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The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (02/04/2024, Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany)

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Let us pray, Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If I were not recovering from a cold that I had last week, I would begin this morning by singing, but I'm just going to read the lyrics to a hymn that many of you know, well, this is my Father's world, and to my listening ears, all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres. Now, if you've ever wondered what the music of the spheres refers to, it's this ancient idea that governed cosmology or the way we look at the universe since the Greeks. They thought that the heavens were made up of these clear spheres, like a Christmas ornament, and they were nested, kind of like the Russian nesting dolls, and so the moon was in one, and then Venus, and then Mars, and so on, and so forth, and the last one was the sphere of the stars, and they all turned and produced what we observe in the night sky, and as they turned, they made music. And beyond the last one, and a realm called the Imperian, is where God lives, you know, the man upstairs, in the great beyonds. It's important to remember that before 1961, no human being ever since the beginning of time had traveled into space. No human being ever since the beginning of time had seen the earth. Let that sink in for a second. Upon being the first human being to travel into space, the Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin supposedly said, I looked for God in space, but I didn't see him

anywhere. Now, this is not true. Apparently Gagarin was himself an Orthodox Christian, and the quote actually comes from Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev, speaking to support the official atheist position of the USSR, and so he told a large crowd of young leaders, why are you still cleaning to God? Comrade Gagarin flew into space and didn't see God. I'm not sure what Khrushchev expected Gagarin to see or to encounter in space, but people still imagine that we believe in a God that is up there, out there, a bearded old dude sitting on a throne surrounded by clouds in the sky. And thankfully, that's actually never been the biblical understanding of God. So I want to talk for a few minutes this morning about what these passages we have here before us tell us about the God we do believe in, a God who was both far and near, a God who was both inside and outside, a God who was both unlike and like us. Let's start with Isaiah. In our reading from the prophet, we see some beautiful poetic language that helped the ancient Israelites to imagine their God as something vastly different from the gods of this world. And thankfully, the prophet's words allow us to imagine God as vastly different from the many gods of our world as well, because I would tell you this, the gods of the old world and the gods of our world are not really that much different. The gods of the old world were princes and kings and emperors, the rulers of the earth, the ones who wielded the sword, the ones who apparently had all the power, all the wealth, all the influence, the ones who could wave their hand and have their enemies eliminated. The ones who rode triumphantly through the streets of their conquered lands demanding worship and tribute. The ones who had vast storehouses of grain that could sustain them in the case of a famine, while the conquered peoples starved. In all of these ways and more, these ancient rulers were God-like in their power and influence. It was easy to imagine them as gods, easy to imagine therefore where the gods lived, someplace high and far off, located as far away from the suffering and pain of human existence as possible. Safe and protected, these gods never had to concern themselves with real people or with real suffering out of sight, out of mind. And yet the prophet Isaiah is speaking to a people who themselves had been conquered. He's speaking to a people who had

themselves suffered under the power of oppressive rulers. He is speaking to a people who had rulers who thought themselves to be gods among people. And as Isaiah reminds his people that the so-called gods of this world are not gods at all. That in the side of the one true God, these rulers are mere grasshoppers. That as we will hear in a few weeks at the beginning of Lent, they and we are dust. And to dust, shall we all return? Gods and goddesses, men and women, the high and the low, all return to the place we come from. So this view of God above the fray that creator of all things, the one who sits and thrown on high, is not meant to be a literal picture of the bearded dude and the clouds. But it is meant to communicate something crucial about the God of Israel, the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is not like us. God does not grow faint or weary like we do, but gives the faint and weary strength. God is not subject to the changes and chances of this life as we are, but is the one who never changes. Eternal and unchangeable, God is simply beyond, beyond our imagining, beyond our grasp, beyond our mortality, beyond our limited horizon.

The psalmist continues the theme, without God's power, infusing all of creation, nothing could grow. No new life could come forth. God counts the stars, knows each one by name. God is not impressed by any human effort or endeavor. I love the way the Coverdale songs. Did you catch that? God is not impressed by men's legs. It's great. Not impressed by the gods of this world, the rulers of this world, their so-called strength and power. The theological term for this understanding of God is transcendence. It means simply that God is not like us. It means that God is beyond human understanding. It means that the answer to the question, where does God live is really ultimately unimaginable for us. And we struggle with that because we like to imagine that we can't know everything. That we can control everything. That we can grasp everything.

