

SERMON – “WHEN YOUR CONFIDENCE IS SHAKEN”-February 8, 2009

Isaiah 40: 21-31 Psalm 147

Mark 1: 29-39

It was a hot summer's evening in July, 1979. I had gone up the hill to swim in a parishioner's pool and then had stayed for supper. I got home very late and there was a message on my answering machine from my mother. Call home as soon as you get this message. I called to get the devastating news that my father had died suddenly of a heart attack. No warning at all! He had spent the day fixing a friend's boat engine, had a good dinner and gone into the living room to relax.

I was hit by that proverbial freight train! I headed home the next day and as we made plans for his funeral of course the question came up about what I would do in the service. In my short three years as a pastor, I had led more funerals than you can imagine – that's what happens in a small town where you really become chaplain for the whole town. I had had to deal with deep tragedies, even a murder. But, when asked about my own father's funeral, I wisely said – it is my time to grieve, but I could read scripture.

Isaiah 40: 27-31 is that scripture.

It remains for me the foundation scripture of my hope especially when my confidence has been shaken.

Stepping back a little further to where this morning's passage begins. How important it is to hear and be reminded of the majesty of God, the constancy of God's creative involvement and to link our hope for a moment to the wonder of creation.

There is a poster that I have got to get! It's that wonderful shimmering blue-green, white-flecked picture ball spinning against the dense blackness of space! Our sense of the world was altered forever. The see the whole – in all its inter-relatedness. From the ground we stand on, the view is so short sighted. It seems to extend outward just a few miles. A view from beyond us reminds us of both our limits as well as our privileges of being part of this world.

Indeed to have the promise of the strength to mount up with wings like eagles is a sweeping gift from God, but even more incredible is to think of our place in the vastness of all creation.

Bald Eagles are positively enormous. The largest have powerful claws and beaks and sport wingspans of about over 6 feet. I don't know what kind of eagle Isaiah had in mind, the ones we know certainly fit the image of power and majesty in flight. Before hot air balloons, airplanes, and space shuttles human beings were bound to the earth. Even in mountain climbing, your feet were still on the ground. The flight of the eagle seemed so effortless, so freeing, and it so amazing. When comparing human efforts to divine power, it was appropriate that Isaiah chose the most powerful and majestic of birds. However, as majestic as

they are, even Eagles are just a small part of this incredible universe.

The people to whom this prophet named Isaiah wrote were living in times of great difficulty. These folks were living in exile. They had been defeated in battle; their beautiful city had been left in ruins and they could be excused for thinking that, either their God no longer cared, or, had been defeated in battle along with their armies. Isaiah writes words of encouragement; Isaiah reminds them that God is still with them and uses phrases that are obviously rhetorical questions.

“Don’t you know?”

“Haven’t you heard?”

“Don’t you understand?”

Of course they have been told these things since they were children. Of course they knew that their God was the creator of heaven and earth. Of course they knew that they would never be abandoned. Of course they knew. BUT - in times of difficulty it is hard to remember what it is that we have all known since we were children! As one of my commentators writes, “We are theological amnesiacs”. When our world’s fall apart our confidence is shaken. God either feels incompetent or insensitive.

Isaiah reminds them (and us) that our God is the creator of heaven and earth. This God is more than a distant deity though. Not only does this God know all the host of heaven by name but also gives strength to ordinary humans.

Everyone who “waits for the Lord” will say, as Isaiah says, will
*“renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.”*

In 1984, I moved to a new parish to serve as an associate pastor. The apartment I rented was the first floor of a two family home. On the second floor were two young parents with an only child, Molly. Molly had been diagnosed with acute Leukemia. Over the next year, I walked with them through the hills and valleys of hope and despair. Molly did not live to see her third birthday. In that time, a colleague gave me a book entitled, “How to handle grief: tracks of a fellow struggler” by John Claypool.

In the midst of his own journey with a daughter also diagnosed with acute leukemia, John wrote a sermon called “Strength not to Faint” He addressed his congregation, as he said, as an ordinary human being who is a Christian and not as a professional “religionist”. He said, “You may think I have to say these things”. His question was, “Does religion make any difference when the bottom drops out?” What is our expectation for religion in a crisis and what vision of God do we take with us into the shadow. He went on to talk about this passage from Isaiah. God gives three kinds of strength for three kinds of needs: The ability to soar with ecstasy – sheer exuberance!; or to take on a cause and get enough strength to run the course without growing weary; or, in his case, to just be able to put one foot in front of the other, and walk without fainting.

The miracle of God's presence, it seems to me, is this third form. John says it this way:

“When there is no occasion to soar and no place to run, and all you can do is trudge along step by step, to hear of a Help that will enable you “to walk and not faint” is good news indeed... Well, that is how it was, and here I am this morning – sad, broken-hearted, still bearing in my spirit the wounds of the darkness, I confess to you honestly that I have no wings with which to fly or even any legs on which to run – but listen, by the grace of God, I am still on my feet!”

What difference did his faith offer – it gave him the gift of patience, endurance, and strength to walk and not faint. There would be a day when he could run again and not be weary, or even soar with the eagles, but for now, to walk and not faint is enough. O God, that is enough!