

When we speak of God, sometimes I wonder of whom we are speaking.
Don't get me wrong; I have a sense of who I mean, when I speak of God.
I still mean the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of Jesus of Nazareth.
I mean a God who created the world and is bringing it back to himself in love, by Jesus Christ.

And yet I hear God spoken of sometimes in ways that leave me puzzled.
A famous book of popular theology of a couple of generations ago was entitled "Your God is Too Small."
In it, J.B. Philips disputed some of the ways of speaking about God that seemed to him so insufficient.
He wrote of those who rendered God the resident policeman; the one who watched for failure and punishes for it.
He wrote of God as parental hangover, a projection of whatever is unresolved from the ways we did not satisfy our parents.
Or of God as a grand old man, rendered in the cartoons of the Far Side and on T-Shirts, looking vaguely Biblical, with long hair and a beard.
Someone respected, but also perhaps, ignored.
Or the tribal God, who belongs to and only loves one nation.

All these gods are too small, too much the invention of our own minds.
It frankly does pain me to hear people speak of God as "The man upstairs."
Or to see football players thank God for their victory,
as though God gave it to them,
on the same day that thousands of children died of malnutrition
or hundreds of innocents died in terrorism.
The things incautious people say to try to comfort those who mourn fit into this realm as well.

I think a great care is called for when we use our little human brains to think about God.
A great care is called for when we use our tiny little languages and vocabulary to speak about God.
It is hardly within us to do God justice by thought or language.
Remember the Hebrew people would not allow themselves to depict God in any image or
to pronounce the name of God,
A good protection against saying anything too stupid about God or painting any foolish, destructive picture.

So says the prophet Isaiah, in our chiding lesson today:

Have you not known?

Have you not heard?

Have you not been told from the beginning?

God sits above the circle of the heaven and the earth's inhabitants are like grasshoppers (that's us!)

He brings princes to nothing, never grows weary, and his understanding is unsearchable.

I'm reminded of a debate about kneeling in our seminary chapel.

The liturgy professor disliked kneeling.

Standing, we were told, was the usual posture for prayer in the early church.

It befitted a people raised with Christ.

And the systematic theology professor,
sensing a creeping progressivism humanism said.

That's fine.

I believe I will kneel because God is very big and holy,
and I am very small and sinful.

We can spend our lives, a lifetime, thinking about and seeking God.

We can venture some thoughts and descriptions

And certainly have a Bible full of faithful words about God.

And yet, whatever we think and say, is best offered in holy humility.

Jesus himself spoke of God with careful indirection much of the time, by parable and mystery.

Some questions he refused to answer,

And his ultimate teaching about God was the sign and love of the Cross, not any sermon he preached.

He who knew the Father best spoke with a loving circumspection of so great a mystery.

Remember then that God has used those who treasured and cared for God's name in these ways.

This Isaiah, whose prophetic career began with an insistence that "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips!" Not worthy to speak of God.

Or Moses who said he dared not speak of God. Ask my silver-tongued brother, he said.

And Jesus, who had fled to the silent wilderness, to rest in God's presence, before he was recalled to speak of God, by the Spirit.

So consider who you mean when you speak of God;
Consider God's indescribable holiness and unfathomable, burning love.
When you have done that long enough, use your mind well and your tongue.
Be silent when it seems fitting.
And then see what God might say and do through you.