

5-31-20 Learning to Fly (Today's message is "blended" with Scripture...)

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 40:21-26

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?
He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.
He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.
No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the
ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.
"To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

Isaiah was writing to the people of Israel after they had been exiled. The people watched as their Temple was destroyed, they were forced from their homes, and they were now refugees from the land they knew as their future. They felt powerless against the enemy and against nature. They watched as the young people with them fell from exhaustion. They were feeling insecure. They thought God had forgotten them. They wondered if God still loved them. They were feeling hopeless. And so Isaiah sent them a message. A message to help them remember that God is always with them. A message that might encourage them to lift their eyes to the heavens and remember that the God of Creation loves them more than they could ever imagine! A message that would help them remember all this so that they would again have the right perspective on their lives and they would again find hope in the Lord.

We are not going through an exile as the Israelites experienced, but still, what we are living right now is a kind of exile - An exile from the close physical interaction that has come to help define us as people. An exile from unquestioned peace, comfort, and security we find in our own neighborhoods, in our own homes. An exile from the lives we have grown accustomed to living. I expect that many people are experiencing some of the same emotions the Israelites felt. Feelings of discouragement, of being beaten down, and just worn out. Feeling overwhelmed and allowing the obstacles in front of them to keep them from seeing the possibilities of tomorrow. In all of these changes in how we are living, there is bound to be some distress... So I ask you, are you experiencing some of these negative emotions? Are you feeling alone and powerless? Do you find yourself wondering if God has forgotten you? If He still loves you? I am not asking you these questions with the intention of making you feel worse or to bring on a sense of gloom. I ask you these questions because I think we need to hear them out loud. When we hear them out loud it helps us to discover that we have all felt like this at one time or another. I know I have felt like this - more than once, and I expect I will feel like this again. This letter from Isaiah, the scripture that we read this morning, is about each one of us and this "exile" we are facing, as much as it was about the Babylonian exile all those years ago. Just as the Israelites needed to look to God for guidance through their difficulties, so must we...

Life is difficult and the challenges we face can be so severe that even the strongest among us will faint and grow weary. Isaiah has more to share; he challenges us and he has words of hope for us.

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 40:27-31

Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel,
"My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God?"
Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

When we feel discouraged, like we can't do, or fix, or complete something; or when we can't seem to get over yesterday or see past tomorrow, our first tendency is generally to find something or someone to blame. We complain about our inabilities, our obstacles, about what we seem to have no control over and we wonder where God might be in all of this difficult, frustrating, hurtful - and I'm sure there are adjectives I have not mentioned that would be fitting - dark times we are facing. And Isaiah asks: *Do you not know?*

Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. (Isaiah 40:28-29) God is with us ALL the time! Just as he knows every star in the sky and calls them each by name, He knows each one of us. When it seems like we are all alone in this world, we have to remember details like that; details like what we hear in Luke: "even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." (Luke 12:7) When we are feeling unloved or unlovable, we need to remember what John told us: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) I ask you now as Isaiah asked the Israelites: "Don't you know? Haven't you heard?"

We may never fully understand how God works in the world - not in this lifetime. We may never understand why suffering continues and evil seems to reign in so many places. These are things that we just cannot do... but we CAN learn to turn to God. Those who surrender their lives to God will find an eternal source of strength - Isaiah shared with the Israelites, and with us, that our strength will be renewed and we will soar on wings like eagles. God will give us the strength we need to complete the journey he has laid out for us; we simply need to turn to Him and share with Him all that is weighing us down...

By casting our cares upon the Lord we are affirming our trust in Him. We are stating by our actions that we have faith and we know that God is our rock. He is the source of strength.

I love this passage in Isaiah for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the phrase "They will soar on wings like eagles." The feeling those words evoke are of a sense of security, a sense of freedom. And it brings to mind the sight of an eagle soaring above...

The eagle is truly unlike any other bird. The eagle is majestic, and powerful. Scientists say that pound for pound, there is nothing in the world stronger than an eagle except for the ant - we will talk about ants another time... Aside from its strength, the eagle distinguishes himself from all others because of its spirit. Let me share with you today some information about the Golden Eagle. Information that might help us understand why the eagle is mentioned in our Bible 32 times either in a time of instruction or as an example of what we can do.

Did you know that every Golden Eagle has a rock? They are born on rock ledges, they nest in rocky clefts, and they always use a rock as a home. An experiment was done several years ago in Lafayette, Georgia where four golden eagles were hatched and raised inside a building. When they were small eaglets, they were taken outside for the first time and turned loose in the compound. They stood still in the compound and just looked around, but as soon as they spotted a rock, they all rushed straight for it and huddled against it. Their natural instinct drew them to the rock. I learned that when a golden eagle needs rest, it will go to his rock; when something is wrong with it, it will immediately fly back to its rock;

it goes to its rock for something as simple, yet necessary, as daily cleansing. I also learned that once a golden eagle finds his rock, he will never leave it for another rock. So an eagle finds its rock early in its lifetime.

