

September 20, 2020 – Isaiah 55:6-9

Since the Wright brothers built the first functional aircraft 117 years ago, mankind has been fascinated by ascending into the clouds and looking down upon the earth. Anybody whose ever been in a plane knows this. It's a completely different perspective than you will get anywhere else. And the pioneers of aerospace science have frequently commented on it.

Chuck Yeager was utterly overwhelmed when he saw the curvature of the earth for the first time, just a thin band of blue atmosphere separating the surface from the vacuum of space. One of the most reprinted photos of all time is that of "The Blue Marble," a photograph taken and named by the crew of Apollo 17 because of how small our planet looked as they traveled to the moon.

We've even seen the Earth from the surface of another planet. Not with human eyes, mind you, but with the eyes of the Mars rovers, looking up and capturing the tiny twinkling light that is our home from 40 million miles away.

And the one really striking feature of all these views of earth is that the higher you go, the smaller we get. The further you go from the surface, the more insignificant we become. Until, finally, you travel far enough, and we disappear altogether. Swallowed up by the vastness of the universe.

In a way, at that point, you have stopped ascending, because the point from which you left is no longer relevant. At that point, you have stopped ascending, and you have started transcending. To ascend means, in Latin, to go up. Whereas, to transcend means to go beyond.

The transcendence of God is one of his most fundamental characteristics. And it's something that gets discussed in Scripture quite a lot. David asks us in Psalm 113, *"Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?"* During the dedication of the Temple, Solomon prays to God and says, *"Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built!"*

And so also, God tells Isaiah in our Old Testament Lesson for today, *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

None of these Biblical writers had ever been in an airplane or rocket ship. None of them had ever seen the Earth as a blue marble hanging in the blackness of space or a tiny speck of light shining in the Martian sky. And yet they all seem to understand the fact that the higher you go, the smaller the earth becomes. That eventually you stop ascending and you start transcending. And that God is transcendent.

He is above it all. He is beyond it all. We think it's impressive when we can venture out into space and capture an image of the entire earth in a photograph. But God looks upon the entire universe – all of creation – in that same way. How small must we be in God's eyes?

That's, at least, how it feels to us. And that has been a powerful idea for a great many philosophers and theologians over the centuries. Our own nation was founded by men who thought in that way.

Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Thomas Paine... All of them founding fathers of the United States. But all of them also known as deists. A vaguely Christian religious philosophy that viewed God mostly as a watchmaker, who put the world together, wound it up, and then lets it run, without intervention.

Because, frankly, we're just too small for him to care about. He is transcendent. And we are just gears in a watch. A speck of dust on a blue marble. An invisible shadow on a tiny point of light.

They were wrong, certainly. But in many ways, it's an understandable perspective. After all, God can feel pretty distant when things are going wrong.

The Israelites of Isaiah's day knew that. Or rather, the Israelites who would come after Isaiah knew that. The Israelites of Isaiah's own day were oblivious to God and God's Word. They were consumed with sinfulness.

Idolatry, greed, pride, selfishness, corruption. The leaders of Israel cared about nothing but the pursuit of power. The people of Israel cared about nothing but themselves and their own happiness. And they all worshipped whatever false god would satisfy their desires.

And so God sent them into exile in Babylon. Where they felt like God was more distant than he had ever been. More transcendent than they had ever realized. Their thoughts had not been His thoughts. Their ways had not been His ways.

And now he was gone and they were abandoned. And they felt like a speck of dust on a blue marble. An invisible shadow on a tiny point of light. Utterly forgotten by the God who had done so much for them.

It's a feeling we know well. Alone. Forgotten. Ignored. The world is falling apart around us and God feels very, very distant. Very, very transcendent.

And all the more so because, deep down, we know we deserve to be alone and forgotten and ignored. We have not had God's thoughts or God's ways. We have sinned in thought, word, and deed. By what we have done and by what we have left undone. The Lord is seated high above the earth, too immense for heaven to contain. And meanwhile, we are the dust of the earth, brought low by our own corruption. There is no reason for God to even consider us.

But he does. This passage from Isaiah insists that he does. Even as he tells us how much higher and greater than us that he is, God reminds us that he is more than his transcendence.

Isaiah writes, *"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near."* Now, in English, this makes it sound like the emphasis is on us: our seeking and our calling. But in Hebrew it's a little different. The emphasis is much more on the second half of each phrase.

"The Lord has made himself available, so seek him. The Lord is near, so call upon him." That's the message that Isaiah is delivering to us. The transcendent God above all creation has come down to us. He is there to be found. He is listening for our call.

So, *"let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord."* Or maybe we should just use the words of Jesus himself, *"Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* The kingdom of heaven is standing right in front of you. Because it is found in Jesus Christ.

The transcendent God come down to earth. Born in flesh and blood, that he may have compassion on us. That he may abundantly pardon our sin.

You see, the transcendence of God is an important attribute of God, no doubt about it. But what makes it important is not that it puts God so far above us, so far beyond us, so far away from us. It is not that God has left us alone, forgotten, or ignored.

No, the transcendence of God is important because it makes his grace so much greater. It makes his compassion so much more amazing. It makes his mercy so much more baffling. It makes the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus so much more... divine.

*"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."* God is not just speaking here about his divine law that we have failed to obey. His holy righteousness that we have failed to achieve.

No, he is talking about his love. A love that exceeds all human comprehension. And the good news that he descended to our tiny point of light, to our little blue marble, and walked among us. So that we may never, ever feel alone or forgotten or ignored again.

*"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near."* Seek the Lord while he may be found in Word and Sacrament. Call upon him while he is so near, you can taste his Body and Blood on your lips. Return to the Lord because he has had compassion on you. And has abundantly pardoned all your sins this day. Amen.