

Sermon – “Our Strength Renewed”

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39

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Our first Scripture reading is Isaiah 40:21-31. This chapter begins “Second Isaiah” which is also referred to as the “Book of Consolation to Israel.” Written during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, it is a time of utter despair for the Israelites who believe God has abandoned them. In an effort to comfort the people, Second Isaiah seeks to give a new perspective and to broaden their theology and understanding of Yahweh, introducing a new theology. Hear now, God’s Holy Word.

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? 22 It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; 23 who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. 24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when God blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. 25 To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. 26 Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? God who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by names because God is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing. 27 Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”? 28 Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; God’s understanding is unsearchable. 29 God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. Amen.*

Our second reading, Mark 1:29-39, reveals the rhythm of a day in Christ’s life as he begins his ministry. Mark intentionally places these stories together to emphasize the divine authority with which Jesus teaches and heals. We begin to get the picture of a man whose strength and direction comes from within, who waits for God and is renewed in prayer. Hear now the Word of God.

*As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. 32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to Jesus all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. 35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” 38 Jesus answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” 39 And Jesus went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “Our Strength Renewed”

*Text: but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles...*  
*Isaiah 40:31a*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, whose understanding is unsearchable, give us the wisdom to recognize that you are beyond our personal experience, and when we are weary and carrying heavy burdens, give us the confidence to wait for you that our strength may be renewed. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Last Friday the Ruth and Naomi Circle of Presbyterian Women hosted a small gathering at “Let’s Make Dinner” to prepare meals which will be brought to members during times of loss, following hospitalizations, and through ongoing treatment. This meal ministry is being initiated by the Congregational Care Committee of the Board of Deacons. It is our hope that this small act of kindness will provide sustenance as well as nourishment to friends who are weary and in need of renewed strength.

One of the recipes we prepared was meatloaf and potatoes. My favorite meatloaf recipe I learned from a petite Italian woman named Rose who directed me to a particular grocery store on the Hill in St. Louis for the necessary ingredients. Rose fell in love with an American soldier during World War II and moved to Belleville, Illinois to marry Carl Baldwin. Carl was a respected journalist with the Post-Dispatch Newspaper who covered crime and corruption on the eastside and who earned a reputation for sending wrongdoers to prison. After 48 years as a newspaperman, Carl retired to become a historian, focusing on southwestern Illinois and producing two prize-winning books. The last book Carl wrote was a gift to the congregation I served on the occasion of their Sesquicentennial Anniversary. He chose to title the book “Our Strength Renewed.”

Ironically, I remember that year of celebration as a difficult one. The pastor of thirty-eight years and my mentor, the Reverend Dr. Fred Cornell, had just retired. There was grief and uncertainty about the future. In giving this congregation its history, Carl gave them the gift of perspective. To look back on the vicissitudes... the ups and downs of one hundred fifty years strengthened this congregation for the immediate change of that year.

There is renewal, there is reassurance in looking beyond one’s immediate situation whether we look back on our history, whether we look up to the stars, as Isaiah encourages, or whether we have the panoramic view of a soaring eagle. When we have the strength to “rise above” our personal experience and to look at the world from another point of view... from a broader point of view... we often experience growth and renewed strength.

This, in fact, is what Isaiah challenges the Israelites to do at one of their lowest times in history. As exiles in a foreign land, the social setting in Isaiah chapter 40, is one of total despair and nihilism. They were an abandoned, despairing people who believed what they once believed was meaningless.

Isaiah seems to respect where they are and proceeds gently to remind the Israelites that God is more than the sum total of their personal journey. Isaiah calls into question their conclusions about God, based solely on their experience.

*“Such experiential forms of faith are characterized as theologies of reward and punishment.”* according to Dr. Marion Soards of Louisville Theological Seminary. *“Central to this is the belief that there is an inherent relationship between action and its outcome... This affirms the ethical nature of life which is positive, however it is also a dangerous belief.”*

The Babylonian exile highlights this danger. The people believed they lost their land because of their unfaithfulness. It was a punishment from God. Part of their hopelessness was feeling unworthy of God’s salvation, and so the people lamented in their worship.

*“My way is hidden from the Lord,  
and my right is disregarded by my God.”*

Sincere as these words may be, Isaiah sees in them a faith that cannot grasp God acting in the world beyond the boundaries of their community’s experience. Isaiah seeks to heal the short-sidedness of such a belief by widening their perspective.

*“Have you not known? Have you not heard?”*

Isaiah reminds the Israelites and us of the creative powers of Yahweh, the incomprehensible, incomparable nature of God. He reminds us that humans cannot interact on the same level of God and invites us to take courage, to wait, knowing that the manifestation of God is more than our individual experience, the nature of God is beyond our understanding, and the salvation of God is dependent on God’s character rather than our actions.

Some would say that this is a difficult message to preach today, because most of our popular theology is based on personal experiences. If that is indeed the case, then this message is necessary to preach today.

I am not saying that our personal experiences of faith are unimportant. Quite the contrary. They are essential... however, a sustaining faith must move beyond our personal experience. Who among us can escape tragedy or misfortune in a lifetime? Whether it is a natural disaster, a war, or a depressed economy... whether it is the loss of a loved one or a betrayal. Who among us can escape illness? We watch our loved ones persevere or we persevere ourselves with uninvited, intrusive diseases that are no making of our own.

It is at these times in our lives, times of despair, times of inequity, when our faith calls us beyond our personal experience; when we realize that there is not a cause and effect relationship to every episode in life. It is at times like these that the theology of reward and punishment breaks down... and thank God!

*For even youths will faint and be weary. And the young will fall exhausted.*

If we are going to mount up with wings like eagles. If we are going to run with consistency and walk with courage, our faith calls us to wait for the Creator God who is more than the sum total of our personal experience. Our faith calls us to hope in the character of the God whose understanding is unsearchable, who joined us in our humanity, and who understands our personal experience; the God who speaks tenderly to us,

*“Come unto me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”*

Our strength renewed...thanks be to God. Amen.

