

Renewing Our Strength

Isaiah 40:21-31

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany/ 7th February 2021

We probably know these words by heart, the closing verses of Isaiah 40. Perhaps we think of the allusion to this text in the Roman Catholic hymn, “On Eagle’s Wings,” often sung at funerals, with its beautiful refrain: “And he will raise you on eagle’s wings,/ bear you on the breath of dawn,/ make you shine like the sun,/ and hold you in the palm of his hand.”¹ It’s a hymn that means a lot to President Biden.

I will always associate this text with one of my favorite scenes in one of my favorite movies *Chariots of Fire*, released in 1981. It’s based on the true story of the famous Scottish runner and mission worker, Eric Liddell (1902-1945) who refused to train or compete on the sabbath at the 1924 Olympics in Paris. We find Liddell —played by the gifted actor Ian Charleson (1949-1990)—in worship on a Sunday morning, standing in the pulpit of the Church of Scotland congregation in Paris about to preach from Isaiah 40. I can hear Charleson’s soft, yet strong Scottish voice permeating this text:

“Behold, the nations are as a drop in the bucket,
and are counted as small dust in the balance...
All nations before him are as nothing;
and they are counted to him less than nothing and vanity...
He bringeth the princes to nothing;
he maketh the judges of the earth as a vanity. ...
Has thou not known? hast thou not heard,
that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth,
fainteth not, neither is weary? ...
He giveth power to the faint;
and to them that have no strength he increaseth might.
But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings as eagles;
they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint.”²

I remember the first time I saw that movie, with its memorable opening beach scene, which was filmed early in the morning, at 4 a.m. on the West Sands in St. Andrews, Scotland, situated along the North Sea.³ Eight years later I was living in St. Andrews, often walking (sometimes even running) along the West Sands. And the house I lived in for a time in St. Andrews is visible in the opening scene.

Reflecting upon this text this week I was drawn to just how active it is: walking, running, even flying. And then I found myself asking, where does one find the energy, the strength, the stamina, even the courage to walk, run, or even fly? Especially today, when so many are exhausted, stressed, overworked, and tired, scared, overwhelmed by just about everything.

The people who first heard Isaiah’s prophetic, majestic, soaring, hopeful vision, which we know as Isaiah 40, were a people in exile. The Israelites were in Babylon, traumatized and enslaved by an alien empire, far from home, living among alien gods and traditions. They were weary and depressed. They were a people who questioned God’s existence, doubted God’s faithfulness and goodness. They felt confused and lost. They even wondered whether God had somehow lost them along the way. Isaiah says to them, “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?’” (Is. 40:27). The people are saying, thinking, *God doesn’t see us. God has forgotten us. God doesn’t care.*

The prophetic, poetic utterance that begins here in Isaiah 40, and continues through chapter 55—known as Second Isaiah—was written to the Israelites while they were in exile. Second Isaiah marks a radical shift in Israel’s consciousness of God, and the prophet wants the people to hear this new understanding given to him. He calls them to know, to remember, to recollect, to recall what they had forgotten about the *true* nature of God: “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” (Is. 40:21)? God is not like your false idols, the small, tiny gods of the Babylonians. No, the God of Abraham and Sarah—the God we know in Jesus Christ—is not like that. “To whom then will you compare me or who is my equal? says the Holy One” (Is. 40:25).

Yahweh is unlike any other god. “Have you not known?” You—you in exile, you who are tired and confused, you who are exhausted, you who wonder where God is and what God is doing, you who are weary and faint and wonder if you can take one more step. *You*. “Have you”—*you*—“not known? Have you not heard? Yahweh is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not grow faint or grow weary.... Yahweh 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”—*but those who wait*—“for the LORD shall renew their strength...” (Is. 40:28-31).

This is a text to people who are tired and weary, scared and stressed and overworked, anxious about the future, feeling lost and alienated from God, strangers in a strange land, exiles and overwhelmed. Written for a people in exile, written for us.

So, then, where does one find the energy, the strength, the stamina to run, walk, even fly? *God gives power to the faint.* When? How?

Those who wait for the Lord. Those who wait *upon* the Lord. Those who place their hope and their trust *in* God, upon Yahweh. Those are the ones who will have their strength renewed. It all comes down to a question of *trust*. Go back and read through the entire chapter and you’ll see that the prophet doesn’t want them to trust in things as they are, the present course of affairs, the conditions at hand, with what is, instead they are to focus upon what will be. Sure, be realistic about the state that you’re in, acknowledge your feelings, your weariness, your fear, pay attention, don’t deny reality, but don’t get seduced by false narratives or conspiracy theories or anything else that takes your sights off of the Living God, such as idols.

Because idolatry is always dangerous. Both Judaism and Christianity warn against idols, against idolatry. It might sound like an antiquated notion to talk about idols. Idols are insidious and they’re devious and they’re destructive because they steal away the devotion and trust that should be invested in God alone.

