Isaiah 40:9-25 *2020 Vision:* *Behold Our God!*

***Our Favorite Song***The Sunday right after Christmas is always a tough one to choose a text and topic for. We just finished a series for Advent and we’re going to start a new series with the New Year, but this Sunday just kind of sits here all alone.

I heard somebody last week call this “Youth Pastor Sunday” because so many Lead Pastors around the country take this Sunday off and have somebody else on the church staff fill in. I guess a missed that memo, because a lot of the staff are taking this week off, and I’m still here. But that’s OK, my family is celebrating up at the lakes, and most of them don’t get the opportunity to hear me preach except for this Sunday, and I wouldn’t want to deprive them of that opportunity.

So I needed to pick a text for just a single sermon, and I decided I would go to one of my favorite passages of Scripture. Isaiah 40 is one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. It contains what I call “Big God Theology.” One of my favorite things to preach about is the power and strength of our God. One of my life’s missions is to help people see that God is Big. Big God Theology.

More than that, one of our favorite songs here at Hope Church—one we have been singing for more about a decade now—is a song called “Behold Our God.” And the lyrics for that song are mostly drawn from Isaiah 40. So, as we wrap out 2019 and prepare for 2020, I thought this would be a great passage to turn to.

Let’s start with **Isaiah 40:9**:

9You who bring good tidings to Zion,

go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem,

lift up your voice with a shout,

lift it up, do not be afraid;

say to the towns of Judah,

“Here is your God!”

In the King James Version of the Bible, that last line reads as “Behold your God!” Isaiah is writing to Israelites in exile. They are discouraged and discomforted. They are doubting God and even questioning their faith in Him. So Isaiah says: “Stop! Take a look at God! Let me remind you of who He is!” In the next 15 verses or so he paints a picture of a God who is worthy of our worship.

We’re going to look at those 15 verses, and we’re going get a good look at God. And here’s our big idea: **In the year 2020 we need to see God for who He is**. (You see what I did there? The year 2020, 20/20 vision.) Let’s take a good look at God. We’re going to see the greatness of God so that we are moved to live for Him.

So let me read the text. Isaiah 40, I’ll start at **verse 10:**

10See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,

and his arm rules for him.

See, his reward is with him,

and his recompense accompanies him.

11He tends his flock like a shepherd:

he gathers the lambs in his arms

and carries them close to his heart;

he gently leads those that have young.

12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?
Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,
or weighed the mountains on the scales
and the hills in a balance?
13 Who has understood the mind of the LORD,
or instructed him as his counselor?
14 Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?
Who was it that taught him knowledge
or showed him the path of understanding?

15 Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket;
they are regarded as dust on the scales;
he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.
16 Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires,
nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.
17 Before him all the nations are as nothing;
they are regarded by him as worthless
and less than nothing.

18 To whom, then, will you compare God?
What image will you compare him to?
19 As for an idol, a craftsman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold
and fashions silver chains for it.
20 A man too poor to present such an offering
selects wood that will not rot.
He looks for a skilled craftsman
to set up an idol that will not topple.

21 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?
22 He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.
23 He brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.
24 No sooner are they planted,
no sooner are they sown,
no sooner do they take root in the ground,
than he blows on them and they wither,
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

25 "To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.

***Bigger than Idols***

I want you to see God clearly today. 2020 vision. 4 things I want you to see. 4 things I want you to behold. First: **Behold our God who is bigger than we can imagine. Verse 12:**

12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?
Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,
or weighed the mountains on the scales
and the hills in a balance?

God is the biggest.

Have you ever cupped water in your hand? You didn’t have a glass, but you wanted a drink, so you stuck your hand under the faucet and caught some water and then you slurped it up. How much water do you get? How many times do you need to cup your hand before you’ve had enough to drink?

You don’t get much water in there. But, Isaiah says that God cups his hand and He measures out the oceans. He scoops up some water and there’s the Pacific. He scoops up some more and there’s the Atlantic. The Indian. The Arctic. The oceans are just drops of water in God’s hand.

Or, again, He marks off the heavens with the breadth of his hand. You know what this is, don’t you? I’ve seen some handymen work this way. You’re cutting some boards, and you don’t have a tape measure handy, so you measure it off with your hand. From finger tip to base of thumb. One, two, three hands…cut. Close enough. Well, that’s how God works, only He’s not measuring boards. He’s marking off the heavens.

