Isaiah 40:21-31

21 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?

22 It 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;

23 who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

24 Scarcely 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.

25 To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

26 Lift 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.

27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,

'My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?

28 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.

29 He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

30 Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

31 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.

Mark 1:29-39

29 As soon as they left the synagogue,
they entered the house
of Simon and Andrew,
with James and John.

30 Now Simon's mother-in-law
was in bed with a fever,
and they told him about her at once.

31 He came
and took her by the hand
and lifted her up.

Then the fever left her,
and she began to serve them.

32 That evening,
at sunset,
they brought to him
all who were sick
or possessed with demons.

33 And the whole city
was gathered
around the door.

34 And he cured many
who were sick
with various diseases,
and cast out
many demons;
and he would not permit
the demons to speak,
because they knew him.

35 In the morning,
while it was still very dark,
he got up
and went out
to a deserted place,
and there
he prayed.

36 And Simon
and his companions
hunted for him.

37 When they found him,
they said to him,
'Everyone is searching for you.'

38 He answered,
'Let us go on
to the neighbouring towns,
so that
I may proclaim
the message
there also;
for that
is what
I came out
to do.'

39 And he went
throughout Galilee,
proclaiming the message
in their synagogues
and casting out demons.

Reading the Prophet This Week

'Second Isaiah' is just getting started in this reading.
The original Isaiah, c.1-39, is 8th C BCE, warning as Israel falls
This voice, c.40-55, speaks in 6th C BCE, from exile in Babylon

These oracles of hope address a context in the 500's BCE,
c.40 opens 'Comfort my people' – we hear Handel's Messiah
a disputation follows: 'Oh yeah? Yeah!' to wider audiences

Maybe 5 to 15 thousand exiles from Jerusalem to Babylon
Seem a 'drop in a bucket' amid empires taunted in v19-24
But v15 just called those empires 'drop in a bucket'

This is the voice of a little guy underdog,
In a Bugs Bunny cartoon or Monty Python skit
As Babylon vies with Egypt, then falls to Persia

The disputation keeps escalating – to a cosmic scale:
The Holy One is in a class beyond all others,
'our God is bigger than your gods!"

The implied audiences of this rant include princes,
But it's intended to be overheard by the exiles:
Faint, weary, powerless, to be heartened

The rhetorical flourish to end the chapter is "but", v31
Likely as familiar in our piety as is v1 "Comfort my people"
Encouragement to demoralized people

Why this opening overture to Second Isaiah today,
Not the Christmas/Easter Handel's Messiah bit,
But the sales pitch to a resistant market?

Reading the Gospel This Week

We're ending (finally!) Mark 1, in 4 parts or 'pericopes':

1. v29-31 healing Simon's mother-in-law, who serves
2. v32-34 many exorcisms & healings, silencing demons
3. v35-38 early prayer, moving on to proclaim
4. v.39 Galilean tour of synagogues & exorcisms

This is terse prose, active, immediate
There's no dialogue or elaboration – 'just the facts, ma'am'
Which facts are chosen? Healing/exorcism, I'd say
(in Luke's version, even the first healing is a 'casting out')

We might continue some of last week's reflections:
Magic or mantic, miracle or marvel, natural or supernatural,
our WEIRD cultural subjectivity exposed as unbiblical
(Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic)

This first woman in Mark deserves more time –
How is she healed or exorcised?
What's the import of her service?
Where's her daughter, Simon's mother – or her husband?

The crowd seeking healing & exorcism will be repeated –
As will Jesus' responses in the first half of Mark
Let's not just skip ahead seeking some moral advice,
wrestle more with silencing demons who knew him.

Another rhythm is established:
From crowd to seeking solitude to pray,
Dumb disciples urging him back to work,
And he pursuing a different agenda to 'proclaim'