

sermon 2/8/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Wings for the Earthbound”
Isaiah 40:21-31
By Jim Patten

I pick the sermon texts for each Sunday several months in advance. I am so glad I was drawn to this passage in Isaiah when I picked this Sunday’s text. If ever there was a scripture passage for our time, a time when we at Newport Church have been dealing with so much illness and death, let alone the economic turmoil enveloping the world, this would be one of those passages. It is a text that sings with hope.

It was written to Jews in exile in Babylon. They had been ripped from their homeland and taken off into captivity by a superior power. They were overwhelmed with their seemingly hopeless situation. We hear their despair as Isaiah quotes them in verse 27: “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God.”

They felt God was absent. They felt as if their situation was hidden from God. And if God did see their plight, God must not care, God must have been indifferent to the hardships and humiliations they endured in Babylon. Their oppressors were just too strong. The weight of their existence was just too heavy. There was no hope.

All of that can sound pretty depressing. It could even sound like whining. But, as commentators have said, these words did not come from a “childish impatience” with their situation. These words were a deep cry out of “heartsick frustration.” They had reason to feel as if God was absent and seemingly indifferent.

This passage was the prophet’s response to that painful cry. It could sound like, as one scholar put it, a theological slap in the face. Have you not known? Have you not heard? Have you not understood? In other words, Don’t you get it? Isaiah says this twice. He goes on to say, “Lift up your eyes on high and see. . .” Pay attention.

Isaiah doesn’t just chide those in pain. He goes on to talk about God in a wonderfully poetic way. Any human attempt to grasp the mind and power of God is feeble at best. Listen again. “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.” This transcendent God is mighty and we are like nothing.

Being compared to grasshoppers is not all that flattering. This grasshopper image is intended for all humanity. It is not just those in exile who are insignificant compared to God. Even princes, even those whose power seemed to have no limits, even those who have held these Jews captive in Babylon are like nothing. They are like plants barely rooted in the soil. When God breathes, they are blown away like stubble.

Earlier in this chapter Isaiah put it this way, “Even nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales. . .All the nations are as nothing before God; they are accounted by God as less than nothing and emptiness.”

God is transcendent in power and beyond our comprehension. But, Isaiah does not stop there. He goes on to say this transcendent God is also intimately connected to all creation. God knows us better than we know ourselves. God even knows the name of every host in the heavens. God does not miss one.

It is in this awesome transcendent, yet immanent God where our hope resides. We don't have to ignore our pain to receive this hope. As commentators point out, Isaiah believes our "suffering is a dwelling place for God." The frail, the exiled, the fallen are actually closest to God's empowerment. One scholar writes, "Where finitude and vulnerability are acknowledged and embraced," Isaiah declares, "the floodgates are wide open for an inrushing of divine might."

And then comes those soaring words that have been used in hymns and anthems down through the years, "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."

I heard those words differently this year. One of my resource books quoted a commentator named George Adam Smith, a late nineteenth century scholar, who had a very unique take on this verse.

He said the order of this hope is a bit contrary to what we would expect: put forth wings, and then run, and then walk. He says, "And is not the next stage, a cynic might ask, standing still?" Why go from flying to walking?

Smith says Isaiah is pushing us to move "from the easier to the more difficult, from the ideal to the real, from dream to duty, from what can only be the rare occasions of life to what must be life's usual and abiding experience."

Sure, God's presence and Spirit can cause our spirits to soar like eagles. I have heard stories from some of you that are incredibly touching and powerful. We hold on to those experiences if, and when, they happen to us. But our far more common experience of God's presence is more earthbound.

Smith concludes his remarks by saying we need to hold to a religion, "which, while it exults in being the secret of enthusiasm and the inspiration of heroism, is daring and divine enough to find its climax in the commonplace."

I find that incredibly hopeful. My experience of God's power involves a whole lot more running and walking than flying. But isn't that exactly what we need? When life is tough, when we share the grief of those around us who are hurting, when death snatches the ones we love, it is the power of God that enables us to move ahead, to walk, let alone run. It helps us put one foot in front of the other instead of just giving up in despair. It is the more commonplace miracles that make life bearable, and sometimes even joyful.

When we baptize a little one into this community of faith, we hope they will grow in their spiritual lives so they will recognize God's mysterious transcendent, yet immanent presence that brings strength to those who wait, to those whose hope is in God. We want these beloved children to hear the music of Isaiah's soaring words in all the times of their lives, but especially when those times of suffering come. It is one of the greatest gifts we can give to them. Amen