

²¹ Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? ²² 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, ²³ who brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ To whom, then, will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. ²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing. ²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”? ²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard? 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. ²⁹ He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. ³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted, ³¹ 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 40:21-31

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“To Renew One’s Strength”

Rev. Amy Terhune

*You may write me down in history with your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt, but still, like dust, I'll rise.*

*Did you want to see me broken? Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops, weakened by my soulful cries?*

*You may shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I'll rise.*

These are words first penned by black poet Maya Angelou back in 1978. They spring to mind whenever I read that famed and beloved passage from the end of Isaiah 40. Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they should mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Angelou’s words are appropriate to remember, not only because it’s black history month and we ought to celebrate the artistic contributions of all different peoples, but because they undoubtedly would have resonated with Isaiah’s listeners. Remember that the book of Isaiah actually contains the writings of at least three prophets. The first 39 chapters are written by Isaiah, probably about 700 years or so before the birth of Christ, and a little before the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. When Babylon defeats Israel, it burns Jerusalem to the ground, razing Solomon’s temple to the ground and carting many of the people off into exile thousands of miles away. Chapters 40-55, known as deuterio-Isaiah, are written by a follower of the original Isaiah sometime around or shortly after the fall of Babylon to King Cyrus and the Persians. And the final 10 chapters (Isaiah 56-66), known as trito-Isaiah, are written by another followers, now in Israel as exiles return to the homeland after Cyrus frees them. Thus Chapter 40, which is our interest today, is the opening chapter of deuterio-Isaiah, and it marks a significant theme change. After 39 chapters foretelling judgement, the destruction of Jerusalem, enslavement, and exile, chapter 40 opens: “Comfort, O comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she’s served her term, her penalty is paid, she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

The Israelite people have spent 70 years in exile. Their captors have told them that their God amounts to nothing. He's puny—can't even defend you from our army, they say. And a lot of Israelites believed it. Their children and grandchildren are born on foreign soil, having no memory of their homeland. They've assimilated somewhat into Babylonian culture. And now comes the word, some 70 years later, that Babylon is defeated, and the Israelites may return to the Promised Land. The question now is: why should we? We're happy here. We've made lives for ourselves here. This is the land we know. God doesn't care about us anyway. This is the attitude second Isaiah must now confront.

'Comfort, O comfort my people,' he says. And we hear the prophesy about a voice crying out in the wilderness 'prepare the way of the Lord', which foreshadows the ministry of John the Baptist and the subsequent coming of the Messiah. And then we're told that God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. It's very tender. And then our text for this morning: a pointed reminder that God is the great Creator, that God controls history, that God is eternal. "Do you think that because he has not answered in a few short years that he has not heard your prayers?" wonders Isaiah. Patience. You're tired? You're weary? You're weak? Fine. But God is NOT. Those ready to wait for the Lord, to let God be God and act in His time, those are the ones who will find their strength renewed over and over and over again.

We understand weariness, don't we? Maybe I should own that statement. I understand weariness. But I'll bet some of you can relate. I'm tired of the divisiveness, of the anger and hate, of the fear-mongering. I'm tired of war. I can't remember the last time there wasn't conflict somewhere on earth. I'm tired of a 24-hour news cycle. And I'm tired of this now-instinctive drive in me that pushes me constantly to prove my worth, as if one isn't valuable if one isn't doing something, producing something, spearheading something. Let me ask you this: when was the last time you simply rested in your identity as a beloved child of God? I have to be very intentional about it – if I'm not, I forget quickly., and I start losing myself. Friends, we're loved because we belong to God; each of us is God's precious child. Not because of what we do, or earn, or lead, or accomplish. But it's hard to accept that these days. Yet not to do so is fatiguing. In preparation for the grief group a week or two ago, I was reading an article about how retirees go through a grieving process when they give up work, and sometimes also an identity crisis: who am I without the job? Interestingly, it noted that a lot of young people are experiencing similar grief in the struggle to find work after college. Who am I if I can't get a job in my field? Am I a failure? No wonder we're exhausted.

Doctors who study health and sleep patterns tell us that REM sleep is vital for health and functionality. Failure to sleep deep enough to enter REM sleep results over time in chronic exhaustion, heart disease, weight gain, depression, anxiety, and reduced immunity to illness, to name just a few things. Sleep apnea is one of the major threats to REM sleep, but mental illness or strain can also interfere. Interestingly, REM sleep is when we dream. You have to dream to stay healthy. Did you know that? And what's true physiologically is also true spiritually. The difficulty is that tired people don't dream. And yet, failure to dream can paradoxically wear us down even more.

Isaiah offers words of comfort to a people who have forgotten how to dream. He advises patience. Wait for God. Trust that God is working. We don't always see it in the moment. Sometimes we only see it in hindsight. Our world is filled with possibilities. "A keen insight into God's power is found in Isaiah's bold proclamation: 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."

"Most of us, at first glance, would think that Isaiah has the passage all turned around... Don't we first walk, then run, then finally soar like an eagle? That's how it ought to go, don't you think?"

"Isaiah knew God and he knew life. He set down the promises of God in the correct order, for the greatest power and the greatest gift is to keep going when life has slowed us to a walk and we're almost ready to cave in and quit.

"God's help is described in three forms. There is the promise that God's help can take the form of such complete and utter joy, enabling us to mount up and soar like eagles. Most of us have those

moments in our life where we've felt such elation and celebration – when God has touched us profoundly. Jesus probably felt it at the moment when he rode the donkey into Jerusalem as the crowds shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Paul undoubtedly felt it when the scales fell from his eyes and Christ became real to him. And the women must have felt it eventually as they stood gazing into the empty tomb. Sometimes God moves in a dramatic fashion... [previous 4 ¶s adapted from "Turning A Minus Into A Plus" by Harold C. Warlick, Jr., www.Sermons.com.] Those moments are unforgettable highs, but they're rare.

So Isaiah describes another way God touches us: we shall run and not be weary. This is the gift of perseverance – the God-given strength to serve over the long haul, to act, to connect, to be part of something meaningful. It's not something we do to prove our worth. It's something we share to advance good in the world. It's energizing, not draining. Sometimes it can be hard to describe the difference, and yet, most of us recognize when we see it. I recall the story of an old friend who was trained as a lawyer. He went to work at a big law firm in the heart of the city. He dealt with big business and he made big money, but he also began to feel disillusioned. In time, he left that practice, and returned to his hometown to open up his own private practice. The cases weren't nearly as big, and he certainly wasn't going to get rich. But he did reconnect with his passion – to make the law work for regular Citizens, his neighbors and friends. In that, he found meaning and purpose and energy again. The Holy Spirit gave him strength to run the race set before him.

In the newsletter this week, I talked about the last aspect of how God sometimes helps us when I wrote: "There are times when we soar - when dreams come together, pieces fall into place, and amazing things happen. And there are times when we run the race - when we persevere with endurance, sweat, and hard work, until we get where God is calling us to be. But the honest truth is that sometimes, the best we can hope to do is put one foot in front of the other and make it through the day; when we just want to walk and not pass out with exhaustion or despair. Isaiah 40, written to despairing Jews in exile, speaks not only to the need to dream and persevere. It also speaks to the brokenhearted.

Harold Warlick tells the story of John Mortimer, "...who was an English barrister that became a great writer. His autobiography possessed a catchy title. He called it *Clinging to the Wreckage*. It comes from a story he once heard from a yachtsman who, when asked if sailing the ocean was dangerous, replied that it was not if you never learn to swim. He explained: "When you're in a spot of trouble, if you can swim, you try to strike out for the shore, and that's when you invariably drown. As I can't swim, I cling to the wreckage and they send a helicopter out for me. That's my tip, if you ever find yourself in trouble, cling to the wreckage." [adapted from "Turning A Minus Into A Plus" by Harold C. Warlick, Jr., www.Sermons.com.]

Don't strike out on your own. Cling to the wreckage. God is found in the wreckage. That's where dreams start. Which brings us back full circle to finish where I started, with Maya Angelou:

*Out of the huts of history's shame, I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain, I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.*

*Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, I rise*

*Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.*

*I rise;
I rise;
I rise.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.