



“Have You Not Heard?”
Scripture – Isaiah 40:21-31
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, February 4, 2018

For the record: I did *not* seek out a reference to soaring eagles specifically for Super Bowl Sunday. Believe it or not, this is the Old Testament lesson that popped up in the church’s schedule of readings for February 4th. And — being the good Calvinist that I am — I took this coincidence as a sign the Eagles are predestined to defeat the Patriots. Of course, I say this in jest. But, perhaps this text will offer you the encouragement you need as you tune in tonight to see if the Eagles do, in fact, soar to victory.

In all seriousness, these words from the prophet Isaiah offer many of us the comfort we seek in seasons of waiting or stress or uncertainty. There is a reason we recite them time and again at funerals, when grieving families need desperately to hear that God sustains weary souls. These words have the power to lift us from the depths and inspire us to hope, even when hope seems a fool’s solace.

This was Isaiah’s intention when he first proclaimed these words to a displaced and despairing people. The prophet speaks to a community in exile; the covenant people have suffered the devastation of Jerusalem, endured the forced march into captivity, and now spend their days laboring on the canals of Babylon. These people have lost their homes and their homeland, as well as something more difficult to rebuild: They’ve lost hope in the God of Promise.

Now — after two generations spent under the yoke of servitude — a new day is dawning. The Babylonian empire is crumbling as another ruler, another regime rises to power. This new emperor promises to restore Israel — to return the covenant community to Jerusalem ... that ruined city that only the oldest among them remember.

This comes as little consolation to people who have lost everything — their security, their autonomy, their identity, their faith. Israel’s trust in the God of David has been shattered, as we hear in the voices that echo from the text: My way is hidden from the Lord! My right is disregarded by my God!”

Though a future full of promise lies before them, the covenant community lacks the strength, imagination, and hope to inhabit it. For they still dwell in a foreign land, wondering if the Holy One of Israel has, indeed, abandoned them.

Two and a half millennia later, Israel’s experience of exile can seem impossible to comprehend — especially for North American Christians. Though we watch such tragedies broadcast on the nightly news, most of us have never seen our homes destroyed or our sanctuary razed.

And, yet, when we consider the plight of our ancestors of the faith, their experience is not so foreign.

For what is exile if not a season of loss, of disorientation, of uncertainty? What is exile, if not a wasteland where life withers and death dares to triumph, where order crumbles and chaos reigns?

Though we have not been taken captive to a foreign land, we have all endured periods of exile: We've groped blindly through deserts of despair after losing a partner, parent or child. We've wandered aimlessly through mazes of dislocation, desperate for direction after the diagnosis or the divorce or that last round of layoffs blew us off course. We've sat immobilized — staring out on a world we no longer recognize, feeling powerless to keep it from spiraling out of control.

We know what it is to feel weary, to succumb to hopelessness, to doubt God's care or God's power or — even — God's very existence. And — from deep in the valleys of exile — we have joined our voices with the laments of our ancestors, crying: My way is hidden from the Lord!

It seems Isaiah's words of comfort are as needed now as they were long ago.

Have you not known?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

The prophet has witnessed the Israelites' crisis of faith; he has heard their doubt-filled murmurings, and knows the covenant community is weary and worn. So he calls upon them to remember ... to remember that their story began before exile, before Babylon destroyed their holy city and scattered its people to the four winds, before death devoured their common life.

Isaiah calls upon them to remember that their story is one of promise — held sacred by a God who has not, and *will* not, forsake them.

Have you not heard?

*The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

“Remember?” Isaiah urges. Your God is the one who ordered the primeval chaos, setting the stars in their courses and drawing back churning waters to reveal dry land. In power and grace, this God sculpted the mountains and coaxed oak trees from the earth and knit together each wooly sheep and fashioned *you* (yes, you!) in the divine image. All in a mere six days ... leaving a full day to rest. I tell you, Isaiah says, the Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth!

Have you not heard?

*God gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.*

Remember? Your God is the one who heard our ancestors' cries, and sent Moses to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. In faithfulness and love, this God bore our people on eagles' wings — out of a land of bondage, into a land flowing with milk and honey. I tell you, God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless!

Have you not heard?

*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.*

Remember? The God of Heaven and Earth, the God of the Exodus is also with you in exile, caring for the battered and broken, the downtrodden and despairing. In compassion and mercy, this God invites each and every one of us into a future filled with hope. All because we are beloved in God's sight!

