

Title: "For Good Measure"**[Slide 1]****Text: Isaiah 40:12-17****The Measure of Creation****Who knew?****[Slide 2]**

The year was 1923 and the cosmos was still small enough to measure. You could go out on a dark summer night and see a big part of it. It even had a catchy name: The Milky Way.

Harvard-trained astronomer Harlow Shapley had recently become famous for demonstrating that the Milky Way galaxy was 10 times bigger than previously thought. But like most other astronomers of his time, Shapley maintained that the Milky Way was all there was to the Universe. All of the fuzzy patches, or nebulae, that weren't stars were just patches of dust and gas.

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Then along came a young astronomer named Edwin Hubble. Hubble had begun working at the Mt. Wilson Observatory in Pasadena, CA after the end of WWI. In 1923 he made a discovery that would change the way we see the night sky forever.

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He focused his studies on one of those fuzzy nebulae called M31, and found that far from being just a patch of dust or gas, it was actually *another galaxy* made up of millions of stars. And M31, the Andromeda Galaxy, turned out to be but one of hundreds of billions of galaxies – thanks to discoveries made through the telescope that bears Hubble's name.

Who knew?

The Measure of Creation:

The ancient prophet Isaiah would have loved Hubble's discovery. Isaiah's challenge was to dislodge his people's tendency to put God in a box. Isaiah commanded them to go out into the desert and build a brand new highway for the LORD. But to do so, they would have to abandon their preconceptions about Him.

Isaiah writes:

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Isaiah 40:12 NIV

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?

There is the challenge that faced astronomers like Shapley and Hubble. How big is big? Shapley was able to better estimate the size of the Milky Way galaxy. Edwin Hubble was able to find another galaxy a million light years away from us. But Hubble, even though he discovered the fact that the universe is constantly expanding, was unable to wrap his head around the new information and refused to believe his own findings!

It turns out that we can never truly measure the vastness or intricateness of God's Creation. Only the Creator knows just how big His Creation actually is.

Just askin'

When Isaiah talks about taking the measure of Creation, he is addressing our need to have control over our world. After all, the Universe is a really big place! We want to know where we fit in to this vast expanse. So we measure and quantify. We give names to everything from atoms to continents, oceans to galaxies. And when we do, we squeeze God's immense world into our little minds.

Or do we?

The Measure of the Mind of the Creator

A mental box for God?

Isaiah's next question goes right to the heart of the matter:

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Isaiah 40:13-14 NIV

Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD, or instruct the LORD as his counselor?

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?

Isaiah has moved from the Creator's works to the Creator Himself. It's like standing before an awe-inspiring painting that overwhelms us with its beauty. No way could we ever adequately "measure" or describe it. And if that is impossible, than how on earth could we ever enter into the brilliant imagination of the artist himself?

The LORD:

Notice that now Isaiah is identifying God by His Name: the LORD, Yahweh. This is the personal God for whom we are commanded to build a highway in the desert places of our lives. The LORD is the Mighty King, the tender Shepherd, the Lord of all Creation. He alone knows the way forward for His flock.

When Isaiah speaks of "fathoming" the Spirit of the LORD, he uses the same word that he uses in asking who can "mark off" the heavens. Measuring the Creation and measuring the Creator are equally impossible!

The Good Shepherd:

So why would we want to get the measure of the mind of God?

Because we desperately want to know why the world is the way it is. We desperately want to know what lies around the corner. To know is to feel in control.

Nowhere is this need more evident than in the desert places in our lives! There we are out in the wild: no signs, no path, no idea of how we even got there. Not a clue of what will happen next. Isaiah's piercing questions remind us that we will never figure out how God sustains His world.

Instead, we're called to build a highway for Him in that confusing and forbidding place. He alone knows the "path of understanding." As David wrote, when reflecting on his own desert experiences:

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Psalm 23:3b-5 NIV

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

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You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Notice how David moves from "he" to "You"? Out in David's desert experience, the LORD leads him, walks through the valley of the shadow of death with him, feeds and heals him.

In the desert we will desperately want to *know* what we can never fathom or understand. The better choice is to *know* the One who knows the way!

The Measure of the Nations

A drop in the bucket!

