

Isaiah 40:21-31 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²¹ 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 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;

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 he 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?

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.

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.

He does not faint or grow weary;

his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He 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.

“Strength for the Weary”

Isaiah chapter 40 is one of the great passages of Scripture. It begins with these words, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says the Lord.” Those words are well known to us not only from Scripture but also from their use in Handel’s Messiah. In fact, Handel uses several phrases from this passage in writing music about God’s promised Savior. But today we jump to the end of the passage where Isaiah says in verses 30 and 31, “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.”

Isaiah was writing to the Hebrew exiles in Babylon. They had been there for a couple of generations. Back home in Jerusalem the temple had been demolished. Their houses lay in ruins. The people were depressed and apathetic. Optimism was in short supply. God was preparing a highway in the desert, in order to bring the people home, but they doubted they would have the strength to make the journey. Even young people who should have been eager for the adventure were disheartened. “Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted.” It is a sad picture indeed, a picture of an exhausted and weary people.

Isn’t that how many of us feel today? I’ve been surprised at how weary I sometimes feel. Like most of you, I haven’t been as active as I usually am, and sometimes I even sleep in a little more than usual. Some days I don’t even set the alarm. But I still seem to be feeling quite tired. Others say they feel the same way. And the weariness we feel is not really a physical weariness. It’s a spiritual and mental weariness. The evening news weighs heavily on our minds and spirits. We are saddened by the situation in our long-term care homes, where many have fallen ill or died. And we wonder how long all this will go on? How long will the distancing rules be in place? How long before businesses open again? What will the summer bring? Will it be 2021 before we can go to our cottages and travel freely around the country? We know the economic fall-out from all this will be severe and we may worry about our personal finances. And on top of all this we heard that terrible news from Nova Scotia. Signs of light and hope are sometimes hard to discern. One day things seem to be looking up; the next day is full of gloom and doom. We feel we have lost control and in many ways we really have. We feel displaced, almost like exiles in a strange land.

There was once a mistake in a newspaper headline. It read “Bridge Collapses – Mental Fatigue Suspected.” Of course, what the headline meant to say was “Bridge Collapses – Metal Fatigue Suspected.” But that’s what we’re suffering from these days – mental fatigue. It’s not our bodies, but our minds and spirits that are overloaded. Like the ancient Hebrew exiles, we have become weary and exhausted. So this a time to hear the words of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah. These words are for us, too. “They 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.”

Now these great words contain both an invitation and a promise. As we act on the invitation we receive what God promises.

First, the invitation. “They who wait upon the Lord...”

Now the invitation to wait may not be especially welcome these days. Our patience may be running low. Yes, we are doing what we can to stay safe and to look after ourselves and one another. All that is good. But mainly we are waiting rather impatiently until these dark days have passed and we can get back to some degree of normal life. And yet there is great value in waiting upon God. And so we are invited to, “Wait upon the Lord.” That means spending time in God’s presence and in his word just as we are doing now.

When life is smooth and kind we tend to be self-sufficient, depending on ourselves and our own resources. But these times remind us of our dependence on God. In our weariness and exhaustion, we learn that our own human resources are not sufficient; that we really need God. So we can use these days to wait upon God, even more than usual, seeking his truth in the word and his presence in prayer and worship. We are invited to wait upon God with a sense of dependence. It is an invitation given by Jesus himself, “Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavily burdened and I will give you rest.”

And Jesus teaches that the God on whom we wait has drawn very near to us. The everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth has made himself known as the Father who knows and loves and cares for each one of us. God does not faint or grow weary. So as the Psalmist says, “Wait on the Lord, ‘be of good courage, and He will strengthen your heart, wait I say, on the Lord.” And through participating in this act of worship we have accepted God’s invitation to wait upon him.

Now comes the promise for those who wait upon the Lord. “The Lord... shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” And God fulfilled that promise for the Hebrew exiles, strengthening them to walk along the wilderness highway back home again; then strengthening them yet again for the rebuilding of the nation and the Temple.

Isaiah tells us, "God is great in strength, mighty in power..." God pours out his strength and power for his people and always in love. So right now a great exchange is taking place as we wait upon God. God is taking our weariness upon himself and giving us his strength.

An eagle soars over the countryside, seeing with a wide and long perspective. So God is strengthening us to mount up as eagles. That is what we need today, to see beyond the current struggles and to keep a longer view in mind, remembering the great future God has prepared for his people and his whole creation. To be sure, evil is a strong power. But lift up your eyes and see. God is at work and he is not finished. No one is equal to the Holy One of Israel, the God who raised his Son from the grave. Lovingly, he is working out his purposes. God is lifting us as on eagles' wings and enabling us to see life from a higher, better, and eternal perspective.

God is also renewing our strength so that we can run and walk with perseverance. "They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint." Along with patience, perseverance is much needed in these days. As the Scripture tells us, "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith." And God is giving us the strength to do this very thing as we wait upon him now. He is giving us strength to persevere, to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint.

Two stories as I close. A tourist in Europe told of something he saw on the street outside his hotel window. He watched as farmers came along the street with heavy bundles of fruits and vegetables for market. Some bundles they pulled in carts; others they carried themselves. Across from the hotel was a small chapel which had become a stopping point for the farmers. As they reached the chapel they put down their burdens and went inside for a few minutes of prayer and rest. The tourist said when they came out again he noticed that they picked up those bundles and headed for the market with renewed energy and determination. As they waited upon the Lord, he renewed their strength.

And I think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. His sweat mingled with blood as he poured out his heart to God, in anguish over what was to come. And then says Luke, "An angel from heaven appeared to him, giving him strength." Jesus waited upon God and God renewed his strength. So Jesus rose up with determination, and went forth to the old rugged cross for our eternal salvation.

These are difficult days. There is no shame in feeling weary or exhausted. But God's invitation and God's promise is sure. "They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength..." And by God's grace and by the power of his Holy Spirit it is happening for us, right now, in this time of worship. My strength, and yours is being renewed. Thanks be to God.