

Awareness
Isaiah 40:21-31
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Harvey was an editor who worked from his home. A confirmed bachelor, extremely content in the apartment he had lived in for over forty years, Harvey rarely ventured out.

Work consumed most of his waking hours. Although he did not advertize, aspiring writers, novelists, professors seeking publication and authors of scientific, business and medical articles sent him their manuscripts and he edited them. He never wondered how the writers got his name or knew his address, he simply went to the mailbox each day and gathered in the large manila envelopes addressed to him.

Seven days a week, from nine in the morning to six at night, Harvey corrected and suggested and revised the work delivered to his door. All other chores in his life were taken care of by Miss Sweeney, or maybe it was Mrs. Sweeney, it never occurred to Harvey to inquire as to her marital status. For forty years, Ms Sweeney arrived on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and cleaned Harvey's apartment, did his laundry and fixed his meals. Harvey paid Ms Sweeney well for her efforts.

When Harvey gathered his work each morning, he separated the manuscripts from the bills (which Ms Sweeney took care of) and package delivery notices. Harvey had no idea when they began appearing, but from time to time, small yellow notes were mixed in with his mail stating that a package awaited him at the Post Office. Eager to get to work, Harvey put the yellow notes into an old cigar box. He fully intended to go and collect his parcels, when had time.

Life was good for Harvey until the economy crashed. Part time writers had to become full time waitresses and construction workers in order to pay their bills. Universities laid off teachers, forcing the remaining professors to carry more classes and write less often. Many of the professional journals went out of business. The day came when Harvey had no work to edit.

Rustling through his desk, looking for something to do, Harvey came across the cigar box. Having nothing else to occupy his time, Harvey took the cardboard container to the post office. Most of the packages had been returned months and even years before but there were two parcels still awaiting him. Harvey opened them in his apartment. One contained a handsome mantel clock and the other a Cross pen and pencil set. Harvey proudly displayed both on his desk.

From that day on, whenever Harvey received a notice, he went directly to the post office and retrieved it. Soon, his apartment was adorned with calendars and paper weights, desk lamps and coffee mugs, carvings and picture frames, plaques and coffee table books. All the gifts were to Harvey's taste and so he exhibited them prominently.

One Wednesday, Ms Sweeney entered Harvey's office as he unwrapped a snow globe of a Bavarian village. Harvey expressed admiration for the globe and Ms. Sweeney asked who had been sending him such wonderful gifts. It had never crossed Harvey's mind to think about the source of these presents. He valued each one, took care in their presentation but not once sought to know their origin.

When asked, the letter carrier at the post office happily told Harvey that all the packages were sent by a Janet Sweeney. It was the only time Harvey had heard her first name. He raced home, found Ms Sweeney in the kitchen and inquired as to the meaning of her gifts. If she wanted more money, Harvey fumed, it was out of the question due to his current economic woes.

Ms. Sweeney assured Harvey she desired no additional salary. She said she sent the gifts for the same reason she had referred so much work to him over the years and provided the daily necessities that made his life easier. The gifts, she explained, were to communicate her love for Harvey and to indicate she was open to a more meaningful relationship with him. For the first time in forty years, Harvey noticed that Ms. Sweeney was a lovely woman with a compassionate face.

When she arrived at Harvey's home the following Friday, Ms. Sweeney found an impeccably worded thank you note by the kitchen sink. Well, she thought, it's a start.

Isaiah, the most poetic of all the prophets, poses a set of life changing questions in the fortieth chapter of his prophecy. He inquires, "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? Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these?"

Like Harvey in this little parable, we can live a long time, focused on the work before us and be oblivious to the gifts that surround us. Evidently such was the state of the Jewish exiles in Babylon. Psalm 137 tells us the Jewish people discarded their harps and other instruments of praise before their forced journey to Babylon. The pathos-filled Psalm explains that the captive people believed they would have no reason to sing in the land of their enemies.

The depressed people hunkered down in the land foreign to them and focused on the drudgery of life in exile. The Babylonians proved to be very generous and hospitable conquerors, sharing the bounty of their land with their Jewish foes. The exiles, however, were blind to the gifts surrounding them. Babylon was one of the most beautiful cities known to humanity, yet the Jews did not notice the magnificence. The hanging gardens of Babylon were one of the seven wonders of the world, but the majesty was lost on the Jewish captives. Cuisine, admired by all cultures, was eaten without appreciation. Wine, savored internationally, was consumed without regard. Fabrics, envied by all people on earth, were unnoticed.

Years after the exiles had entered Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah wrote to them and told them to quit feeling sorry for themselves and take advantage of the opportunities before them. Jeremiah said, you have the right to build homes there, so build them. You are living in one of the most fertile places on earth, plant a garden. Take a wife or a husband, bear children, stop pining for the life you've left behind and love the life God has given you.

Some people followed Jeremiah's advice, but most did not. Thousands lived out the remainder of their days, dull to the wondrous gifts all around them.

Often, due to some major disappointment in life, we lose sight of the blessings around us. Like the Jewish people, something or someone we love is taken from us or we are prevented from obtaining something we feel is essential for our happiness. We conclude, "well if I can't marry her, get that job, achieve that goal, live in that place, regain that ability, reclaim that relationship, then nothing else really matters." Giving up on life, we still breathe, continue to rise and take nourishment, converse with people, go to the grocery store and watch t.v. We simply don't see the blessings around us any longer. We feel cheated.

