

WORSHIP

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Strength for Weary People

The Reverend Pen Peery

Isaiah 40:21-41

In preparation for hearing God's word in Scripture, let me spend a little bit of time setting the context.

Our text today comes from the prophesy of Isaiah. Isaiah wrote to the people of Israel in what was one of the most tumultuous times in their history – which is saying a lot.

Scholars notice that there are three distinct parts to Isaiah.

The first section – spanning chapters 1-39 – addresses the ways that God's people have fallen short. Isaiah prophesies with words that sting and convict and warn about impending doom. It is during this time that Israel is defeated by the Babylonian army and the Temple – where it was thought God's presence resided – was destroyed. Many of those in Israel had to flee or were dispersed in what is called the Exile.

The third section of Isaiah sounds like a joyful homecoming. The exiles return. Hope is renewed.



The second part of Isaiah begins in the 40th chapter, where we pick up our reading today. The tenor and tone of this part of Isaiah is one of comfort. Isaiah writes to support God's people who are navigating a sorrowful and disorienting time. Instead of confrontation, Isaiah writes to encourage; to help God's people hold onto God's promises as they pass their days in a strange and foreign land and without the routines they had learned to count on.

As we prepare to hear God's word, let us first come together in prayer...

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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 he 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 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.

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As an East Mecklenburg Eagle, before every cross-country, indoor track, and outdoor track meet in high school, my coach – Larry McAfee – would have us get down on one knee and recite the last verse we just heard:

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

They shall mount up with wings like Eagles.

They shall run and not be weary...

We left off the last line – I don't think Coach wanted any of us thinking about walking.

There's a reason that Bible uses running as a metaphor for the endurance that faith requires. Running – and especially, racing – forces you to the edge of exhaustion and then demands a little more. When you can push through it – the reward is unbelievably gratifying. But it doesn't always work out that way. I remember my last meet of my senior year. The 4A outdoor track state championship in Chapel Hill. Our two-mile relay team was competitive that



season. There was only one school who had gotten the best of us that season, North Mecklenburg, and they were lined up next to us at the start. It was a close race throughout. One of our legs would pull ahead, and then one of North Meck's legs would close the gap. When our third leg handed off the baton to our anchor, it was a dead-heat. The anchor for North Meck was one of my rivals. He pulled out ahead...and then, with a little less than one lap to go...he started to slow down. Then he started walking. Then his muscles started to lock up. He had gone into oxygen debt...he had pushed himself beyond the limit. He made it across the finish line – but he came in dead last. It's been 26 years – and it is still painful for me to think about.

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I can't hear this morning's Scripture without thinking about my East Meck days. And I can't help but hear Isaiah's encouragement for weary people to put their trust in God and not think that the prophet has been reading our mail.

We started this race almost a year ago.

I remember – at first – being strangely invigorated. There was so much to do. So many plans to adjust. So much to learn.

Then days turned into weeks and week into months.

And now – here we are – almost a year later – with more of the race still ahead of us.

How many times over the last year, I wonder, have we felt like my old North Meck rival?



Dragging ourselves forward.

Drawing from depleted reserves to take one more step.

Moving toward a finish that seems farther and farther away.

We've invested huge energy in overcoming the logistical hurdles the virus presented. Drive-by birthday parties. Orchestrated send-offs for friends seeking cancer treatment. Creative approaches to family holidays and vacations.

Backyard weddings and funerals.

Now – the next birthday is coming up.

The one-year wedding anniversary celebration that is supposed to be so different feels too familiar.

The strategies we've employed to keep the isolation and grief at bay aren't working like they used to.

We've willed ourselves to this point – poured ourselves into making it here – and we face a future where more energy will be required.

From a mental health perspective, we've practiced patience. We've tried to be gentle toward one another and with ourselves. We know how many – and how different – the challenges are that we all face in the various chapters of our lives: older adults in retirement homes, parents and kids, singles on their own. But – eventually – the patience wears thin. The frustration builds. And it gets channeled at our leaders – whose decisions (or indecision) push us over the edge.