We think in other words that transcendence is bad news because it means that we have limitations. It means that we are grasshoppers. We are painfully limited. We are subject to what Shakespeare called the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, what the musician Tory Amos called these little earthquakes. Doesn't take much. She reminded us from her 1992 album to rip us into pieces.

I bet you know this already. I bet you that you have had a little earthquake in the past week, probably in the past 24 hours, maybe even this morning before you got here, that reminded you that human beings are painfully limited. Bodies break and decay. Relationships can be full of misunderstanding and hurts that people we love can fail us and we fail ourselves over and over again. And if that were just the end of the story, that God is transcendent and that we are frail and broken and limited creatures, maybe we wouldn't have as much reason for the hope that is within us. But that's not the end of the story, not by a long shot. God's transcendence, God's beyondness is good news. It means that what we mean when we say God loves us. God cares for us. God has mercy on us. God's grace flows from the very heart of God, that all of that too is beyond our imagining. Something even better than we could have hoped for. A story more wonderful than anything that we could have dreamed up ourselves. That is the hymn puts that the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind. That the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind. Love so amazing, so divine, that it cannot be captured even in our most rapturous hymns, songs and poems. Love that as soon as we try to define it or pin it down, eludes and escapes our limits, like nailing jello to the wall. What I like about our readings for today is that they begin there with wonder and awe at God's transcendence, but they end with a story from Mark's gospel of intimacy and interiority. We go from transcendence. God is not like us. God is beyond to its opposite. We call eminence, nearness, closeness, familiarity. The incarnation, this crucial paradox of our faith that we proclaim at Christmas, but really animates the entire story, gives us hope in a God who takes on human flesh. The same God who is beyond comes near. The same God who created the stars now looks back up at them at night. The same God who was and is and is to come has to contemplate his own mortality, has to look into the face of pain and suffering and death. This king is not far removed from his subjects, safe in a palace, ignoring their cries of pain. In the incarnation we learn that God is not merely beyond us, but is

also with us,
like us, one of us. This is the heart of our faith as Christians. Yes,
that transcendent God
remains transcendent and yet also comes to us in our need, our
weakness, our limitation,
to know us so closely and intimately. When this passage begins, the
Sabbath is ending.
Jesus and his new companions, these followers named Simon and Andrew
and James and John,
are present with a sick person, the mother-in-law of Simon, later
called Peter.
She is painfully limited. We need to remember that a fever could very
well have been a death
sentence in this time, but it's not nearly that this woman needs some
antibiotics. She can't run
down to the CVS. This could be the end for her. So the disciples tell
Jesus that this woman is sick,
and Jesus comes and takes her by the hand and lifts her up, healing
her with his touch.
The same God who counts all the stars by name, in other words, knows
this woman,
this particular woman, this woman who lived in a particular time and
place, this real person.
In Galilee, Jesus knows her and her needs. He calls her by name. He
lifts her up.
And now we know where God lives. God lives here, with us, among us.
In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out
to a deserted place,
and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When
they found him,
they said to him, everyone is searching for you. Where does God live?
Everyone is searching for God.
Everyone is looking for something to take away the pain of being
human. Our hearts
are saying a gust that reminded us many years ago are restless. They
are restless because we were
created to know God, and nothing can satisfy us ultimately except God.
So if you are searching for
God, I have good news, and it's not just that I have a roadmap or a
pathway to find God. It's not
just that I can point you to the right verses in the Bible so that you
can find God. It's not
that I can point you to the mysterious black hole in the sky where God
lives. It's not just that I can
say if you join this church, you will find God. Jesus answered, let us
go on to the neighboring
town so that I may proclaim the message there also. For that is what I
came here to do.
And he went throughout Galilee. The good news is this, God is already
searching for you.

God seeks out and searches for each one of us. God comes into our house when we are sick and frail and losing strength. When we are losing hope, God finds us and takes us by the hand and lifts us up. It may not be anything as dramatic as this story, and sometimes many times we only realize after it's happened. The God in Jesus Christ is looking for you, pursuing you with reckless abandon. He is left behind, 99 others, safe in the sheepfold, and looks for you. Transcendent and imminent. We need to know that God is all powerful and glorious and we need to know that God is near. As Rich Mullins sang, hold me Jesus because I'm shaking like a leaf. You have been my king of glory. Won't you be my prince of peace? The prince of peace is looking for us and he will find us all in the end. He will not lose any one of us, not you, not me. For we know where God lives. God lives here with us among us. Transcendent and imminent. Out there and in here. Amen.