

WHAT KEEPS YOU GOING?

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 4, 2018

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 40:30-31)

In a sermon not long ago I told you about a hiking trip to Iceland that my son James and I took last summer to celebrate his high school graduation. Our plan was to drive the Ring Road around the island, and stop to explore whatever caught our attention. One day we saw a road sign that indicated an historical site, so we pulled over and followed a path to a stone pillar out in the middle of a field. On the pillar was a metal plaque commemorating a great Viking battle that took place right where we stood on August 21, 1238. Apparently, nearly three-thousand men squared off against each other to determine which clan would rule northern Iceland. When the day was done, many lay dead in the field and others horribly maimed.

Standing there nearly 800 years later, it wasn't hard to imagine the clamor of battle, and hear the sound of their shouts and cries and clashing metal. But soon another sound and another sight caught our attention. Off in the distance was a picturesque waterfall that looked to be just a few hundred yards away from us. We could hear it. With not another soul in sight we decided to head for it, thinking it would be a relatively easy hike. We would run and not be weary. We would walk and not faint. So we walked, and then we walked and walked, and then we walked some more. Strangely, the waterfall just didn't seem to get any closer. Along the way we were attacked by swarms of midges, which are insects like mosquitos. We crossed gullies and marshes and followed the occasional sheep trail we could find. And because we were following a sheep trail, we realized we were probably stepping through more than mud. It was anything but the easy stroll we imagined, but more than an hour later, we finally made it. What kept us going through the bugs and mud and rocks and ridges? So compelling was the sight and sound of the tumbling water that we pressed on toward it, even though it seemed out of our reach. Then it was time to turn around and head all the way back again, but that's another story for another sermon.

In today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah (40:21-31) we hear the prophet addressing the people of Israel as they walked through a time of great national and spiritual crisis. Many long decades ago the Jews had been conquered by the Babylonians, who sacked Jerusalem twice, ripped the people out of their homes, and carried them off into exile. Those to whom Isaiah spoke in today's passage were the adult children, possibly the grandchildren, and perhaps even the great-grandchildren of the original exiles. Many, if not most had never seen Jerusalem, but it wasn't hard for them to imagine its gilded beauty from the way their elders had constantly talked about it. Even though Jerusalem was far off and seemingly inaccessible, they yearned for it as they languished year after year in Babylonian internment camps.

As they languished, they asked the age-old question: why? Why does God, whom the prophets tell us is all-loving and all-powerful, allow evil things like decades of exile happen to us? Why do clans take up arms against each other so that soldiers lie dead in the fields of battle? Why do swarms of grasshoppers consume crops, and clouds of midges pester all creatures great and small? Why do we suffer diseases of body and mind? Why do bad things happen to good people? The people lamented that the ways of God were hidden from them.

Isaiah's response that we heard in today's reading might satisfy some. For others, it might raise more questions than it answers. Essentially, he told the people that God's ways were not hidden at all. In fact, they should be as plain as the earth beneath their feet and the sky above their

heads. God is responsible for all of it: from stretching out the heavens like a curtain, to bringing princes to naught, to taking down every ruler of the earth, to counting every grasshopper. Our minds simply cannot fathom how the times that try our souls fit into the grand scheme of God's intentions, so a little humility on our part would be in order. God's reply through Isaiah reminds me a bit of God's reply to Job. If you recall, Job suffered tremendous loss, and dared cry out to God, "Why?" Finally, God answered Job out of the whirlwind: *Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding (Job 38:4).*

Fortunately, Isaiah wasn't finished. He wasn't content to chide the people for misunderstanding God's ways as they suffered through exile. No, he meant to encourage them – to hold out for them a vision that would give them hope, and propel them onward through death's dark vale of shadows. You heard his vision at the end of today's reading: *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.* It's a lovely verse of Scripture, often set to music, and I'm sure today that Super Bowl fans across the country will be trying to read their wishes into it. Philadelphia Eagles fans will be hoping that their team does indeed mount up with wings like Eagles. And New England Patriot fans are counting on the young Eagles' quarterback, Nick Foles, to fall exhausted, while their 40-year old veteran, Tom Brady, runs and grows not weary. There it is. I couldn't resist it, even though I don't care who wins – just so long as it's not the Patriots.¹

All silliness aside, Isaiah's vision is compelling, and not what you would expect. The people might have thought that if they ever made it back to Jerusalem, the elders among them would enjoy watching the youth romp and play from the comfort of their rocking chairs. But no, in the kingdom of heaven, youth is not wasted on the young. Those of any age who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. It's a vision of vitality borne not out of physical prowess, but trust and confidence in the Lord. Simply put, Isaiah wanted the people to keep such a vision of hope before their eyes. Hope would keep them going.

