



SUNRISE ON THE TEMPLES OF LILLIPUT

2 Chronicles 26, Isaiah 2:5-22

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Jay Mathews of the Washington Post has been writing for decades about how a presidential candidate's height affects his or her popularity with voters. In most cases, the taller candidate wins. On Thursday [Mathews reported](#) that Hilary Clinton has grown 2 inches. In 2007 she was listed at 5'5"; today she's reportedly 5'7". Mathews is skeptical, noting a tendency among candidates to exaggerate their height. "Donald Trump and Jeb Bush both say they are 6-3, but Trump — let me break this to you gently — *may* be exaggerating. At the CNN debate, Bush looked taller." So also Mrs. Clinton *may* not have grown two inches while Secretary of State. Mathews, who is 5' 4½", writes on behalf of all "height-challenged voters," not only in search of the truth, but also to see whether Mrs. Clinton has "something we can use" [i.e. to make us taller.]

Every half inch matters here in the most sophisticated democracy on earth. Just look at how big our leaders are!

Meanwhile, Pope Francis this week urged our big leaders to take action on behalf of little people: to do unto immigrants as you would have them do unto you, to protect and defend human life at every stage of its development, to develop a culture of care with regard to the environment and poverty and the global arms trade. But Pope Francis is only 5'9"; I wonder if any of our big leaders took him seriously. Personally, I think he towered above us as he reminded us of our high calling to care for the little ones everywhere.

Isaiah 2 paints a similar picture, except that it's God himself paying a visit to Jerusalem's leaders. They're so tall, so rich, so impressive—until the Lord appears. Then it's like sunrise on the temples of Lilliput. How petty, how small they look in comparison with the Lord! All the big things of our world become small as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords comes to reign.

HOW BIG IS UZZIAH? (2 CHRONICLES 26)

At the sunset of his own ministry, Moses warned the Israelites about getting too big for their britches, saying, "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'" (Deuteronomy 8:17) Yet this is precisely what happened after they took possession of the promised land. Centuries later, this came to a head in Isaiah's day.

Isaiah's ministry began the year that Judah's King Uzziah died. Uzziah was 16 years old when he became king, and he reigned 52 years in Jerusalem. (2 Chron 26:2) It was a time of enormous strength and prosperity for the Southern Kingdom. Uzziah expanded Judah's borders,

overcoming the Philistines and subjugating the Ammonites (2 Chron 26:6-8). He invested in agriculture throughout the region, thereby multiplying their wealth (26:10). He raised up an enormous army of 300,000+ soldiers, with all the best weapons, as well as strengthened Jerusalem's defenses in terms of both stronger walls, towers and better catapults (26:9,11-15).

Yet as he prospered, Uzziah didn't heed Moses' warning; instead, he let it all go to his head. "But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the Lord his God..." (2 Chron 26:16). He went into the temple, God's house, and began acting as if it were his own house. And at that very moment the Lord struck him with leprosy—from which he suffered until the day he died.

Think of how disorienting that must have been for King Uzziah, after all that he had accomplished. He *had* been a courageous leader. He *had* worked very hard. But somewhere along the way, he began to believe his own press. A fog settled around him, as he came to believe that it's "my power, my good looks, my ingenuity that have gotten this prosperity." And then one day he went into God's house and the bright shining sunshine of God's greatness broke through the fog of Uzziah's self-delusion. Uzziah's name means "The Lord is my strength." Not "*I* am my strength," but *the Lord*. Uzziah usurped the authority of his true King, the Lord Almighty. He deserved to die. Instead, God spared his life and blessed him with weakness, so that he might yet live in the strength of the Lord.

HOW BIG IS JERUSALEM? (ISAIAH 2:10-21)

The Lord visited King Uzziah at the height of his self-delusion. In Isaiah 2, the Lord promises to visit Jerusalem in the same way. It's what Isaiah calls "The Day of the Lord"—which happens whenever God opens our eyes to perceive *his* great stature in contrast to our own. In vv. 10-21, Isaiah says that on the Day of the Lord, Jerusalem will see that everything they once thought to be great was nothing in comparison with the Lord Almighty.

On that day, v 10, they will "Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty." In other words, they'll be tiny, down there with the rocks and the dust. For, v 11, "The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day." No one will be great in comparison with the Lord. It's like the Lilliputians when Gulliver arrives. Before he came, someone might have boasted in being a half inch taller. But after Gulliver, no one could ever claim to be tall again.

