

Series: Transition

July 23, 2017

Title: Chosen

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Text: Isaiah 41:1-10

“All Rise”

“Hey, Blue!”

There he crouches behind the plate, waiting to call the next pitch. In a few seconds he will be both hero and villain. One side will cheer for his expert call while the other will be screaming in shock and disbelief. He doesn't have a name or a number. He wears the same drab uniform every time he's on the field. The fans will likely call him “Ump,” and the players will call him, “Blue.”

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Baseball: what would it be without “Blue”? On October 6, 1845 an attorney named William R. Wheaton officiated the first recorded “modern” game of baseball. Until then, baseball had been a recreational activity. But with the advent of umpires the game became a competitive sport.

The umpires never swing a bat or catch a ball. And yet without them there literally is no game.

“All Rise!”

In the aftermath of the destruction of the Jewish state by the armies of the Babylonian Empire, Israel felt like they were in a game where either there was no umpire calling the balls and strikes, or the umpire was unjustly favoring the other side. She felt like “her way was hidden from the LORD,” and that God had deliberately refused to give her a day in court.

In response, God Himself speaks:

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Isaiah 41:1 NIV

“Be silent before me, you islands! Let the nations renew their strength!

"Let them come forward and speak; let us meet together at the place of judgment."

God has come as Judge to give Israel her day in court. The case is ready to be heard. The distant lands and surrounding nations are summoned to appear before the LORD of the whole world. It is a day of judgment; justice will be served.

Notice the taunt: "Let the nations renew their strength!" Isaiah has just reminded Israel that they who hope in the LORD "shall renew their strength." Now the LORD Himself uses the same expression as a challenge to the unbelieving and hostile nations: Let's see what you can do on your own!

Judgment in the here and now:

One more thing to notice here: This courtroom scene is happening in the middle of human events. It is not something that will happen at the end of time. No, the Judge of the world is in the house, rendering judgment in the here and now.

In a baseball game, the umpire is the Judge. He renders judgment *during the game, not after it*. Instead of having the players play the whole game, and then have the umpire decide who won, the umpire is right there *in the middle of the game*. The judge renders a decision with each pitch and each swing of the bat.

And that's what God is saying He is doing for Israel: He is calling the balls and strikes as the game progresses. He did so for Israel, and He does the same for you and me.

The Judge is in the house: All rise!

Who will be God?

God in the present:

Immediately we find ourselves in the courtroom with the LORD Himself presenting irrefutable evidence of His power and rule over His world:

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Isaiah 41:2-3 NIV

"Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow.

"He pursues them and moves on unscathed, by a path his feet have not traveled before."

The LORD is talking here about the things that had just recently happened in the middle-eastern world of Empires and kingdoms.

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The mighty Babylonian Empire that had destroyed Jerusalem and exiled her people, had been toppled by an upstart chieftain from the east named Cyrus. He had conquered the Median Empire, overwhelmed Babylon, and now ruled from Turkey to India.

The LORD asks, "Who stirred up one from the east? Who caused this unknown ruler's rise to such power?" The assembled political powers had their heads in silence. Only God could cause such a stupendous turn of events – one that paved the way for the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem!

Here is the LORD, not distant and uninvolved, but actively present in human events. The umpire is behind the plate. There is hope for the future!

God and eternity:

Now the prosecution offers its second argument:

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Isaiah 41:4 NIV

"Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning?"

"I, the LORD – with the first of them and with the last – I am he."

The great Creator God, the LORD, has taken the stand and addresses the nations and Israel. The scope of His power and wisdom is eternal. This is not His first rodeo; this is not the umpire's first time behind the plate. He has been ruling His world since it began.

Who will be God?

The core issue to be decided in this judgment scene is the answer to the question: "Who will be God?"

Isaiah explains that the nations have invested in false, idolatrous human structures:

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Isaiah 41:5-7 NIV

The islands have seen it and fear; the ends of the earth tremble. They approach and come forward; they help each other and say to their companions, "Be strong!"

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The metalworker encourages the goldsmith, and the one who smooths with the hammer spurs on the one who strikes the anvil. One says of the welding, "It is good." The other nails down the idol so it will not topple.

There is no escaping the grandeur and power of God and His Creation. But that still begs the question: "Will this Creator God be my God? Or will I make my own god?"

The islands and the surrounding nations have chosen to band together to try and stabilize their world by their own strength. They have put their faith and hope in false gods – structures and deities of their own making. Instead of honoring the world's Creator, they have attempted to remake the world on their own. They look at their false god and say: "It is good."

But the only stability they can create is that of immobility. The LORD appears any and everywhere. He is LORD of Time itself. Their little gods have to be nailed to the floor so they won't topple.

In an insecure and unstable world we face the same question: Who will be God? Will I create my own security out of little, false gods? Or will I put my trust in the Great Creator God, the LORD of heaven and earth?

Chosen

Servant:

Israel complained that her case had been overlooked by the Judge of the world. God has replied by summoning the political powers of the age to stand before the bench and give account of themselves.

Now He addresses Israel with these words:

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Isaiah 41:8-9 NIV

"But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you."

This is Israel's story: God found a pagan in precisely one of those faraway kingdoms that have been such a problem for Israel in the present day. He called a man named Abram to take a faith journey to Canaan, the Promised Land. He gave him a new name: Abraham, "Father of many peoples."

God promised that He would bless all the nations of the world through Abraham and his descendants. In other words, they would be God's servants in restoring God's Creation.

Servant, chosen, called from the farthest corners of the earth. This is Israel's story and destiny. God hasn't forgotten. It may look like the world is upside down, but God has not taken back His promise or changed His plan!

"I am your God"

Instead of being a God who lost sight of Israel's terrible journey or who decided to withhold justice, God says:

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Isaiah 41:10 NIV

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God."

"I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

The God who called Abraham to be His friend so long ago is calling to Abraham's children right now: *"I am with you. I am your God. I will strengthen and help you. I will uphold you."*

To Israel it looked like all of God's promises were null and void. God Himself was nowhere to be found. But God was there all along, working in and through the very events that seemed so out of control.

Here for you!

And the same is true for you and me right now. The umpire is behind the plate. He is still calling the balls and strikes, what's foul and fair, who's safe and who's out. So don't listen to the yells from the stands or the ranting and raving in the dugout. Just watch the ump. God is in control.

He has promised to help us every step of the way. Like David, we can say:

Psalm 31:22 NIV

In my alarm I said, "I am cut off from your sight!" Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help.

Psalm 33:20 NIV

We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.

Psalm 28:7 NIV

The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him.