“The End of Ourselves”
Isaiah 40:21-31

In 1947, General Mills launched a new line of Betty Crocker instant cake mixes – just add water to the mix, and you get a cake that tastes like it was made from scratch. Sales skyrocketed at first, but then slowed to a near halt. The flummoxed leadership of General Mills hired a psychologist to analyze the situation, and he determined that the sales decline was the result of guilt. Homemakers felt that if all they did was add water, the cake was not truly theirs. They couldn’t say they had baked a cake for their loved ones with their own two hands.

So General Mills relaunched the instant cake mixes with one additional step. Add water…and an egg. Sales soared.

Now, according to Amanda Montell, in her book *The Age of Magical Overthinking,* what happened with Betty Crocker wasn’t so much a guilt thing, but a significance thing. We don’t want to feel insignificant or unneeded. We like knowing that we contributed to something. A few decades after General Mills discovered this truth, this same phenomenon was observed in what is now called “The IKEA effect.”

The folks at IKEA discovered that this need for participation will cause us to buy unmade furniture and spend hours on our living room floor trying to figure out which allen key we need to screw Bolt#473 into Hole A76. There’s something satisfying about putting a dresser together yourself. We like to feel that we have contributed. We want to know that we are enough, that we don’t always have to rely on others, that we…can make a cake. Or build a bed. We’ll call the IKEA helpline when things get really problematic, but otherwise, we’re perfectly fine on our own, thank you.

In 2005, sociologists Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton observed that this desire for autonomy and significance has also shaped our sense of faith and our idea of who God is. Smith and Denton coined the phrase Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a worldview they summarize in five points:

1) A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5) Good people go to heaven when they die.

"Moralistic" is the idea that we have to be a generally good person. "Therapeutic" underscores the importance of our own feelings. And "Deism" is the idea that God is distant; he isn't personally involved in our lives or in upholding his creation.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism feels good to us. It doesn't ask much of us, it encourages us to seek our own happiness above all else, and it allows us to keep our autonomy. We might brush up with God every once and a while when things get hard, but otherwise we can keep God contained, and maintain our independence, our own sense of significance.

This desire is, of course, nothing new. God's people have been trying to get away from God since God first created people. The Old Testament is one long story of the Israelites turning away from God, choosing to follow gods that looked a little more pragmatic, a little less mysterious, and a little more like what they thought a god should look like. The

people of Israel wanted to make their own decisions, rule themselves how they saw fit, live the way they wanted to live…which usually looked more like how neighbouring peoples were living than how God was calling them to live.

The people wanted autonomy, and in the end, God gave them autonomy. 1 Kings 17 says, "Jeroboam enticed Israel away from following the Lord and caused them to commit a great sin. The Israelites persisted in all the sins of Jeroboam and did not turn away from them *until the Lord removed them from his presence,* as he had warned through all his servants the prophets. So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile."

In exile, of course, the people determined that the whole autonomy thing wasn't so great after all. Left to their own devices, without the power of God to sustain and protect them, they were captured, killed, enslaved, and forced into a foreign way of life.

So it was that, sitting in Assyria, and later in Babylon, the people figure out that maybe they need God after all. They're forced to face the fact that they haven't gotten themselves very far. And then, like a kid who insists she doesn't need her dad to hold onto her bike and then blames her dad when, unassisted, she topples over, the Israelites tell God this is all *his* fault.

How could *God* have gotten them into this mess? Our text tells us the people were grumbling, complaining, saying, "My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by my God." Suffering a bout of short-term memory lapse, the people are quite sure it's God who has abandoned them. And yet, having come to the end of their rope, their only hope now…is God.

In an article for Point Magazine, Lindin Smith writes about his sister dying of leukemia when they were teenagers. At the time, he was an atheist, so this caused no great theodicy problems for him…he wasn't wrestling with how God could have allowed this to happen. But he was confronted by the problem, the presence of evil. Something terrible had happened, and how could he now make sense of it?

He tried to find meaning in his sister's death, to find some interpretation that would help him move through his grief, to move past his anger, some way that he could work it all out on his own. "Of course," he writes, "I never found a story that redeemed my sister's death. I had thought I could busy myself with the poetry of living, but after a while, I discovered that I could not live on narrative alone. Not only did I fail to find a story that could explain the evil outside of me, I could not even manage the evil within me. I have long sought to discover why I am as selfish and dishonest as I am; why I am so callous toward my neighbor; why I love to hold a grudge. I have found a hundred convincing explanations. And yet none of them have ever changed me to my satisfaction – my will is something apart from any story I can tell about it."

"It is there," he continues, "in experiencing absolute limits within myself, in my failure to love and forgive, that I found God…When you experience yourself as being entirely beyond your own control, and forgiveness feels out of reach, prayer is all you have."

We try, all the time, to go it on our own. But if you are anything like me, you are all too aware of the absolute limits within ourselves. We do not love as fully as we want. We struggle to forgive. We are impatient. We're too angry. We say cruel things aloud even as our heart already regrets it. We come to the end of ourselves all the time. "Love," says Smith, "is a duty the will cannot fulfill." The kind of love we long for…an

absurd, joyful, forgiving, big love…that is a gift of grace from one who knows no end and no beginning, for whom nothing is too difficult.

This is what God tells the Israelites when they cry out to him in exile. It is both a challenge…and a comfort.

“In your desperation for autonomy, he says, “have you forgotten who I am?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?
It is God who rules all things,
who sits enthroned above the earth,
stretching out the heavens like a canopy.
It is God who raises up princes and then brings them to ruin,
It is by God’s decree that flowers bloom and rain falls
and stars come out at night.

And God does not come to the end of himself. Ever.

“The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.”

Not only is God’s power never-ending, God’s understanding knows no limits. While we come to the end of our patience and ability to love and forgive, God does not. When we have come to the end of ourselves, what we find, waiting for us with open arms, is God.

“He gives strength to the weary,” says Isaiah,
“and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;

they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint."

Have you ever watched an eagle fly? Some birds spend a lot of energy to get themselves airborne, in a constant frenzy of flapping wings.

Not so with the eagle. They might beat their great wings occasionally, but eagles don't flap – they soar. They unfurl their wings and catch a breeze, gliding effortlessly through the sky. The eagle was made, says pastor Meg Jenista, for this interplay of self and wind. And we humans, she says, are the same.

"The thing to note about human beings," writes Jenista, "is how *we* fly – not by constant flutters and flaps. Rather, we unfurl our wings and catch the Spirit (which, in Hebrew, is the same word as wind). We may glide on – not in our own strength but in the work of the Spirit shoring us up, sustaining us. We may swoop and play and rejoice in the work of the Spirit. We have been made for this interplay of self and Spirit."

Notice that the eagle doesn't get erased in all this. The eagle is still it's big, beautiful self. But without the wind, the eagle would come to the end of its own strength rather quickly.

So, too, are we not insignificant in the story of God. Dependence on God does not mean that we have *no* agency, no self, no unique place in the work of God's kingdom.

What we find, when we come to the end of ourselves, is that God has made us for something *more* than ourselves. That, as Theologian Todd Billings puts it, God is calling us into a "into the playful, joyous world of *living as children of a gracious Father, as persons united to Christ and empowered by the Spirit."*

God has adopted us as heirs of his kingdom, with all the privileges of that inheritance, and all the responsibilities of that role. Each of us,

called to discover the unique ways in which we might participate in the work of the Father, equipped and empowered through the Spirit, and united with Christ in his death and his resurrection…thus called to die to ourselves that, in our very brokenness, we might experience the power of God and be raised up into something surprising, something new, something beyond what we could imagine.

So to conclude, I want to share a favourite poem of mine. It's by a 17th century English poet named George Herbert. In the poem he refers to a process called "Imping." For a bird to fly properly, its wings need to be intact, with all their feathers in just the right place and position. But sometimes feathers break in accidents or injury. When this happens, a bird rehabilitator can take another feather of a close match and, by inserting a piece of wire into the shaft of both the broken and whole feather and applying some adhesive, will adhere the new feather, leaving the bird with a full wing, allowing it to soar again.

You'll notice the shape of this poem, which is, aptly titled, "Easter Wings."

Lord, Who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:

With Thee,
O let me rise,
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day Thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne;
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.

With Thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day Thy victorie;
For, if I imp my wing on Thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Would you pray with me?

O Lord, whose greatness and patience knows no limits,
thank you that when have come to the end of ourselves, you are there.
You do not fail us, you do not grow tired,
you do not leave us alone.
In our foolishness
we try to do it all on our own.
Thank you for not abandoning us to our pride,
but sent Jesus Christ to rescue us,
that, united to him in his death,
we might also share in his resurrection.
So by your Holy Spirit, lift us up and empower us
to do the work of your Kingdom,
relying on you alone,
our rock and our salvation.
We pray this in the name of Jesus,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.