We can hear the objections of a cynical world, then and now. Hope is a lovely thing. But is it not a cruel trick to dangle the object of our desire ever before our eyes but always out of our reach? It reminds me of a story I once heard about how an older boy would taunt his younger brother. The older brother would say, "Tomorrow I am going to give you a wonderful chocolate bar." "Really," said the young boy? "Just you wait and see," said his older brother. "Come in to my room tomorrow." The next day the younger brother came rushing into the older boy's room but received no chocolate bar. He protested, "But you said that today you'd give me a chocolate bar." "No," said the older brother, "I said tomorrow I will give you a chocolate bar. Now it's today. Come back tomorrow." Are God's promises like that: always pushed off to tomorrow, never to be realized today?

Well, obviously I wouldn't be doing what I do for a living if didn't think God fulfilled his promises. The truth is, the people did go home and over time they did rebuild Jerusalem. Then, some 800 years after Isaiah spoke, Jesus came on the scene. The Babylonians were long gone and the people were not in exile, but now the Romans occupied the land and ruled the Jews in their own city. Why? What was the meaning of it, if any meaning could be found at all? Jesus had a different take on the problem of evil than the explanation Isaiah put forth. For Isaiah, much of our mental and spiritual anguish was due to the inability of our finite minds to comprehend the infinite purposes of God. If we wait for the Lord all will come clear. As for Jesus, he certainly believed in the providence of God. He certainly trusted that God knew what he was doing, and would separate the wheat from the chaff on the last great day. But Jesus had a more militant streak in which he believed we all live in enemy occupied territory. Who was the enemy? Not the Babylonians, and not the Romans. Taking up arms against them would only lead to more soldiers lying dead in the battlefields, and most of them would be Jews. So who was the enemy? It was deeper than any one corrupt king or wicked regime. Jesus believed that God's good world had

been invaded by the powers of evil which sought to corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. What is more, it was time to serve an eviction notice to Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God.

As Jesus traveled the countryside to preach and teach, he immediately began to draw crowds around himself. Why were they constantly searching for Jesus? What seems to have been so attractive about him is that when he spoke, he didn't push off the promises of God until tomorrow. *"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,"* is what he said in his hometown synagogue. Then he backed up his words with his works. In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (1:29-39), we've heard how he healed the sick and cast out demons. At other times he made the lame to walk, gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and even life to the dead. Here was someone who embodied the hope that Isaiah foretold. St. John (1:14) wrote, *"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."* God was truly on the move. The kingdom was at hand. "Follow me," says Jesus. Today, not tomorrow. Let's go. For me – and I pray, for you – the emblem of hope that impels us onward is Jesus. His life, death, and most importantly, his resurrection happened. And because they happened, they shine like a beacon in history, revealing a new meaning and a new purpose to whatever difficult road you have to walk.

Yes, we will always with the tension between the sufferings of this present time and the call of a distant country. Lately I've been reading excerpts from a book by someone who knew better than most what it meant to maintain hope and keep going under the cruelest of conditions. In 1942, Victor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist and neurologist working in Vienna. As a Jew he and his family were arrested by the Nazis and sent to a series of concentration camps. For Victor Frankl, the last of these was the death camp, Auschwitz. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl describes the brutal conditions: the forced marches through snow in shoes that gave little protection, the threadbare clothes against the bitter winter wind, the meager rations, the hard labor, the disease, the filth, and the certain reality of punishment or even death for those who fell behind. Many of Frankl's fellow prisoners who were younger and physically stronger than he was withered and died. Frankl survived. Why?

The answer is long and complex, and Frankl himself spent a lifetime working out the answer. But if it could be summed up in a word, the word would be hope. He came to understand that "human beings have a continuing need to be striving for something yet beyond reach,²" and that to lose faith in the future was to be doomed. Thus, Frankl held to a vision of his future and would not lose sight of it. He envisioned reunion with his pregnant wife and other members of his family. He imagined returning to his practice in Vienna, helping others through psychiatry and neurology. It finally came down to a choice between hope and despair. Since the Nazis had taken everything else from him, he determined that they would not take away his hope. For him, hope was the call of a distant country, and the voice he intercepted said love. *The truth is, that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire,* he wrote. *The salvation of man is through love and in love.*

Isaiah preached good news to the people in exile to give them hope in their future. Jesus healed the sick, cast out demons, stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the cross, and rose victorious from the grave to give us hope – hope in a future we call the kingdom of God. With Jesus out in front, we press on toward it. *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.*

+

¹ The Eagles did indeed defeat the Patriots in Super Bowl LII, 41-33.

² Selections from *Man's Search for Meaning*, forward by Alonzo McDonald, The Trinity Forum Reading, Winter, 1998, p. 11.