

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Isaiah 40:21-31

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? It is God 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.** To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? God who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because God is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing. **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? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.** God does not faint or grow weary; God’s understanding is unsearchable. **God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.** 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.

Trust and Soar

Let’s be honest: at the start today’s scripture doesn’t paint a rosy picture of us. We are not God’s deeply beloved. We are not “fearfully and wonderfully made”. We are not brave servants of the Lord. What we are is forgetful. As one commentator put it, we are theological amnesiacs.

When it comes to God and to ourselves, we remember only selectively. For ourselves – If we are constantly self-critical, we remember only the awful things we have done in our lives. If we think we are perfect, we remember only the good things. (William Carl, Jr in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, p. 315))

Now take that and turn it towards God, who we are inclined to not only forget day by day but to actually think at times, when things are hard, when things are challenging, that possibly God has gone off and left us altogether. I’m not feeling all jazzed up about life...where are you God? I’m unsure about the future...where are you God? I’m facing a difficult time...where are you God?

So this week, having realized that I have failed entirely to follow a spiritual directors advice, given long ago, I go for a walk around my neighborhood. The advice was to pray over my calendar, so as to not get it so jammed up that I am stressed and scrambling and no good to anyone. But it’s two weekends in a row that I will have worked the entire weekend: Confirmation retreat last weekend plus Leadership retreat this weekend, plus notes and letters to write, meetings to attend, people to call or visit, a sermon to write.it was adding up -- piling up -- and feeling like too

much. In my household, we often quote Inspector Clouseau from the Pink Panther movies: "A little bit of this and a little bit of that, gets to be a little bit much."

So that's the state I'm in and I'm walking, but my head is down, and I'm hunched over I think, not so much because of the cold but from the burden of simply feeling overwhelmed by all there is to do. I'm reflecting a bit on the day before when my father in memory care's friends from Hancock Church in Lexington came to visit, about how very poignant that was to see them seeing him in this new state for the very first time. And I'm berating myself for the things on my to do list I really didn't have to add - making soup for the retreat being one, and I'm worrying about not having enough sermon thinking and writing time for this particular Sunday when something makes me lift my eyes... It is a seagull, flying over Manters Point, coming right over me.... only as it gets closer I realize it doesn't fly like a seagull or look like one either because it's *an eagle*, a white headed bald eagle flying right over me toward Plymouth Beach.

And I stop. And I think "if that isn't today's scripture speaking" I don't know what is.

*Even youths will faint and grow 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.*

And I laugh, out loud because darn it, it is so easy to get self-absorbed, to cave in on ourselves, to carry burdens around like oversized back packs and God, in his infinite wisdom, and God in her infinite good humor gives us these nudges, see, to say come on now, it is not all up to you. I am here. A source of courage and strength and perspective. Lift up your eyes and see.

What happens when we forget the One who is Creator and Sustainer, Redeemer and Friend? We collapse with anxiety and stress. *We sin* -- if we understand sin to be not only bad things we do but also anytime we act in such a way anytime we hold ourselves as if we are separate from God. But thank God for the nudges that do come. A woman who does so much for so many gets a tough diagnosis and finds her friends in church surrounding her with love and support. A person who often gets frustrated with the slow pace of things in the church receives a lovely thank you note from someone and realizes It's not how much you do, but the spirit with which you do it. I believe we have many eagles who nudge us all the time, and often they are clothed not with feathers but with human skin.

Maybe it is time for a check in. Is anyone still agitated about finding an eagle on the bulletin cover this morning? Traumatized by a sermon that features eagles in it? All I can say is I promise a sermon sometime on Patriots, on what it means to be Patriotic (I am in fact reading a book by Dan Rather on that topic) but that didn't appear

applicable to a scripture lesson today that ends with this beautiful reference to eagles wings. Are you doing okay? Are you able to listen?

In my research on eagles this week, I learned a few things about these magnificent birds. Eagles are known to carry their eaglets to safety away from the threat of predators. Eagles are known for their strength and courage in dangerous, turbulent weather, so that where other birds seek shelter in trees or bushes during a storm, An eagle will soar above storm clouds and to safety in that way. Moreover, in ancient Hebrew culture “eagles’ wings” was a figure of speech commonly used to attribute these fine characteristics to a person. God references eagles’ wings in Exodus, chapter 19, in a recollection of How God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. In that passage, God gives Moses a message for the people: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. (Exodus 19: v.4-5) The prophet Isaiah uses “wings like eagles” the same way, attributing the great characteristics of eagles to those who remain faithful to God.

So while our passage may sound like it is saying Trust God because God is great it is also saying that those who put their trust in God will be exemplary people and *they will get what they need*. There is a promise that God will provide renewed strength and courage to overcome obstacles, just as God did for the people escaping Egypt, and later wandering through the desert. To people who were awaiting deliverance from exile, who wanted to know “How long?” this was encouragement, to stay steady in the waiting to be like an eagle to trust and soar.

The apostle Paul spoke similar words to the Corinthians, urging them to trust in God and to wait faithfully for God’s kingdom in the well known “treasure in earthen vessels” passage: *“So we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”* II Corinthians 4:16

I know I have shared this with you before, but years ago I was serving a church in Boston, a church that actually got fewer visitors than we do here in Plymouth. But one Sunday there was a new woman, and I made it a point to seek her out when we paused in our service to pass the peace. I came toward her with hand extended, but she grabbed me and hugged me, holding on for dear life. “I need God” she said, and my goodness she meant it! She was in recovery, she’d just lost her job and she was coming to church for the first time in a long time. I think of her often, because well, when we’re tempted to think money or power or something else will secure us we are not living in that raw and sometimes necessary place of knowing there is a God sized hole in each one of us, of knowing our need. “Oh, I need God” she said.

Some years later, in another church, I heard a remarkable stewardship moment, shared by a woman who was newly a single mom with two teenagers, each just a year or so away from going to college. Her husband one day said “I don’t want to be married anymore”. “I was so afraid” she said. “ I am on the stewardship committee.

How with my changed circumstances am I going to give?" "But I made a pledge" she said. "I can do this, with God's help" she said. "It's like a partnership: I'm going to do this and I'm going to trust God is with me in this challenging time"

Yesterday at the leadership retreat Bill McCoy shared a story with me at a break. He was at a conference or workshop setting and this man who was leading the conference performed the 23rd psalm from memory, well done. At the end of the conference though, an older woman asked if she might share something. She was initially apologetic, because she too wished to offer the 23rd psalm, from memory. And when she was finished and sat down the workshop leader said to the woman, "Betty, I know the words, but you know the shepherd."

Trust is not a passive thing, a weak thing – it's a hard thing, and a choice made again and again and again. We live in such interesting stressful, demanding, and soul-threatening times. And what our world needs and what our church needs are people who know Eagles wings. People who know the shepherd. People whose lives have been changed. People who've been guided. Strengthened and carried by God. And who know how to share that.

The biggest challenge facing our church right now is not our building renovation or stewardship or finding ways to get young families in the door.

It is how much does our faith mean to us? Do we understand that God has made us to trust and to soar?

Amen.