So, beginning in v 12, Isaiah lists ten impressive things that on the Day of the Lord won't be impressive any more. The Day of the Lord is set against all these things:

- (12) against all that is proud and lofty
- against all that is lifted up. Everything tall will become small.
Including everything in nature that impresses us:
- (13) against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up
- against all the oaks of Bashan—the giant redwoods and sequoias of that day.
- (14) against all the lofty mountains

- against all the uplifted hills—the Denalis and El Capitans.
- (15) against every high tower
- against every fortified wall—all that we build, whether for fame or security, from towering skyscrapers to nuclear missiles.
- (16) against all the ships of Tarshish
- against all the beautiful crafts—all that we devise for profit and for pleasure, from the great ships carrying our exports to the luxury cruise ships.

Before the Day of the Lord, leaders may seem very big, and God very small. But on the Day of the Lord, v 17, the proud will be brought low, and the Lord alone will be exalted.

What's more, as Isaiah goes on to say in vv 18-21, not only will big people become small on the Day of the Lord, but also the big gods of all the big people. When the Lord appears, vv 18-19, their idols will become utterly worthless and disappear as the big people scramble down into caves and holes. In v 20, their big gods made of silver and gold will tumble down into the holes together with the moles and the bats on the Day of the Lord.

HOW BIG ARE WE? (ISAIAH 2:22)

I have a box of treasures somewhere, probably up in the attic, and it contains everything I once held dear, circa 1980. There are my Cub Scout badges, and the Star Wars cards, and the little league trophies, and so on. And whenever I find that box and open it up, it's like the Day of the Lord. Look at all these big things! Look at how little they've become!

What are the big things in your life? What has your undivided attention? What is that one big thing you long to have or achieve, whether at school or at work or in life?

What about the big people in your life? Is there some influential, important person you wish would take you seriously, who would give you a break, who would become a friend rather than an enemy, or a lover instead of a friend?

If you have your heart set on acquiring or achieving some big thing, or winning the affection of some big person, but you haven't yet, is this gap, this longing robbing you of joy? Do you find yourself distracted by it again and again? I do this all the time. I become utterly preoccupied, and whatever it is, it becomes the first thing I think about in the morning, the last thing I remember before I go to bed, and what keeps me up in the middle of the night. It's a very common condition, and there's a name for it: idolatry.

We fall into idolatry all the time. And whenever we do, look at what happens. There's a downward spiral of distraction, delusion and depression.

First, **distraction**. We become so enamored with some big thing or person in the foreground that we completely lose sight of the greatness of God. So we give our hearts to something big that really isn't big at all.

Then, secondly, **delusion**. Even though our desires are turned toward this big idol, what's really happening in our hearts is an idolatry of self. Because the reason we so badly want the big idol is because it will make us big too. Whether it's the big promotion at work, or the big academic achievement, or the endorsement by the big name, or the affection of that person who has become so big to us, we know that if we get it, we'll be big too, maybe a half inch or even an inch taller. And the further down this road we take things, the bigger we get, so that, well, look at us! How big are we? So big! We're almost as tall as our presidential candidates!

And then, finally, **depression**. We become terribly sad. Think about all the grand things that Isaiah mentions in this passage. Yet why is there no joy in it at all? It's the bitter fruit of idolatry. Because no matter how big we get, we're never big enough. And with God so tiny in the background, it's depressing to think about how out of control we are, and all the ways we have been wronged or slighted or misunderstood, and yet we can't do anything about it.

Idolatry is not the root cause for all depression. You may be depressed because of some genuine tragedy in your life—something truly worthy of your grief and sadness. But if you're depressed, ask yourself: "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you in turmoil within me?" (Ps 42:5)

Is it possible that you're downcast simply because you're not as big as you had hoped? The Psalmist says, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

Isaiah makes the same point in 2:22, in which he says, "Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath." Have you forgotten? Who put the breath in our lungs? God did. Everything we are and everything we have comes from him. All human glory, innovation, strength and wealth is derived from the Lord. No matter how big we are, God is infinitely bigger.

SO WHAT? (ISAIAH 2:5-9)

So the effect of idolatry on us is a downward spiral of distraction, delusion and depression. What about God? Why does he get so angry when we become too big for our britches? He's still big; it doesn't diminish his stature at all. Why does he care?

Two reasons: first, **God cares about us**. God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son, Jesus, into the world to live and die for us, that we might not die, but be reconciled to him, and live in close communion with him forever. That's how much he cares, and that's why when we don't reciprocate God feels betrayed.

