

Sermon – “Run and Not Be Weary”
Scripture Readings – Isaiah 40:28-31, Mark 1:29-39
Sunday, January 28, 2024
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Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 40:28-31. Isaiah reminds God’s people of their source of strength, the One who has created the universe. Many scholars believe this writing, which introduces Second Isaiah, was written in the sixth century BCE, when the people of Judah were living in exile following the Babylonian conquest. The temple and Jerusalem had been destroyed. It is easy to imagine the people’s discouragement and weariness. The prophet reminds them of God’s power to restore and liberate and of God’s desire to renew their strength. This is the Word of God.

*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.
God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted, 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 scripture reading, Mark 1:29-39, introduces us to the rhythm of a day in Christ’s life as he begins his ministry. We get a glimpse of One whose strength and direction comes from within, one who is able to run and not be weary, One who balances service with solitude and 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. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sunset, they brought to Jesus all who were sick or possessed by demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons, and Jesus would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there Jesus prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found Jesus, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” 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.” And Jesus went throughout all Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. Amen.

The title of the sermon “Run and Not Be Weary”

The text: “...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...” Isaiah 40:31a

Let us pray. Creator God, whose understanding is unsearchable, we thank you for the prophet, Isaiah and for all the people in our lives who give us the courage to wait, to hope, to run and not be weary. May the words of my mouth and meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

We all have had those moments in our lives when we are weary and exhausted, and we wonder how we got to where we are and if we have the strength to put one foot in front of the other. Running is a metaphor for the living of our lives. The author of Hebrews writes: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.* At today’s annual meeting of the congregation, we will celebrate Westminster’s great cloud of witnesses and give thanks for all who run the race of ministry before us with perseverance, putting one foot in front of the other and leading in love.

I have always had a deep appreciation and respect for the discipline and perseverance which are a part of running, enriched when I met Peter, who was a state two-mile runner up in high school and ran cross country and track at Yale. Perhaps that is why running is such a great metaphor for the living of one’s life. Discipline and perseverance build our character and give us the strength to hold on when there is nothing left within us, except the will which says to us “hold on!” to quote a line from Kipling’s beloved poem “If.”

The summer of 2011 Peter, Paul and I traveled through France and Geneva during a sabbatical I received following fifteen years at Webster Groves Presbyterian Church. Father and son morning runs became an important part of the rhythm of our days. They ran through the streets of Paris and Geneva, and they ran through the hills and valleys of Taize. On our journey, a story of refuge and hospitality was unfolding, giving us a new perspective and deeper appreciation for renewed strength in the history of Europe, for those who kept running, though weary and exhausted; and for the faithful who worked together to empower the faint, to strengthen the powerless, and to overcome evil with good.

The stories of courage and compassion in these cities were interwoven. Geneva and the Taize Community both became places of refuge for those oppressed in the power struggles of nations and religions. Geneva, under John Calvin’s leadership, became a safe haven for persecuted and exhausted Protestants who fled France during the mid-sixteenth century and again in the seventeenth century when the Edict of Nantes which decreed religious tolerance was revoked. The Taize Community, founded in 1940 by Brother Roger Schultz, a Swiss Protestant, began as a place of refuge for the weary Jews fleeing for their life in France during World War II.

Stories of faith and courage need to be remembered because when we are weary, we sometimes forget and lose perspective. This is what happened to the Hebrew people during long days in a strange land, mourning the loss of the life that sustained them in Jerusalem. When Isaiah reminded them of who their God was, he was calling to their memory what they already knew but had forgotten.

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?*

It is God who sits above the circle of the earth. Do not forget! It is God who is the Creator of the ends of the earth. Do not forget! It is God who gives power to the faint and who renews the strength of the weary. Do not forget!

In reminding us of who God is, Isaiah also reminds us of the mutuality between God's providence and God's compassion. God is both powerful and understanding. The poem moves from the cosmic to the personal. When we are weary, let us not forget the God who created the ends of the earth is the God who bends down to lift infants. When we are exhausted, let us not forget the God who does not grow faint is the God who joined us in our humanity in Jesus Christ to share the weariness that is ours, and who waited, and hoped and mounted up with wings like eagles, conquering death by dying on a cross.

I would like to close with a poignant experience Peter, Paul and I shared in Paris during that sabbatical. The guys had made their morning run, and the three of us toured Saint Chapel and the Notre Dame Cathedral, which were beautiful and impressive as expected. A Rick Steves' Paris Tour book suggested we visit the Deportation Memorial, located behind the Cathedral. We walked as directed in the book...along the side of the cathedral past a lovely park; however, we could not see any sign of a memorial. We stopped to ask some folks, and thanks to Peter's French, we eventually found an obscure landmark at the site of a former morgue, underneath which was the underground memorial.

This memorial to the 200,000 French victims of the Nazi concentration camps draws one into their experience. France was quickly overrun by Nazi Germany, and Paris spent the war years 1940-1945 under Nazi occupation. Jews and dissidents were routinely rounded up and deported—many never returned.

A man opened a gate as we approached, and we found ourselves looking down a long staircase. We were the only ones at the memorial. As we descended the steps, the city disappeared. Surrounded by walls, we walked into the world of the prisoner. Like them, the only freedom was the view of the sky. Then we entered the dark, single-file chamber. Inside on the floor was a circular plaque which read "*They went to the end of the earth and did not return.*" The hallway stretching in front of us was lined with 200,000 lighted crystals, one for each French citizen who died. Flickering at the far end was the eternal flame of hope. The tomb of the unknown deportee was at our feet. We remained outside in the open area for some time without speaking. It was a way of holding onto this moment of honoring the weary and broken hearted who persevered unspeakable loss in the face of evil. Above the exit as we walked out together, written in French: *Forgive, but never forget.*

The three of us walked back to the park behind Notre Dame. None of us wanted to be the first to break the silence, which spoke volumes. We noticed there was a choir of young people from the states getting ready to sing so we sat down on a park bench, happy for the distraction. The orchestra began to play and we immediately recognized Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," a secular song which had come to have special meaning for our family, a song which speaks of the weariness and joy that are a part of the race we run together and a song that expresses awe and wonder to the God who renews our strength, in the rhythm of waiting and running along the way. We sat on that park bench and listened to the minor and major notes of praise. This poignant moment filled our hearts with sadness, hope, reverence, and gratitude all at the same time, reminding us that only through the grace of God can we run and not be weary. Amen.