With these words of assurance, Isaiah calls the covenant community back to the faith that formed them, the faith that can inspire them to embrace the new thing God is doing in their midst.

And the prophet calls to us as well. For we still need reminders of God's faithfulness, whether we are enjoying a season of optimism or we are waiting in exile.

This is why we return week after week to hear the good news of God's grace — because we, too, must recall that ours is a story of promise. This is why we gather around table, font, and pulpit — so that we can be prophets for one another, calling the weary and worn back to the faith that has formed us, to the love that sustains.

A few years ago, a colleague of mine desperately needed this reminder of God's faithfulness. Her forty-year-old husband had been suffering for years from a terminal illness, and the family had just made the heart-wrenching decision to move him onto hospice. Needless to say, at this moment, my colleague was dwelling deep in the valley of exile.

Some of the youth from our community of faith decided to make cards to encourage her during this season. Nothing fancy — just simple reminders that we were holding this family in prayer. So we pulled out the paper and colored pencils and got to work.

I was sitting next to one of our middle-school girls as we worked on this project. Sarah¹ had taken her time with the outside of the card, carefully creating a design and using every colored pencil at her disposal to fill it in. When she finally opened the card, she looked at the blank page before her, thought for a minute, and said, "I don't know what to write."

I offered a few suggestions ... "God loves you." "We are here for you." "We're praying for you." Statements that were true, but not particularly profound. Clearly, they did not strike a chord with the young artist.

Sarah thought for another minute. And then she turned to me and said, "What about the words we say in worship every week? You know - "In life and in death we belong to God ..."

So with precise penmanship, Sarah filled the inside of that card with our community's Affirmation of Faith. These words were etched upon her heart from reciting them week after week in worship, and now she offered them to a weary soul desperately in need of this reminder: "In life and in death we belong to God ... With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit."

We have been given words of comfort — words that can lift us from despair and inspire us to embrace the new thing God is always doing in our midst. And — like Sarah — we are called to speak them, to be prophets of hope for one another.

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God ...

¹ Name has been changed.

Remember? The God who stretched out the heavens does not just sit above the circle of the earth, but dwells among us. In radical love, this God became flesh and walked with us: to show us the way and to heal our brokenness, to suffer with us and to wipe away our tears, to make all things new.

And this story of promise — this Gospel truth — has the power to call us back to the faith that has formed us, the faith that sustains us in seasons of exile, the faith that inspires us to hope in the Lord until we mount up with wings like eagles ...

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Composer of creation, you are both the energy of the universe and the soft whisper within us. As we come to you in prayer, we do not invoke your presence, but rather acknowledge that you are always present. Your Spirit both surrounds us and penetrates us, yet we are often blind to your activity in our midst and deaf to your urgings in our soul. We pray that we may clear the sleep from our eyes, disperse the meaningless chatter from our brains, and become fully awake to your word for our lives.

Loving God, when we turn on the news, pick up the paper, or go online, we encounter story after story of the victories being won by the prince of darkness. Wars create millions of homeless and people are starving. A young woman experiments with opioids, becomes hooked and overdoses. Her loved ones are now drowning in their grief. Celebrities, politicians, and coaches – men in positions of power - abuse women. Some are exposed and pay a price, others get away with no penalty, but the scars cry out for healing. Lord, the drumbeat of human misery seems never to cease, and these days it only grows louder.

Mighty God, we know that today's problems defy quick and easy solutions. We know that evil will not surrender without a fight. But do not allow us to use this as an excuse for failing to strive for justice and equality.

God, you call us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. When we are bland, restore our zest; when our light dims, shine in and through us. One of our mistakes – one of our great mistakes – is to imagine that we are alone in the work you have called us to do. You summon us to lock arms with all people of good will to combat the problems that breed ill will.

Grant us the determination to counter cruelty with compassion, to repel deceit with dignity, and to rebuke the cycle of retaliation with reconciliation. We know that you want us to create a world very different than the one that is unfolding. Guide us to a better future.

And if we fall exhausted, infuse us with energy; and if we feel defeated, boost our spirit. Give us the strength, God, not only to keep marching forward, but the courage and the determination to soar like eagles.

Now, we join our voices together and pray as Jesus taught us to pray, saying,

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**