

None Missing

Isaiah 40:21-31

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First Presbyterian, Luling

As you know, I've recently had a very short career as a horse feeder. If I want to get formal, I guess I'll list it on my resume as "stable hand." I was helping out someone who has become a friend, and I was happy to do so. The total tally of animals at her place is 11 mini horses, one full size horse, two llamas, four outdoor cats, two indoor dogs, and one guinea. She continued to feed the dogs, and I can only assume the guinea takes care of itself. My volunteer partner and I quickly developed a routine, and we got pretty efficient, which was nice on days when the weather was yucky, or one of us had to get somewhere else. I took care of the big barn's animals. Eight horses and one llama got feed and then hay. One horse, who has medical issues, got feed and her hay soaked in water. Anywhere from 1 to 3 cats got cat food. Check everyone's water. Muck out stalls. And done. Every day, I could not help myself. I counted horses. Nine horses in my area, and the one llama. Were they all there? Seven of the nine are all white, so it's easy to get them mixed up. Even if they escaped, there are two or three levels of fences before they would get off her property, but I still felt responsible. I counted them every time. And every time, they were all present and accounted for. None missing.

I come by this honestly. In the first church where I did youth ministry, there had been an unfortunate incident where a young person got left behind on a trip. Thankfully the young person was resourceful and called a relative on a pay phone. But that left a legacy in that youth group that we counted kids constantly. On any kind of outing, on a regular Sunday morning. At any point, we knew exactly how many youth were in attendance, so we could make sure none were missing. I guess that's not ever left me, and transfers easily to livestock.

Nine horses are countable. A van full of teenagers is countable. In several places, the Bible uses the comparison of God counting the stars in the sky to say that God knows and cares for each one of us. God created the stars in Genesis. God promises Abraham that his descendants will be more than the grains of sand on the earth, and more than the stars in the sky. Psalm 147, which was our call to worship, though we didn't use these verses, puts in parallel the stars in the sky and the outcasts of Israel. Listen to these few verses: "The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and

binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.” (Psalm 147:2-4). The outcasts of Israel, those who have been exiled far away from home, the Lord gathers and heals them. Even if there were as many of them as there are stars, the Lord would know each of their names.

So by the time we get to Isaiah, this comparison of people and stars is well established. This passage is full of good verses and comforting imagery, and it is indeed meant to be a comfort to the exiled Israelites, and those who were returning to the promised land after an absence of at least a generation. “Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.” (Isaiah 40:26).

Not only has God created all the stars, but God has numbered them and counted them, and named them. None is missing.

You know I had to google the answer to this question. Exactly how many stars are there in the universe? According to astronomy.com, there are 200 billion trillion stars in the universe. That sounds like a made up number to me, but it’s a 2 with 23 zeros after it. I’ve been in awe myself, on a few occasions when I’ve been able to see the Milky Way. I’ve wondered at the immensity of the universe when those NASA telescopes send back pictures. I’m fairly sure that a human being can’t even count the stars, but who am I to question astronomy.com? 200 billion trillion is a lot of stars. More than grains of sand on the earth, again according to the internet. And more than the number of people who have ever lived, which is 117 billion, according to something called the population reference bureau. More stars than sand. More stars than people. And yet God knows each star and calls them by name.

That comparison is on purpose. If God knows and counts and names even each star, as many of them as there are, then of course God is capable—more than capable—of knowing and counting and naming, and keeping track of the humans. God is more than capable of making sure none of the humans are missing as they return to the Promised Land. God is more than capable of making sure none of the humans are missing, period. God’s not going to lose track of any of us.

We look around this room, around this zoom screen, and we believe that some really are missing. People aren’t here. People we think ought to be here. If none are missing, then where are they this morning? I do think, if we are followers of a God who makes sure none are missing, then we are called to welcome and

invite and find those who might be a part of our number. But just because those people are missing to us, we shouldn't assume that they are missing to God.

God knows them, just like God knows us. God hasn't lost track of them. None are missing. God knows where they are, loves them, counts them, includes them. God knows us, knows where we are, loves us, counts us, includes us. In God's world, none are missing, not even if there were 200 billion trillion of us. None are missing.