Second, not only does God care about us, but **he also cares about the world**. The vision of the mountain of the Lord (Isa 2:1-5) is one of what should have been. God's people were supposed to be pure and holy so that they could woo all the nations of the earth to the Lord. Jerusalem was supposed to be a fountain of God's love, protection and justice for all people. But Isa 2:6-9 describes what happened instead, as the mirror image of vv 1-5. Rather than filling the nations with righteousness, Jerusalem itself became filled with the junk of the nations.

1. The nations were supposed to stream to Jerusalem, but instead, Jerusalem was full of things from the east and of Philistine fortune-tellers (2:6). It was filled with idols; they bowed down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers had made (2:8).
2. God's law was supposed to spread from Jerusalem to enrich all the other nations. Instead, Jerusalem was filled with silver and gold, and there was no end to their treasures (2:7).
3. The strength of Jerusalem was supposed to be God's shalom. Instead, Jerusalem was filled with horses and chariots (2:7).

Do you see what was happening? Instead of being a spring of living water—a source of pure, holy life for the nations—Jerusalem had become a stagnant swamp, a cesspool filled with the raw sewage of global idolatry. God was furious about it because his people had taken his many blessings and used them to do precisely the opposite of what God had intended.

Older church buildings for sale in the city are often filled with junk—dusty piles of old desks and chairs and books, cast off by parishioners from by-gone days. Instead of being places where people come to *be filled* with God's light and hope and healing, they are instead warehouses filled with old, worthless debris.

When you look back on our own lives decades from now, will you be like these old church buildings? Think how you spend your time and money. Think of your in-flow and out-flow. Which direction is it going? Are you a conduit of God's love, protection and justice for your neighbors? Or have you become a cul-de-sac instead?

One of the Apostle Paul's classic antitheses, capturing the question of heart orientation, is in Ephesians 5:18. Paul, who was certainly no teetotaler himself, said it this way: Don't get drunk on wine, but instead be filled with the Holy Spirit. Why? Because then the Spirit will flow through you for the life of the world. That's why we're here. To be God's conduits. There's no greater high than that.

God is angry about idolatry because it affects everyone. Not just us. Not just him. But also the world. For us, idolatry leads from distraction to delusion to depression. For our neighbors, it means **deprivation**, as they are deprived of the light of the Gospel. Look at v 5, Isaiah's plea to the people of Jerusalem: "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord." In other words, "be God's light to the nations." Instead, they hid it under a basket.

The same thing happens today, whenever we become distracted, deluded and depressed by our own idolatry. Our neighbors are deprived of the light of Christ that should be flowing through us. We're worrying about how tall we are, while little people around us suffer. Our idolatry hurts our neighbors.

So, what are we to do? What's the solution to this downward spiral? Again, listen to what the Psalmist says 3 times in Pss 42-43: "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

The Day of the Lord came for King Uzziah. At the height of his self-delusion, God humbled him with leprosy so that he might not only remember God's greatness, but also be a visible reminder of God's greatness for the rest of his life.

The Day of the Lord came for Jerusalem. At the height of their self-delusion, God humbled them with exile in Babylon, so that they would remember God and point the world to him.

And now here we are. You have your little gods, I have mine. And aren't they all so pretty? And the more I think about them, the more I want them, the taller they become, and the bigger I feel, and so on. Yet the sun will rise again, and then we'll see our gods for the baubles they really are. How could we have given our hearts and lives to these dull plastic pieces when we could have enjoyed the brightness of the sun instead?

So the Lord says to us, why wait for sunrise on the temples of Lilliput? "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). Why not walk by faith rather than sight, with the assurance that some day "every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11). He is the rider on the White Horse, the Word of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the victor over sin, and death, and Satan, and every idol that mankind has ever fashioned (Rev 19).

Not only so, but he is full of mercy and compassion for lost sheep like you and me. He knows how we've gone astray, and he also understands why. He created us with hearts that long for significance and security and love. When we put our trust in proximate idols, Jesus knows it's all because we're longing for him. He knows and understands. For example, take Paul's antithesis from Eph 5:18. If you were drunk last night, not only does Jesus know that you were, but he also understands why. And in his mercy and compassion he invites us to come to him in repentance and faith.

So let's cast aside all our little gods, seek the Lord's forgiveness, and become a holy people united in his greatness. Let's put an end to our distraction, delusion, and depression, and put our hope in the Lord instead. Let's stop depriving our neighbors of the light of Christ, and become conduits of God's love instead. Ask yourself:

"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."