

THE HOPE THAT KEEPS US GOING

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Grace Church in New York
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 7, 2021

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)

Although I aspire to be a well-rounded person, when it comes to the books I read I find myself returning to the same few areas of interest. One of these is the great, tragic drama of World War Two. Some years ago the author Laura Hillenbrand told the story of Louie Zamperini in a book entitled, *Unbroken*. Zamperini was a track star at the 1936 Olympic Games, then a bombardier in the U.S. Army Air Corps. After miraculously surviving a plane crash at sea, Zamperini found himself adrift on the vast Pacific Ocean with two other men in an inflatable raft. Louie, Phil, and Mac were wounded, hungry, thirsty, and far from civilization. Day after day they battled the elements and the ever-circling sharks. Their only sustenance was rainwater, and the occasional fish they could catch or bird they could grab. The ordeal would go on for forty-seven days.

In the end, Louie and Phil would endure. Mac would not. Why? What was the difference? Hillenbrand describes how Louie and Phil would engage in actively envisioning a future for themselves. They would talk endlessly about their favorite dishes down to the smallest detail, describing every ingredient in the recipe and how properly to prepare it. Then they would imagine themselves eating the feast, savoring every bite, for a while even tricking their stomachs to forget their hunger. They talked about where they would go, whom they would see, and what they would do after the war. Hillenbrand explains that “the conversations were healing, pulling them out of their suffering and setting the future before them as a concrete thing.”

In contrast, Mac had given into despair from the moment he climbed onto the raft. He would not participate in the banter and mental exercises with Louie and Phil. He could not imagine surviving. He said little to the others. More and more he withdrew into himself, and as his mind shut down so did his body until, one night, he breathed his last. Louie and Phil had hope. Louie and Phil had hope because they practiced hope. They rehearsed hope. They dared to glimpse life and prosperity ahead of them, and their hope renewed their strength.

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 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 are the nations in an uproar? Why do the people mutter empty threats?*” asked the Psalmist. Why do plagues, famine, and death itself forever circle human existence like hungry sharks? 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 can 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 sustain them 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 perhaps it might even influence your vote in our Souperbowl of Caring at the upcoming Annual Meeting. Kansas City Chiefs fans will be hoping that their young quarterback, Patrick Mahomes, will neither faint nor fall exhausted. Meanwhile, Tampa Bay Buccaneers fans are counting on their 43-year old veteran, Tom Brady, to renew his strength – to run and not be weary. There it is. I couldn't resist it: youth versus experience on display tonight and in today's reading!

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 lift them up from despair and sustain them. Hope would keep them going.

Was their hope rewarded? It was. They waited for the Lord, and the Lord restored them to Jerusalem. They rebuilt the city and the Temple, and then in the fullness of time, Jesus the Messiah walked among them. To be sure, evil still stalked the earth. Though the Babylonian empire was long gone, now it was the occupying Romans who ruled the Jews in their own city. Thus, they continued to raise the age-old question: Why? What was the meaning of the suffering, if any meaning could be found at all? Like Isaiah, Jesus certainly believed in the providence of God. He certainly trusted that God had an overarching plan, and would separate the wheat from the chaff on the last great day. But Jesus also seemed to have a greater urgency and agency than Isaiah. He wanted to confront the evil powers of the world whenever he came across them to demonstrate that they were already defeated. He wanted to give people a foretaste of victory. He wanted to give them a basis for hope.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (1:29-39), we've heard how Jesus cast out demons and healed the sick, specifically Simon Peter's mother-in-law, who lay desperately ill with a fever. Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up. He restored her to the role of matriarch and caregiver, which gave her life meaning. At other times he made the lame to walk, gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and even life to the dead. Always he lifted people up as a sign that hoping for the kingdom of God was not just wishful thinking. Quite the contrary, 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."* For me – and I pray, for you – the hope that sustains us and keeps us going is Jesus. His life, death, and most importantly, his resurrection happened. And because they happened, they shine like a beacon in history to guide

us through our present darkness. Jesus gives us a reasonable and holy hope of humanity lifted up and restored.

Paul the Apostle certainly would have counted himself among those whom Jesus lifted up and restored. Paul had been a persecutor of the church, and presided over the stoning of an early Christian named Stephen. Then on the road to Damascus he met Jesus. He had a vision of the resurrected Jesus, and beheld the glory of God. He saw what it meant for humanity to be fully alive. The effect was to lift him out of his old ways into a new and larger life. The transformation was so profoundly good that he had to share what he had seen and whom he had come to know. He called it his gospel, his good news. In his own words (Romans 8:38-39), *I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

More than anything else St. Paul wanted people to know that God is for us, not against us. We heard him today (I Cor. 9:22): *To the weak I came weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that I might by all means save some.* To this end Paul founded churches to be communities of hope. With the resurrection of Jesus before their eyes and the power of the Spirit in their midst, they would practice hope. They would rehearse hope. They would dare to glimpse the glory of God about to be revealed in them.

We, too, as a Christian community, have a mission to be stewards of hope: to practice it, to rehearse it. Especially in our present darkness, let it be our duty and delight to envision certain things right now: this church full of people wearing no masks, sitting wherever they want and singing hymns in safety; these newly restored choir pews stuffed full of squirming choristers, who also happen to sing like angels; Sunday brunch after church at a nearby restaurant, and you get to eat inside; Broadway theaters lit up and alive with shows; sports arenas filled to capacity; standing room only at Citi Field this very October for the World Series. Perhaps we might also throw into the mix actively hoping that some of the harder lessons we've learned in the past year will leave a lasting imprint on us: this nation rid of racial injustice; our political discourse rid of partisan strife and vulgar nastiness. Is it wishful thinking? No, it is hoping in Christ and trusting in God's future.

At the beginning of the sermon I mentioned my penchant for books about World War Two. It seems to me these are relevant to our day. People then endured a great, horrific ordeal and were always at risk of losing hope. A more recent read of mine has been the book that inspired the theme of our annual pledge campaign: *No Ordinary Time*, by Doris Kearns Goodwin. In it she tells of a visit that President Roosevelt made to a hospital ward of recently wounded soldiers who had lost limbs in battle. Roosevelt himself was essentially wheelchair bound, having lost the use of his legs to polio in the 1920s. But he didn't want people to see him as vulnerable, so he had an agreement with the press that they would never photograph him in his wheelchair. He was only to be seen seated in an open-air car or standing with his leg braces.

On this particular hospital visit, however, FDR insisted that he be wheeled in his chair slowly through the ward, so that the amputees he would greet could see that he was as impaired as they were. To the weak he came weak so that he might win the weak. He wanted to show them that their life still contained infinite possibilities. He wanted to help them envision their future, to believe that they could mount up with wings like eagles. He wanted to give them hope, and here was a person who embodied it.

Today we have heard Isaiah, and Jesus, and Paul giving us hope. It is, in fact, our mission to be stewards of hope, trusting that *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.*