In the middle years of a golden eagle's life, there is a period of time where they go through a depression that has come to be called the "moping" period.

During this time of moping, the eagle seems to lose his will to fly and he comes down to earth and, well, he just stays. His natural power is just gone and it is up to him whether he lives or dies. He can stay there to die in that valley of depression, OR, he can climb up the mountain and go back to his rock.

In Cherokee NC, there is a place called "Eagles' Bluff" which is a natural "bowl" in the top of a mountain. It is a couple miles in diameter and surrounded by rocky cliffs. At different times you can go to Eagles' Bluff, look down into the bowl and see golden eagles walking around on the ground. The eagles walking will not look proud and strong - they will look beaten down and their talons will be bloody from the swelling and cracking caused by walking around all the time. Eagles were not meant to walk around like a chicken or a turkey... Eagles were made to soar above the earth. The other thing you would see is that their eyes will no longer be moist and alert but dry and crusty. They will be unfocused and unable to see the dangers that surround them. In this period, the golden eagle has forgotten about his home on the rocks above and it just looks down to the ground.

While you are here, at this "bowl", you will see older eagles flying overhead dropping big chunks of rabbit or squirrel - fresh meat for those in the bowl (a side note: eagles will only eat fresh meat - they will not eat anything rotted or polluted like the buzzard will) Anyway, these older eagles will be dropping fresh meat so that the eagles on the ground might be strengthened and able to get out of their valley of despair. If the eagles on the ground don't eat this meat, they will die in this place - away from their homes, away from their rock.

I think of this story about the golden eagle's time of moping and I wonder, is this what we are seeing in ourselves right now? Are we seeing people in their own kind of "bowl" where they are experiencing a mental or spiritual despair and have lost their natural power - The power they were given through Christ? Is that what is happening in our world with the protests against guidelines offered for maintaining community health; with the verbal and physical violence erupting against each other; with the finger pointing and the cowering and the denial of wrong? Are we in our own kind of "moping" period where it is up to us whether we live in Christ or die of this earth?

Just as the golden eagles in their "bowl" need to eat nourishing food to regain their strength, stop looking down and look to their rock - learn to fly again, so do we - we need to feed on the word of God - we need to see again what is above us. People have gotten all tangled up in the things of this world and have lost their focus on God.

The natural instinct of the eagle draws him to a rock - to His rock - to the rock that cannot be replaced by another. Remember once an eagle has found his rock he will never leave it for another... As christians, our natural instinct draws us to a rock too - the Rock of Ages where we find our salvation - our own rock that cannot be replaced by another.

We need to learn from the eagle - from the creature God chose to offer as an example - and we need to fly to our rock everyday for cleansing. In him we will find comfort, healing, strength; and we will learn to fly.

And I could end my message here, but I would be remiss, it would be wrong of me, to simply allude to what has happened in Minneapolis and the results of that one, horrific, incident. And that is what I have done, I have simply alluded to the unnecessary death of a man caused by the inappropriate behavior of

another. I struggled with my message a bit today because I really liked what I had to share when I was able to connect these words from Isaiah to the health crisis we are facing, but I knew I could not simply pretend the daily news doesn't exist... I went back, reviewed and rewrote parts of my message to include that allusion (not illusion - but **allusion**) to what has been happening in our country these past few days, but I still wasn't satisfied that I was addressing our "world" appropriately. I looked to posts and readings I had saved in order to address this, and I found a short exchange that was shared on facebook. I find what this exchange is telling us is both extremely important and very fitting to the message I have brought to you today. This post was shared in response to emotions, behaviors and actions that resulted from the unnecessary death of Mr. Floyd in Minneapolis. I find the exchange to be great instruction whether the despair you might be feeling is because of this or if it is caused by the disruptions COVID-19 is causing. This exchange tells us exactly what we need to do to learn to fly again - to find our way back to our rock...

This question was posed: "How did the movie GroundHog Day finally shift to the next day for Bill Murray? Have we tried that yet?" and the answer: "He breaks the cycle when he shifts his focus from himself to devoting himself to helping others. And yes: that's EXACTLY how we get out of this. All of this."

No long drawn out psychoanalytical evaluation - short and to the point...

When we focus on ourselves, our eyes are not looking up and we find ourselves no longer soaring on wings like eagles, but down in those bowls that can take our lives, our salvation, away from us. Just as the mighty eagle thinks not only of himself but looks to help those who are in their "moping" periods, in despair and feeling hopeless, that's what we need to do. We need to help each other during this health crisis by learning the best ways to protect each other from this deadly virus - and then actually doing those things that we learn are helpful. We need to help each other during this social crisis by learning about the injustices that are taking place all over our country and then NOT pretending they don't exist because they don't directly affect us. We need to heed the words of scripture and learn the lessons taught by our ancestors - taught by Christ. Lessons of hope in our Lord that are encompassed in Matthew 22: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.. And ... 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

I pray that you not only listen to, but that you truly hear, the words of Isaiah: "...those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles..." Turn to the Lord. Learn to fly.
AMEN