For hundreds of years Israel had anchored its entire identity in the fact that it was a *nation*. It had a king appointed by the LORD. It had a capital and national boundaries. It had a flourishing economy and a powerful army.

And then all of that went away. Israel as a nation was no more. Its fate as a people was now determined by a succession of empires – super-nations that had gobbled up one little kingdom after another.

How tempting, then, to think that the New Reality was the Empire. How tempting to think that, once again, humans *could* control their world and their destiny if only they created more powerful kingdoms.

So what does the LORD say about this plan?

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Isaiah 40:15 NIV

Surely the nations are like a drop in the bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.

Remember how Isaiah had asked *who held the dust of the earth in a basket or weighed the mountains on the scales?* Well, now it turns out that the vaunted nations and kingdoms of the world wouldn't budge the scales.

No human can measure the waters of the sea; and no nation is more than a drop in a bucket. Building a road in the desert means putting our faith not in the human systems and institutions around us, but in the God who created all things.

Mere idols:

Isaiah points out that the nations and all their wealth are in many ways a false god – a rival to the LORD. He says:

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Isaiah 40:16-17 NIV

Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.

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

God is not measured by the magnificence of our cathedrals. When our faith in human systems is greater than our faith in Him, those systems have become nothing less than a false god. That is why he says that the nations are "as nothing," "worthless and less than nothing."

This description is identical to his description of the idols of the pagans:

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Isaiah 41:29 NIV

See, they are all false! Their deeds amount to nothing; their images are but wind and confusion.

For Good Measure:**[Slide 12]**

So how do you measure your world? Are you trying to wrestle the Creation into a box of your expectations? Are you trying to convince the God of Creation to finally see that you know more than He does about your life path? Are you pinning your hopes on human systems to show you the way?

There is another way: Build that highway out in the middle of your desert. Go out there with nothing but a rake and shovel. Go out there and discover that the God who made all things and who sustains our world in His own mysterious ways, has been waiting for you.

Then let Him show you the way that your desert road will take. He will fill your cup until it runs over. He is all you need.

LIFE Group Lesson for “For Good Measure”

Ice Breaker

- Tell about a time when you got lost on a trip.
- What did you do to get “found” and go on your way?

The Artist:

- The Artist:
 - A group of people stood before a large painting in the halls of a museum. Each one had a theory as to the deeper message or meaning of the painting. One pulled out an art history book to make her case. Another disagreed, quoting his professor from college. Some based their arguments on the painting itself – the choice of colors, the composition of its various elements, etc. Others presumed to know what the artist was thinking when he painted the work.
 - An elderly man came down the hall. They didn’t notice his arrival in the heat of their arguments. What would he know about all this anyway? He was wearing a rumpled shirt, old baggy pants, and paint-splattered shoes. Couldn’t he have at least changed his clothes before coming to this illustrious museum?
 - The man spoke up. His voice was soft and thoughtful. He asked probing questions about various aspects of the painting, drawing out things the group had never thought about. He pointed out details with a loving look in his eye.
 - And then he was gone. He shuffled off down the hall. The members of the group looked at each other and resumed their argument, except for one individual. She hurried on after the man. When she caught up with him, she said: “You seem to know so much about the painting. It seems like it is almost a part of you. How do you know it so well?”
 - “I’m the artist who painted it. It lived in my imagination, it came to life in my studio, and it lives in my heart.”

Building the Highway in the Desert:

- Remember how Isaiah began this conversation?
 - It’s a new day! The LORD has forgiven us our sins and is coming to comfort and renew us.

- We are commanded to build a highway for the LORD in the desert areas of our lives.
- Building a highway in the desert for the LORD means choosing to walk with the Artist rather than hang out with the so-called experts in the museum.
 - He alone knows the measure of His world.
 - He alone understands how it works and where it's going.
 - He alone has the power to create and sustain His world.

Getting "unlost"

- It's in the desert that we finally get "unlost."
- The sense of control over our lives that we have in the more civilized places of our world is just an illusion – being lost without knowing it!
- In the desert these illusions (idols?) are stripped away, so that we can see them for what they are.
- And best of all, the LORD is there waiting for us, so we can see Him for who He is.
- When we do, we're lost no more.

Prayer: