

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Sunday, February 7, 2021**

**“Those who Wait for the LORD”
Isaiah 40:21-31**

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“[B]ut 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” (v. 31).

As you may know, I’m an Officer in the Canadian Armed Forces, serving as a Chaplain in the Army Reserve. Some years ago, when I was completing Basic Training, we were on a ruck march—with loaded packs, late at night. Mutual encouragement is an important part of the military ethos, and a fellow officer—looking to be uplifted as we pushed on—she said me, “Hey Clark, isn’t there something in the Bible about walking and not fainting?” We obviously couldn’t stop and get out a flashlight to look this up in my little Bible; however, it so happened that, years previously I’d memorized Isaiah, Chapter 40...and so, on that dark night, I was able to recite: “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.” My fellow Officer said, “That’s what we need right now: you gotta recite that a couple more times!” I did, and it was a powerful, invigorating moment.

I often think of that moment when I reread this passage: it’s a reminder of how almost inexplicably powerful this passage can be, even when recited out of its context in Isaiah. Even by itself, the poetry of these verses seems to lift off the page. And a helpful question to ask is: what is it about this passage that makes it this powerful and compelling? Those verses I recited on that ruck march offer a stirring, hopeful conclusion to a passage that’s (partly) about *forgetting and remembering*. Our Old Testament Lesson testifies to the dangers of forgetting, and the power of remembering. So, let’s explore forgetfulness and remembrance in our Old Testament Lesson—and then, when we return to those climactic verses, we may discover that the stirring conclusion is even more powerful than we already realized.

In Isaiah 40, we hear a message to Israelites in exile: this begins a series of chapters (40-55:13) which “console the people of Judah with the promise of a joyous return to their homeland,” as someone has written (Roberts). Now why are they in exile? In 587 BCE, after Babylonian invaders destroyed Jerusalem, many Israelites were captured and displaced, forced to live in Babylon where they were cut off from their city, from their land. In Chapter 40, Isaiah is speaking to these exiles. And the questions Isaiah asks his audience in exile—these questions seem to show that he believes they’ve *forgotten the identity of God* (who God is and how God acts). And this kind of forgetfulness can be disastrous: as one writer puts it, our Old Testament Lesson “builds on [a claim] at the core of Israel’s testimony [...] that faith begins with memory,” and “[w]here memory fails, the faith of the community is threatened” (Puckett).

Faced with this forgetfulness, Isaiah asks questions that serve as calls to remembrance (Puckett): Isaiah invites remembrance of God’s identity (who God is and how God acts). Isaiah first offers questions that seem to ask: *Have you forgotten who our God is?*

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?”

Isaiah asks, challenging this forgetfulness,
“Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?” (v. 21).
Then Isaiah answers by announcing what’s been forgotten about God:
“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;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble” (vv. 21-24).

Amid this seeming forgetfulness, Isaiah announces *who God is*, describing the sovereign, creating, eternal Lord, a God above even those rulers who—at the time—had subjugated the exiles and forced them far from home.

Isaiah also encounters a forgetfulness about *how this sovereign God acts*. One Presbyterian minister suggests that, as far as we can tell in this passage, it seems the exiles didn’t so much deny God or reject God, but rather—in a kind of forgetfulness—lost sight of how God acts. He writes: “They could have concluded that the gods of Babylon were stronger than their God or that God really does not exist at all. But their conclusion is that they are simply ‘disregarded’ by the One who sits above the circle of the earth” (Forney). To put it another way, Isaiah encounters a forgetfulness that has led the exiles to believe they’ve been forgotten by God: it seems they may have forgotten that God does not forget.

And so, Isaiah asks:
“Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel,
‘My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God’?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?” (vv. 27-28).

And Isaiah offers an answer to anyone forgetting *how this sovereign God acts*, by describing a God who does not disregard those who are struggling:

“The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless” (vv. 28-29).

Amid the seeming forgetfulness that viewed God as “disregard[ing]” the exiles, Isaiah announces *how God acts*, as one who does not forget those who are weakened or disempowered but instead strengthens and sustains them.

But *why* is it so important for Isaiah to remind his people in exile of the identity of God? Why must he remind them who God is and how God acts? This work of reminding—this exercise in restoring the memory of faith and the memory of God—this is essential if Isaiah is to speak new hope to the exiles. One United Methodist pastor writes this: “The crisis of the Babylonian exile ha[d] caused the people to forget their own story, the story of God’s attentiveness and dependability, the story of God’s love for Israel. Because they ha[d] forgotten, they [were] questioning the presence and power of this God. But,” this pastor adds, “those who remember

their history and believe in the God who fulfills promises will be able to receive new strength and life from their relationship with this God” (Puckett).

The hope that Isaiah promises, prophetically, for his people in exile comes only as they “wait for the LORD”: that powerful conclusion to our Lesson, the one that made a difference on that ruck march, that powerful passage hinges on “waiting,” “waiting for the LORD,” which—in a biblical sense—is a kind expectant, hopeful trust. Yet in order to wait, we must remember! As I explored in the Word to the Children, we can’t wait for what we don’t remember: we can’t look expectantly toward something we’ve forgotten. So, Isaiah rekindles the memory of faith. To wait for the LORD, the exiles must first rekindle their memory of God’s identity: with his wonderful, evocative poetry, Isaiah bears witness to what seems to have been forgotten, that the sovereign God cares for those who stumble. Then—and only then—with the exiles’ memory restored, can Isaiah speak that stirring and powerful promise of hope, what’s been described as “a tapestry of good news” (Forney): “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” (vv. 30-31)—

—“those who wait for the LORD”: Isaiah promises that there’s a strength that comes in waiting for the Lord, in waiting for God, in looking toward God with hopeful expectation of deliverance and rescue. And remember, this was a word of hope spoken for exiles, for those who’d seen their city laid waste and their temple destroyed. Isaiah spoke this promise not to the powerful but to those who needed to be empowered (cf. Forney). There’s a reason, I think, why my most vibrant memory of this passage came when I recited it on a ruck march for those in my platoon, literally, seeking to “walk and not faint”: this is a hopeful message for those who need strengthening.

Our circumstances these days—though certainly nothing like the calamity of the biblical exile—are nonetheless challenging in many ways, and with a great deal of loss: in this pandemic, we’ve seen loss of life, loss of health, loss of employment, loss of milestones, loss of companionship... And I wonder whether we could learn from Isaiah, and—amid this period of many losses—commit ourselves *to remember*. Our forgetfulness about God’s identity threatens our faith, our hope, our capacity to “wait for the LORD.” So, could we, during this in-between time of the pandemic—as this community of faith is separated and distanced—could we seek to rekindle one another’s memory of faith, reminding one another of who God is and how God acts? Could you—and I certainly can’t be the one to do this—could you remind one another of how the Spirit of Christ has been present over the years in the life of New St. James, uplifting those who are fainting or fading? Could the memory of faith in this congregation be renewed, so that—when we are weakened or discouraged—we may yet find strength as we “wait for the LORD”?

“[B]ut 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” (v. 31). Amen.