“Fatigue and Faith”

a sermon by

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Now we will hear from the prophet Isaiah chapter 40 verses 21-31. "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? 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; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? Says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes (to the stars) 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. 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"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He 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."

For those of you who know him, you know that my husband is not one to mince words. He was quite possibly the inspiration for the phrase 'delivering a hard word of truth in love' and is particularly good with the hard truth part. And so it comes as no surprise that as we were finishing- yes, finishing- our Christmas shopping this past weekend, I had to glance over my shoulder to see if there were any children within earshot as we rounded a corner of the mall only to be met by Jolly 'Ole Saint Nick ho, ho, ho-ing away in a throne at the base of an enormous decorated Christmas tree. My husband's comments definitely captured the resounding sentiment we both felt which was, to paraphrase, 'you've got to be kidding me.' But it is not as if we were so high and holy either. After all, can you really say that you have risen above the commercial machine and vapid consumerism that has become the driving force behind the holiday season when you yourself have finished your Christmas shopping 6 weeks in advance? Oh yea, we're just as guilty as the Southpark Mall. It seems like the holidays come earlier and earlier every year, though Advent still remains fixed on the calendar two weeks from now. And my husband and I ended up getting caught up in that very absurd momentum of the season that we were trying to avoid.

For the ministers here, we unofficially kick off the season the first week in October when our worship service information for the Advent booklet that we publish is due. Whereas it used to be criminal to even think of it before the Macy's Day parade, now nothing says Christmas spirit like a looming deadline after Labor Day. What my husband and I felt this weekend and what is so incredible to me is not only the way we have taken something so simple and wonderful as Christmas and piled up all this extra exhausting pressure on it at work, at home, at church even, and in our families, but we have somehow now managed to double the amount of time that we feel that pressure. And with the quickened pulse of the Fall months and the general bustle of gearing up for the holidays, you can practically forget about spiritual preparation for the season- that's right, not meal preparation- Spiritual preparation. It's just so easy to get lost in the shuffle and it takes too much energy to try and figure out how to do otherwise. And, on a more serious note, besides all of this, a lot of people have been staring at their feet beside a lot of bedsides

lately. And it seems that when the winds change and the air turns cool and smells of leaves and cinnamon, while the lights and displays are being constructed around us, there so often emerges a hole within that cannot be filled with all the bows and ribbon and nostalgia in the world. Not one to mince words myself, though I'm not nearly as deadly accurate as my husband, I'd call that hole 'fatigue.' Because as energizing as this season can be, we sure can get awfully tired too, can't we? Lose sight of what all this excitement is supposed to be about because we are tired in the body. Spent in the soul. Exhausted in the brain from all that is left still undone at the end of the day. These days nothing says the Christmas season like fatigue.

Isaiah's audience was pretty tired too. They had exile fatigue. At the time of his writing the people of Israel had only begun their many years of exile and already they were beginning the first of a series of long laments to their God. It seems the disruption of dislocation and trauma of trial left them with an exhaustion that translated itself, as it so often does, into spiritual terms, "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"? Abandonment and isolation become the predominant spiritual by-products of their weariness with their journey and the body becomes dejected. Surely God has turned his holy face from us. We've been away from home for so long and we are weary. No wonder Jesus says, "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." It would seem this weariness that comes so easily is simply a part of the human condition. Exhaustion feels like exile, and exile is exhausting. And it is not long before we begin to lose sight of what it is that we, as a people of faith, are supposed to be all about. It is not long before we begin to lose our strength, our way, and our hope.

It is in this context that Isaiah interjects a word of hope to remind Israel of that which they had forgotten about their God. "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 ...who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in ... Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He (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." The God of the cosmos, who calls all things into being, is not so caught up in his creation that he doesn't know each and every being in it by name. He follows their life's story and never tires of the tale. "He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable." God never forgets us. It is we who forget him. It's inevitable. In the bustle, in the rush, in the pressure and plans, in the grappling and the grief- fatigue and the subsequent forgetting of the presence and promises of God is inevitable. "Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted ..." But even when we stray from his promises there is a promise built in. When we wander too far off, when we feel like we are growing weary and fragile and could at any moment fall and fall hard, Isaiah says oh, but those who wait for the Lord...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."

'They shall mount up with wings like eagles.' Do you know what this actually means? To mount up? I didn't either until I stumbled across a description several months ago in a sermon preached by Tom Tewell. You know how baby birds learn to fly - they are booted out of the nest and plummet to the ground until their flailing stirs some natural instincts and their little wings get to work. I've had close encounters with these young fliers - on a beautiful Saturday afternoon sitting on my parent's front porch, we realized a mamma bird was pushing out her little ones for

the first time and we were witnessing a beautiful act of nature. Well, it wasn't so tranquil-flapping like mad and flying about erratically, they swooped through the porch dive-bombing us and missing our heads by just about a foot or two before they landed with a crash in the bushes on the other side of the yard. Some graceful act of nature! But eagles are different. When it is time for the baby eagles to be on their way, the mom pushes them out of the nest, much to their surprise, and they start falling like a rock to the ground. But before they hit bottom, the mother eagle swoops down and catches them and carries them back up to the nest. The next day, the ritual is repeated. But the final fateful day the mother eagle pushes them out of the nest, but this time does not follow after them. She watches them fall because, as Tom puts it, "she wants them to learn the lesson they were created for. She wants them to learn to fly...And as that little baby eagle is falling he suddenly makes a phenomenal discovery. Those little appendages on the side are purposeful. They are wings. Although the baby eagle doesn't really know how to use them he knows he has to do something. Then all of a sudden the wind catches one of the wings and the baby eagle starts to fly and soar. Eagles don't really flap their wings, they mount, they soar, they catch the wind currents and they go higher and higher without much effort."[1] They just reach out and the wind catches them. Who knew that in the fear of falling there would be a flight lesson? "He 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 ..."

It is a great work of faith not to misinterpret our own fatigue as a lack of God's faithfulness and presence but rather to recall that never before in the history of God's covenant with the people has their weakness and exile and exhaustion ever been an obstacle to God's grace. And if we don't always feel it, at the very least we can know it in our heads that that grace is waiting to catch us, to buoy our feeble wings and help us to soar. So when Santa Claus catches you off guard and the holiday season feels like it is bearing down like a freight train, when the items on your planner and the Christmas 'to do' list only continue to grow or you start to wonder for a lot of reasons how you are even going to make it through these days let alone find meaning in them; know that we cannot make it on our own in the wilderness of our fatigue. And we don't have to. Because it is not our own strength that we have to rely on. It's God's. It looks like a long way down when you are falling, but you don't have to reach the bottom. You just have to reach out. Reach out in the only way you know how, and be surprised by where the unseen but ever present currents of God's love will take you. Reach out and allow yourself to catch and be caught by the powerful winds of the Spirit that surround this season and recall again exactly what these coming days of Advent are all about because it is the blessing born in this season that saved your soul. Born so we will wander as a people in exile no more. This is the lesson we were created for. This is faith. "Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He 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.

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[1]As described by Dr. Tom Tewell in a sermon, "*The 29th Chapter of the Book of Acts,*" preached on 6/29/03 at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City.