And it gets channeled toward those closest to us – because they are always there.
And it gets channeled inwardly – where we question our own choices...and value...
and worth.

From a community standpoint, we've tried to address the symptoms that have surfaced as a result of the pandemic – with stimulus payments, and eviction moratoriums, and a three-fold increase in the amount of food we give away to those who are hungry. But – in many ways – the virus has revealed what is the disease we face: a growing inequality that is going to be harder to address as a result of what we've been living through.

It's one thing to try to summon the energy to navigate these kinds of things for a week. But to face this when we wake up every day for a better part of a year... well, it can make us want to stay in the bed. Just go through the motions. Stop investing our heart. Throw up our hands.

Because we are weary.

We realize that we have been dislocated.

We have left behind the familiar.

We are strangers in a foreign land.

It is the experience of exile.

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For God's people, the great worry about living in exile is that they would forget the cadences of home. The worry was that people would lose their identity.



The issue wasn't about change, or wanting to recapture exactly how things used to be.

It was about forgetting who and whose they were – as God's people.

What made them distinctive.

What promises they could trust.

And when you are absorbed in a predicament – or an environment – that moves past the temporary to the familiar...it can be easy to forget.

In today's Scripture, the prophet Isaiah writes to a people who were exhausted from their journey; he writes to a people who were down on themselves and their situation – and who were at risk of letting go of the promise and the hope that had defined them as God's own. To get their attention, Isaiah gave them some perspective. He lifted the people's gaze from the immediate – to the cosmic.

I actually took a page out of Isaiah's book in the past few months with my own children. Over the past year, one parenting strategy that I have used – not one that I am especially proud of – is to promise that we could all watch a YouTube video if everyone ate a good meal. I would be intentional about choosing videos that located us in a different space – beyond the four walls and the yard that had



become our own prison. Clean plates translated into videos about the world's tallest roller-coasters, or the scariest sharks, or the fastest animals. But there was one video that I remember the kids wanted to watch over and over again.

It began with a picture of a young woman lying in a grassy field. Then the camera began to zoom out. You could see that the field the woman had been in was somewhere in California. Then, as you zoomed out of the earth's atmosphere, you could see the familiar outline of the green and brown continents framed against the blue ocean. Then you zipped past the moon and the planets of our solar system. Then you saw the wisps of the Milky Way. Then – how many solar systems are in our galaxy. And the untold number of galaxies that comprise the universe – whose boundaries we cannot know.

And then...the camera started to zoom back in. Retracing the steps through the galaxies and planets. Rushing toward that blue and green planet that is so familiar. Back through the atmosphere and face to face with the young woman who had been looking up at the sun.

“Have you not known?” Isaiah asks.

“Have you not heard?”

“Has it not been told you since the beginning?”

“Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?”



The God who flung the moon and the stars.
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain.
Who outmatches anyone or anything that we believe has power.
Whose understanding is unsearchable.

That God does not grow weary – even when we do.
And it is in that God’s image that we are made.
And in whose presence we draw strength. Not because we dig deep – and
summon that strength ourselves. (Because there are limits beyond which we
cannot go.)

No, Isaiah encourages the weary to remember...and wait for...and trust in the God
whose promises are sure – even when the times we are living in are not.

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Over the past year, the pandemic that has dislocated us from what was familiar
has worn us out and exposed a number of our vulnerabilities.
Perhaps the hardest one for us to admit – because we spent so much time trying
to convince ourselves otherwise – is that if we just try harder, push faster, and
think better we can fix whatever the problem is that ails us.
That is a dangerous road to walk.
It doesn’t lead to life.
It leads to exhaustion.



And it makes it easier to forget the good news that – ultimately, saves us:

That we are more than ourselves.

We are more than the problems we face.

We are more than solutions we can...or cannot...figure out.

No, we are connected – one to another.

We belong – one to another.

And to God in Jesus Christ – whose weakness and vulnerability was actually strength.

And whose path – while difficult – leads toward home.

May God give us strength for the journey.

Amen.

