basic foods to feed their families. The poor people may have never noticed, but God noticed.

God says, *Why do you say, 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.*

Isaiah's message is a message of warning for those who have told lies, and been cruel and selfish. It is also a message of hope for those who are weak and weary. *God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

This message of hope and justice runs all through the center of Isaiah, beginning with chapter 40 and continuing through to chapter 55. These sixteen chapters form a coherent story of their own so I think of them as a little book within the big book of Isaiah. I call them 'Middle Isaiah'. In my mind, these verses from chapter 40 are the beginning of a story that leads to Isaiah 55, the most beautiful poem in all of Holy Scripture. *Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!* God is offering us the gift of the food that will truly sustain us.

We'll have to wait until the Easter Vigil to hear the entire poem, but do not miss the storyline. The story begins with the warning that our ways are not hidden from God, and ends with God's invitation to us to receive a gift that is beyond our imagination. *Ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy the best bread and the best milk and the best wine, without money and without price.* God's gift to us is free and it is priceless.

There is much we do not understand. If someone tells you they know the exact way God works in the world, be prepared to ask some questions. There is a mystery in Isaiah's warning that our ways are not hidden from God and that God will execute justice. There is an even greater mystery in the generosity and power of God's gifts to us.

This is the place where the story of the little black cat is completely inadequate. I love my little black cat and her mysterious ways. There is a critical difference between God and my mysterious little black cat. After living together for five years, there are a few things I do not understand about my little black cat. There is one magnificent thing we do not understand about God's ways. We do not understand the breadth and depth of God's gift to us. We do not understand the way God gives us the very best thing, and yet we have not earned it. We do not understand God's generosity.

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. 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.