What are idols? All the things that you fashion and make and then invest with power and value and authority to give you comfort, to assuage your anxiety, forget your pain, alleviate your suffering, your fear, your stress, to protect you. John Calvin (1509-1564) was right when we said that the human heart is a factory of idols. We are idol factories. We’re making them all the time—we’re crafting, making idols out of silver, out of gold, out of wood, out of stone, out of

cloth, out of *ideas* and beliefs and ideologies and philosophies—investing them with enormous power and value. Then we worship them, we bow down to them and serve them, forgetting that we we're the ones who made them in the first place (see Isaiah 40:18-20). This is what sociologist of religion Peter Berger (1929-2017) once called “bad faith.”⁴ We craft the idol, mold it and shape it, invest it with power, value, worship it, serve, forgetting all the while that we made it. When we place our trust in idols instead of God, if we give our devotion and worship and passion and energy to these false gods and idols rather than to God, a lot of damage is done *by us and to us and through us.*

These false gods, these idols—wealth, possessions, things, the past can be an idol, the stories or narratives that we tell ourselves about what happened in the past can become idols, success can be an idol, security, just about any idea can become an idol, ideologies, political parties, princes, presidents, nations, nationalism, actually, every form of *-ism*—are all *nothing* and are counted as vanity. A drop in the bucket. Our institutions can become idols, including the church. Beliefs and even our theologies can all become idols, false gods. They all are nothing, a drop in the bucket.

The God of Abraham and Sarah, the God revealed to Moses, however, is a jealous God (Exodus 20:5), the God of Isaiah and the prophets, the God of Jesus Christ is a God who cannot be limited or defined by anything or anyone, a God who is *Wholly Other*, who moves over creation, the one who creates and recreates. Not the God of our projections or wish fulfillments, the God who is, the great I AM—who was and is and will be who God will be (Exodus 3:14). The one who holds creation in the palm of God's hands, who creates and creates and renews us with life, with energy, energy that doesn't come from within us, although we can experience it there. This is the God upon whom we wait and wait upon and lean upon, into whose arms we fall when we come to our limits, the God we discover when we are exhausted and tired and scared and can't go on, when you can't take another step, let alone run or dream about flying on eagles' wings. This God can be trusted and when we wait upon *this* God...our strength is renewed because we are drawing our strength and hope and love from a greater source, from love itself, as Dante (1265-1342) said, the love “that moves the sun and the other stars.”⁵

A later prophet, who preached in the tradition of Isaiah had to discover this firsthand. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), preacher, prophet, reformer, agitator, we need to remember, did not go looking for these roles, they emerged within him when he remained faithful to God. King challenged this nation and the Church to live up to its own ideals and vision, to live out its calling. We need to remember because we are good at forgetting that Dr. King was not popular in his day, especially among white Christians. So, how did King become *King*? How did he become a prophet and preacher? When he reached his limits.

King did not seek black leadership in the civil rights movement. He was asked to take it on and the fear nearly overwhelmed him. The fear came to a fever pitch on the night of January 27, 1956, in the early weeks of the Montgomery bus boycott. He received a threatening telephone call at midnight, his house would be blown up if he did not leave in three days. That call created what King called a “spiritual midnight” for him. He thought about his life, his wife, and newborn baby girl. Fear drove him out of his bed to the kitchen table, to pray. Praying “out loud,” he leaded, wrestled with God, he said, “Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right...But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faulting, I'm losing my courage.” And then in the midst of the prayer, “almost out of nowhere,” he heard a voice saying: “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even to the end of the world.”



Three nights after the call, King's house was bombed while he was away at a boycott meeting. His wife and daughter escaped unharmed; they moved to the back of the house when they heard something land on the porch. Later, King said, "I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My religious experience a few nights before [in the kitchen] had given me the strength to face it." When an angry crowd of blacks gathered with guns ready for revenge, King stopped them and said, "We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with non-violence... We must love our white brothers no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them."

Almost a year to the day of his kitchen experience, twelve sticks of dynamite were discovered unexploded on his porch. Later, on the anniversary of his kitchen experience, King shared in a sermon how God removed his fear. God gave him a vision in the kitchen that changed his life. "So," King preached, "I'm not afraid of anybody this morning. Tell Montgomery they can keep shooting and I'm going to stand up to them; tell Montgomery they can keep bombing and I'm going to stand up to them. If I had to die tomorrow morning I will die happy because I've been to the mountain top and I've seen the promised land and it's going to be here in Montgomery."⁶

Stand up, Martin—*Martin Luther*. Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth.

Wait upon the Lord. *Wait upon the Lord*. Then stand up, rise up, and walk, run, and maybe even fly.



Eric Liddell reading Isaiah 40 from *Chariots of Fire* (Warner Brothers, 1981).

¹“On Eagle’s Wings” written by Michael Joncas in 1977. The text alludes to Isaiah 40:31, as well as Psalm 91, Exodus 19 and Matthew 13.

²Isaiah 40:15, 17, 23, 28, 29, 31 from the King James Version. In the film, “strength” and “might” were switched. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjF59VB0h6g> *Chariots of Fire* (Warner Brothers, 1981).

³The West Sands scene was filmed forty years ago on April 27, 1980. Here’s an interesting article about what it was like that day, from *The Dundee Courier*:

<https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/nostalgia/1282972/famous-slow-motion-running-scene-from-chariots-of-fire-was-filmed-in-st-andrews-40-years-ago/>

⁴Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990).

⁵Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: III. Paradiso*, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), Canto XXXIII, 485.

⁶The significance of the “kitchen vision” for King is relayed in James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 77-800.