Think of that. I read in the paper a while back that scientists in Canada have discovered a planet that actually heats its sun. There’s a planet out there revolving around a star, but the planet is actually warmer than the star—so warm it causes solar flares on the star. The article said the planet is a gas giant 250 times larger than the earth and that this phenomenon can be found 90 million light years away. Our universe is varied and immense.

And God walks up to all this immensity—all these planets and stars and galaxies, 90 million light years—and He measures it with the span of His hand.

Or, again, He holds the dust of the earth in a basket. All of the dust and sand in the world—all of the dust in the Sahara and Malibu and all of the other deserts and beaches in the world—and He packs it in a little fanny pack strapped around His waist.

He weighs out the mountains. He balances hills on the scales. The Rockies, Andes, and Appalachians on one side; the Himalayas, the Atlas, and Urals on the other side. Huge mountains are like one ounce weight markers to our God.

The point is, as enormous and vast as creation is—we can hardly conceive of the size of the universe, how could we imagine anything bigger?—as huge as creation is, God manipulates and puts it all together like a craftsman in His shop. God is bigger than you can imagine.

Not that people won’t try to imagine God. That’s some of the irony here. Jump ahead to **verse 18**:

To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?

When Isaiah wrote this, nearly every nation had its own god or gods. In fact, the Israelites were probably the only group of people who believed there was only One God. And all these other nations made images of their supposed gods. They created idols to worship and bow down before. And Isaiah thinks it is absurd.

So, to demonstrate just how absurd this is, Isaiah gives us a picture of what goes into making an idol. **Verse 19:**

As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it.

This isn’t the fanciest of idols—it’s only gold-plated, not solid gold—but it’s still pretty uptown. A blacksmith carves a mold, and pours the iron into it. Once it has cooled, the goldsmith takes it and overlays it with gold. Then fancy chains are attached to it, and it is hung up in the house so that it can “see” what you are doing.

But not everyone can afford such a fancy idol. That’s like a Cadillac. Some can only splurge for a Ford. No matter. **Verse 20:**

A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.

Can’t afford iron and gold plaiting? Whittle up some wood, you can still have a god.

You can feel Isaiah’s sarcasm here. A hunk of metal hanging by a chain—“look out!—Marduk is watching!” A piece of wood in a shrine—“get another log, Baal is about to fall over!” Make an idol, and you can make your god into anything you can imagine. Your god can look like anything you want. But Isaiah’s point is that God is so much bigger than anything your puny imagination can come up with.

Of course, we’re far too sophisticated to build shrines to statues or to bow down to something you can hang on a key chain. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have idols. In fact, we have a tendency to do something far more blasphemous. We take Jesus, and then we confine Him to the limits of our imaginations. We domesticate Jesus. We create a pet Jesus. A Jesus that we can stick in our pockets and then take out for a couple of hours on Sunday. A Jesus that thinks like us and acts like us and sees the world pretty much the way we see the world.

But I need to tell you: a pet Jesus is not Jesus! Jesus cannot be confined to the limits of our imaginations. He measures the waters in the hollow of His hand! He measures the heavens with the breadth of His hand! We cannot tame Jesus, but we should bow before Him.

***You Cannot Hack God***

Second: **Behold our God who is smarter than any earthly wisdom. Back to verses 13 and 14:**

13 Who has understood the mind of the LORD,
or instructed him as his counselor?
14 Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?
Who was it that taught him knowledge
or showed him the path of understanding?

One of the trendy things in American culture right now is to bring in specialists to straighten out your life. They call them “Life Hacks” now. All these tips and shortcuts to make your life more efficient. All these so-called experts to help you get fit, to organize your closets, to coach you in your relationships, to help you get a better job.

But God doesn’t need experts. When God put together the laws of nature that govern our universe, He didn’t call in an advisory panel of scientists to guide Him in the best use of gravity. When God designed the moral laws that govern us, He didn’t run it by a focus group first to see how His target audience would react to rules against adultery or lying.

God doesn’t need counselors. God does not need consultants in order to know the “right way.” You can’t hack God.