Until something happens to wake us up. The Swiss pastor and counselor Bernard Martin had an awakening during a mid-life crisis. A widower at a young age, Rev. Martin concluded that nothing really mattered in life after the death of his wife. He still went to work. He served a large parish where there were always people to see, counsel and help in one way or another, and so he plodded through the years until, one day, he arose and realized he had no energy for any of his appointments or ministerial tasks. The frightening emptiness sent him into months of self-examination in which he struggled with his faith and vocation.

Dr. Martin tells of his journey in his book If God Does Not Die. He writes that his crisis led him to see that the God he had been serving since his wife's death, had to die. That God was oppressive and demanding, unfair and mean spirited. That God had robbed him of his most precious blessing in life. After months of prayer, Scripture study and meditation, Dr. Martin put that God to death and finally found the God of love, blessing and hope. This God helped him discover a new appreciation for the everyday gifts of life: his food, home, clothing, the people of his parish, the beauty of his garden and the joy of music. The true God brought him back to life. In the aftermath of his crisis, he wrote, "there are two groups in this world: those who walk along the road with deep appreciation for all that surrounds them and those who are asleep in the ditches."

We can be asleep in the ditches for years and then, any number of life experiences can wake us up to the gifts that surround us. Being aware of the blessings of our lives is a good start to living with greater awareness, but it is only a beginning. Like Harvey, we can appreciate the gifts we receive without ever wondering about their source. As long as we cherish the gifts, with no regard for the Giver, we stay partially asleep.

By the time Isaiah preached his powerful words, the Jewish exiles had begun to notice wonders around them. The worst leaders in Babylon had been defeated and the more reasonable Persian despots had agreed to let all the exiles return to their homeland. The Jewish people took note of this amazing development.

The stars in the skies of Babylon were, by all accounts, astonishing. I'm not a student of astrology or astronomy and do not know why the heavens would be more electric in Babylon than in Jerusalem, but many ancient writings testify to the brilliance of the eastern skies. Again, the Jewish people took notice.

Another gift recognized by the exiles was the mere fact that they were still alive and physically able to journey home when given the chance. After all they had been through, their mere survival was a gift. According to the text, the Jewish people took note of this as well.

What they didn't do was connect the dots from the gifts surrounding them to the One who bestowed such treasures. Isaiah challenged their semi-conscious state by calling the people to recognize the God who had blessed them in so many ways. He said, "Don't just notice how leaders come and go, see the hand of God behind their rise and fall. Don't merely thrill at the beauty of the stars, praise the

One who set them in the heavens. Don't simply feel pride that you are still standing after decades of exile, thank the One who renewed your strength, helped you mount up with wings like eagles, enabled you to run and not grow weary and walk yet not faint."

Isaiah was demarcated the difference between appreciation and gratitude. Total spiritual blindness prevents us from seeing the gifts that surround us. Awareness begins when we at least notice the fragrance of the lilac, the warmth of the sun, the tenderness in our loved one's kiss, the majesty of the osprey in her nest and the spice in the enchilada. That's a start, but that's only appreciation.

Gratitude occurs when, by faith, we attribute these gifts to the benevolence of our Creator. Isaiah wanted the exiles to become fully alert to the glory of both the creation and the Creator. Full awareness to the miracle of life comes only as we move from spiritual blindness to appreciation and finally, gratitude.

I don't know you all that well, but I am confident that God is in the process of bringing you awake to the fully glory of life. If you have suffered some major disappointment, it is natural to fall into the sleep of depression, grief and spiritual dullness. Isaiah's call to you is to look around and notice the gifts that are still in your life. You may not see it today, but there is bounty in your life.

If you are becoming more aware of the gifts surrounding you, then Isaiah's call is to take the next step of faith and acknowledge that these gifts are from God. Should you already be aware that your life has been graced by the goodness of God, Isaiah calls you to take one more step. I received this call last week.

Tuesday night, Jacob's baseball game was rained out so we decided to go to the movies. When I asked the clerk for two tickets, one adult and one child, she replied, "that will be eighteen dollars." Eighteen dollars, I thought. I didn't want to buy the movie, I just wanted to watch it . . . once. Feeling happy to have a chance to go to the movies with my son, I shook off my dismay at the price and handed over a twenty dollar bill. As the clerk printed our tickets, I felt grateful that I could afford to pay such extravagant prices ever once in awhile. My grateful heart was then disturbed as the young woman behind the counter inquired, "Would you like to donate a extra dollar to help sick children?" She held up a cardboard star as she spoke and assured me that I would be a star if I made the donation. I was already smarting from the cost of the movie and I didn't know anything about the organization to which she wanted me to donate and I was somewhat irritated by the fact that she had asked a guilt-inducing question at a place of entertainment. "No, not today," I sourly replied.

The clerk gave me the two dollars cash and as I turned away she added, "By the way, since this is Tuesday, you can get a sack of popcorn for one dollar." I thought, wow, that's a good deal and bounded over to the snack bar. It wasn't until I sat down in the theater that I heard the call. In the chapel of my heart, the Spirit said, "You can't spare a dollar for a sick child, but nearly fall all over yourself to exchange it for a sack of popcorn. I didn't bless you with these gifts so you could spend them on yourself and neglect the needs of others. If you are grateful for what you have, be generous."

If we are already aware that the many gifts of our lives come from God, the next step we need to take, in order to be made fully alive, is to say thanks. Leave an impeccably worded thank you note in your heart today. Share what you have with others and thank God for the opportunity. Pray a prayer of thanksgiving and allow the Spirit of God to make you fully aware of the miracle of your life.

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