

**February 8, 2015**

**TEXT: Isaiah 40:21-31**

**TITLE: You've Known All Along**

I want you to learn a new word this morning: WYSIATI. Say it out loud: WYSIATI. It is spelled “wysiati.” It’s not a real word; it’s an acronym. It stands for this phrase: What you see is all there is. WYSIATI. Every day we make thousands of decisions and most of them are based on very limited information. We are very prone to jump to conclusions because “wysiati”—what you see is all there is. Consider two people who bought cars recently. Adam switched from a gas-guzzler getting 12 miles per gallon to a slightly better guzzler that gets 14 miles per gallon. The environmentally virtuous Betsy switched from a 30 miles per gallon car to one that gets 40 miles per gallon. Both drive equal distances a year. Who will save more gas? Betsy seems the logical choice. Her mileage improved by a third (from 30 to 40) while Adam’s only increased by a sixth (from 12 to 14). But do the math. If they each drove 10,000 miles, Adam will reduce his gas consumption from 833 to 714 gallons—a savings of 119 gallons. Betsy’s fuel usage will only drop from 333 to 250 gallons, a savings of 83 gallons. The real issue here wasn’t miles per gallon; it was gallons per mile. But the false assumption about which choice is the better one affects car buyers and government policy makers all the time.<sup>1</sup>

We receive a limited amount of information, which is presented with a certain slant to it, so we end up making a quick decision that may or may not be the right one. Scientist Daniel Kahneman calls this “thinking fast.” You are more likely to feel encouraged if the doctor says “the odds of survival one month after this surgery are 90%” than if you’re told “10% of people die within one month of having this surgery,” although both statements express the same statistical fact. Likewise, you’ll likely choose the salami package labeled “90% fat-free” rather than the one described as “10% fat.”<sup>2</sup> Thinking fast happens all the time. But sometimes we need to think slow. We need to get more information; do the math; remember that what you see is not all there is. Sometimes to get this to happen requires a good shake of our shoulders and someone saying to us, “Have you not known? Have you not heard?”

For most of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the people of Israel lived in exile in Babylon. They had lost their homes; there was no Jewish king on the throne; there was no temple in Jerusalem; they were strangers in a strange land. All around them were reminders that someone else was in control—whether it was the magnificent palace of King Nebuchadnezzar or the mosaics on the temple walls praising Marduk and the other Babylonian gods. For 70 years that was all they saw. Psalm 137 tells their story: *By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.* The Israelites came to believe that the God of Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had forsaken them. But then, after 70 years in exile, they were finally allowed to return home and begin re-building their lives.

As they left the gates of Babylon, the words of Isaiah 40 rang in their ears: *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, for she has served her term; her penalty is paid. Now make straight in the desert a highway for our God. For every valley shall be lifted up; every mountain made low. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed.* (Isa 40:1–5) But, truth be told, those promises were hard to accept. After generations of suffering and exile, after feeling for so long abandoned by God, they found it hard to trust the prophet's good news. WYSIATI—when all you see is all there is, and all you see is harsh, believing in something else comes neither easily nor automatically.

Much of what we think about the world is shaped by our intuitions and “fast thinking” related to our experiences. Exiles in a foreign land will feel exiled from God and life in general. Prisoners in solitary confinement here, or locked away at Guantanamo Bay without hope of due process there, feel like perpetual captives instead of human beings. People who experience racism, homophobic bias, economic prejudice feel like strangers in strange lands unsure whom to trust or what to believe in. The combination of WYSIATI and white privilege means that for Caucasians when a police officer pulls you over, you simply stay in the car and do what is asked of you. Yet for African Americans, Latinos, and people of color, it can be much less clear what to do in that situation. To be silent risks being characterized as sullen and dangerous. To be deferential risks being interpreted as mockery. To step out of the car puts far more at risk than most white people ever imagine.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, “fast thinking” makes it easy to look at statistics of inner city crime and blame the victims since they won't break the code of silence about the perpetrators. But “slow thinking” recognizes that a victim's mother might actually tell her neighbors that she does not expect them to let their children cooperate with the detectives trying to solve her child's murder because she doesn't want to run the risk that any other child might be killed.<sup>4</sup>

WYSIATI thinking affects us all the time, when things are good and when things are bad. When we are healthy and organized and bills are paid on-time, we imagine we will always be so. When we are hurting, broken, given bad health or financial news, we imagine we will always be so. Faith in God in both situations can be difficult, because if all is well, let God be thanked but then move on to the next pleasure. And if things are bad, God feels distant, like we're in exile and other powers are ruling our life. That is why Isaiah's voice—or more accurately, Isaiah's persistent questions are so important. *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?* Isaiah challenges WYSIATI and says, “No, what you see is not all there is.” To use his poetic language, from the perspective of God who sits above the circle of the earth, all humankind is like grasshoppers; all princes are as naught; all powers and authority are ultimately as nothing. Isaiah calls us to step away from our simple conclusions; to do the math—hear other voices—look beyond today's suffering to remember the presence of a loving God that you have felt before, and remember again the promises of healing you have trusted your whole life long.

Pediatrician Diane Komp has written that for children it is more important to be known than to know. The basis of children’s confidence depends less upon how much they know about their family than upon the inner assurance that they are known by their family—that they exist, they’re remembered, they belong.<sup>5</sup> If that is true for children, it is certainly true for us. That is why we take such comfort in scripture, like Psalm 139: *O Lord, you have searched me and known me. Even before a word is on my lips, you know it completely.* It is there in the promise of I Corinthians 13: *Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. So faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.*

The philosopher Blaise Pascal famously said, *“Man is but a reed; the most feeble thing in nature; but he is a thinking reed... Our dignity consists in thought. By it we must elevate ourselves; not by space and time which we cannot fill. Let us endeavor, then, to think well.”*<sup>6</sup> That means letting Isaiah shake us by the shoulders on a regular basis, saying to us: *Have you not known? Have you not heard or remembered what has been told you from the beginning?* It means wherever we are, we need to regularly pull back the curtains and look at more the world than we’ve been accustomed to seeing. We need to have longer conversations with that person different from us to hear more about their story than what we had quickly concluded for ourselves to be true. Yes, that means we need to risk having more information spoil our preconceived ideas, whether that is about climate change, or vaccinations, or immigration policy, or whether you can support yourself on a full-time minimum wage job. (By the way, you can’t.)

It means we are to stop and “slow think” for a while. Breathe and be aware that you can breathe; feel our pulse and give thanks for having a pulse. As thinking reeds, it means we are to endeavor to think well. As children of the exile, it means to remember that all earthly power is of naught and we are to work now so that all may live in freedom. As children of God, it is knowing that we are fully known—always have been, always will be. As people of faith, it means moving from following Jesus of Nazareth to believing in Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

It’s the stuff we have known all along. Isaiah just wants us to remember it again. Why? Because it is the good news that gives power to the faint and renewal to the weak. It is the good news that reminds us that what you see is not all there is—as we mount up with wings like eagles, run and not grow weary, walk and not be faint, now and forever. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, 2011, p. 372.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Joyce Carol Oates’ novel, The Sacrifice; reviewed by Roxane Gay, NY Times Book Review, February 1, 2015, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jennifer Gonnerman’s review of Ghettoside by Jill Leovy, NY Times Book Review, January 24, 2015, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Diane Komp, A Child Shall Lead Them, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Blaise Pascal, Pensees, p. 116.