Let me ask you a question: Have you ever said: “If I were God, I’d do things differently”? Don’t lie, we’ve all said something like that. You know you have. “Why doesn’t God just do this or that?”

But, it’s nonsense. We couldn’t possibly comprehend all that goes into governing the universe. We will never know all that God knows.

So, **verses 15-17**:

15 Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket;
they are regarded as dust on the scales;
he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.
16 Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires,
nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.
17 Before him all the nations are as nothing;
they are regarded by him as worthless
and less than nothing.

There were all these nations around Israel that projected a God-denying presence. Big, bristling superpowers. Egypt. Assyria. Babylon. These were strong nations that could, and would, inflict serious damage on Israel. They were frightening. Intimidating. And they believed they knew better than God.

They all presented sophisticated ways of living that took no account of Jehovah. They laughed at Israel’s God and desecrated His temple. But how did God view them? They are like a drop in a bucket to Him. Like dust on the scales.

Think about that: How many of you, when you go to weigh yourself on your bathroom scale, dust if off first? You want that number to be as low as it can be—you want every advantage—but have you ever thought to get the dust off first? Of course not, because dust weighs nothing. And that’s how these big, bristling, power hungry men and nations appear to God.

“Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.”

Every nation tries to project a God-denying, God-defying interpretation of reality; and God is not at all impressed. The powers of this world have no real substance apart from God. They exist, they have reality, but not in any meaningful sense. They are deficient of the ultimate ground of reality that is God.

Ultimately, they are acted upon, and not the actors. Eventually, every world superpower—even the United States—will be sent to the dust bin of history. Eventually, every dictator will end up in a rat hole.

God is smarter than any earthly wisdom. He doesn’t need life hacks. He’s not impressed by our sophisticated ideas that leave Him out of the picture.

***To Whom Will You Compare God?***

So, behold our God who is bigger than we can imagine. Behold our God who is smarter than any earthly wisdom. Now third: **Behold our God who is unequaled by any rival.** Let’s skip ahead to the last verse, **verse 25.** This is God speaking, and it’s sort of the summary of the whole passage:

25 "To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.

We have a tendency to substitute lesser things for God. To let earthly powers—and earthly problems—obscure our view of God. Scary headlines, and day-to-day stresses, loom large in our lives and as a result God appears smaller. These problems rush to the foreground, and shove God to the background, and they seem so much bigger than Him.

But it’s silly. If we’d just get things in proper perspective, we’d see that nothing compares to God. Back up to **verses 21 and 22:**

21 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?
22 He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

The circle here is like the circle of the horizon. Any way you look—wherever you turn—God sits enthroned over it all. The heavens—the star-studded sky on a clear night—are like a giant tent to Him. And people—those of us who live in this vast creation—are like grasshoppers to Him. In other words—we are laughably puny when compared to God.

And that’s important, because the temptation for the people Isaiah is writing to would be to compare powerful people to God. These were people being threatened by mighty armies. People banished to exile by powerful kings.

But it’s absurd to compare these puny powerbrokers to the God of the universe. **Verse 23:**

He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

God was the living God when this universe banged into existence. He was the living God when Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon. He was the living God when Genghis Khan and his Mongol hordes controlled most of the continent of Asia. He was the living God in 1918 when Vladimir Lenin and the rest of the Bolsheviks declared He didn’t exist and tried to stamp him out of Russia. And

he will be living ten trillion ages from now when all the puny potshots against his reality will have sunk into oblivion like BB's at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean… There is not a single head of state in all the world who will be there in fifty years. The turnover in world leadership is 100%. In a brief 110 years this planet will be populated by ten billion brand new people and all [seven] billion of us alive today will have vanished off the earth... But not God. He never had a beginning and therefore depends on nothing for his existence. He always has been and always will be... (John Piper, sermon on Isaiah 6:1-8, Jan. 1, 1984)

He’s the God of history. The rulers of this world don’t drive history, God does. All of the so-called power of the rich and famous and political is subservient to—and at the pleasure of—His power. **Verse 24:**

24 No sooner are they planted,
no sooner are they sown,
no sooner do they take root in the ground,
than he blows on them and they wither,
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

Isaiah wants us to see the brevity of human power. Taken at face value, this verse says that these rulers aren’t even planted yet and they’re gone. Not even for one moment are they independent of God. They’re like stubble in a field. Like faded hot house flowers.

We are just a month away from the Iowa caucus. The year 2020 is going to be dominated by news of the Presidential election. Clearly, this next election will be a pretty big deal.

And that’s all fine and good and important for us to take seriously, just so long as we remember that whoever governs us—Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders or Pete Buttigieg or Elizabeth Warren--God is still the ultimate and real power.

God controls all human events. Earthly powers cannot take the place of God.

Now, again, I don’t know how much of what Isaiah is literally describing is a problem for us. We don’t incline toward worshipping our leaders. Even if you vote for him, you aren’t likely to pray to the President of the United States.

And yet, I think the idea that Isaiah is getting at is a problem that still exists today. We can let our concerns over who has power, over who has control, dominate our perception of the world. How often have you heard it implied that unless this party or that is in control, this nation is sure to fall to pieces? How often do we let headline-making calamities shake our confidence? The stock market drops a couple of hundred points and people panic and sell. A terror attack overseas gets big coverage and thousands of people change their travel plans.

Or, take it down a level—from big, CNN-type worries to the little, regular-life type worries that plague us from day to day. We can let those things become little gods too, can’t we? We can let our worries and fears and concerns crowd in on our allegiance to God.

So here’s the question we need to ask ourselves: What worries or problems are we letting take the place of God? What earthly problem are we making bigger than God?

I’ll admit: there are some nights that I can’t fall asleep. More often than I’d like to admit, I get a problem or a worry stuck in my head and I can lie awake for hours on end. We have a consistory meeting or Beth and I have to make a big decision about our family and I can lie there all night turning it over and over and over in my mind.

I need to remember Isaiah 40, don’t I? I need to remember that God sits enthroned above the circle of the earth. I need to remember that God is in control. I need to remember that earthly powers—and earthly problems—cannot take the place of God.

***The Tender Shepherd***

Then, fourth: **Behold our God who loves us with a tender love.** Let’s go back to the beginning of the passage. Verses I skipped over earlier. **Verses 10 and 11:**

10See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,

and his arm rules for him.

See, his reward is with him,

and his recompense accompanies him.

11He tends his flock like a shepherd:

he gathers the lambs in his arms

and carries them close to his heart;

he gently leads those that have young.

The whole point of this passage is for us to see how mighty and glorious God is. We need to see how immense and strong He is, so that we are filled with confidence in Him. That’s the point of verse 10. Look at the strong words used there: Sovereign, LORD, power, rules. This is a picture of God with biceps like Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. A mighty warrior. The cosmic Christ of Revelation.

But, at the same time, this awesome God loves us. Those same mighty arms also gently cradle and hold vulnerable lambs. This big and wise and unequaled God has entered into history as a humble servant, sacrificing Himself on behalf of the people He loves.

Isaiah 40:11 might just be my favorite picture of God in all of scripture. I’ve mentioned before that the nursery in the church I grew up in had a full-sized mural on the wall picturing Jesus as a shepherd. It’s a very pastoral picture, with Jesus cradling a lamb in His arms. It’s one of the first pictures of Jesus I can remember, and so it is often how I think of Him.

It’s a good picture of Jesus, a Biblical picture. Except, that picture of Jesus, as a remember it, is of Jesus as kind of a wimp. He was drawn very gentle looking, kind of like a 1960s hippie. But what Isaiah 40 wants us to see is that Jesus is no wimp, He is no weakling. Yes, He carries His own tenderly, but He does so with arms that are rippling with strength.

The hands which scooped the oceans and stacked mountains are also the hands that were pierced by nails.

The burden of this passage is not just that we will be in awe of God, but also that we will love Him. Because He loves us.

The God who is bigger than you can imagine.

The God who is smarter than any earthly wisdom.

The God who is unequaled by any rival.

That’s the God who entered into the world on Christmas. That’s the God who went to the cross on Good Friday. That’s the God who rose from the grave and now reigns on the throne of heaven. That’s the God that loves you and holds you tenderly in His arms.

That’s the God I want you to see in the year to come. That’s the God we love and serve.