

“To Run and Not Be Weary”
February 7, 2021
Scripture: Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

There are times in all our lives, I think, when circumstances start to pile up on us, just one thing after another, and it feels like everything is out of control. When you look at this past year for the whole country with pandemic and lock downs, social justice marches and an attempted insurrection and then in our private lives, juggling the demands of school, work and home in a lot of families; it's all contributed to our feelings of anxiety and tension, sometimes even despair. Then if you add to that illness or injury, the loss of a loved one or sudden unemployment and a person can start to feel abandoned by God, left completely alone and isolated from any source of help. We experience it individually in our personal lives, but also collectively as a church or a community or a nation.

Well, behind Isaiah's words lies just that sort of experience for Israel. They have been cut off from God. Everything about life in their homeland that was good has been stripped from them. I suspect they are despairing, their lives have become overwhelmed with anxiety and tension. They can use a word of comfort, and in fact this chapter of Isaiah begins with the words, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...” But what I love about our passage for today is it's more of a reality check than a word of comfort. Isaiah's not interested in commiserating with these folks. He wants them to snap out of it and remember what kind of God they're dealing with.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?” In other words, “How can you be so obtuse? Don't you get it?” The God of Israel is bigger than all they are going through. Israel is just the latest victim in a string of conquests by Babylon. There's no denying they are victims and there's no denying they are in pain, but if they allow themselves simply to wallow in their misery they will never find the strength to rise up and carry on. The danger in such circumstances is to be so fixated on the current difficulty that it becomes impossible to see anything new on the horizon.

I think to a certain degree the disciples around Jesus are guilty of that, too. That first chapter in Mark's gospel is pretty breathless. It moves so quickly from one scene to another, always with the words “and immediately.” So, Jesus is baptized and bang! he's driven to the desert and bang! he's declaring God's kingdom near and bang! he's calling disciples, casting out demons, healing mothers-in-law, holding a huge healing revival in Simon's home. It is mind boggling, dizzying. And you can bet it made the disciples a little nervous. They've just given up their livelihoods; what are they supposed to do for a living now?

So it's little wonder when they wake up on Sunday morning after that crazy Sabbath and Jesus is nowhere to be found, they start hunting. In their minds Jesus was a healer who could set up shop in Capernaum and become a shrine. People would pay to keep him in business and receive healing and they would have a source of income. They are fixated on their need to make a living, understandably. They want Jesus to come back to the house and get to work.

Again, anxiety and fear of the future is calling the shots. Over and over in scripture we come across this all-too-common human tendency to be overwhelmed by what's happened up to now and worry about what comes next. It drains our energy and leaves us tired and paralyzed. Could it be even Jesus was wrestling with it? Did he go off to a lonely place to get some perspective, to re-examine his actions and motives? It may have been tempting to stay in Capernaum and have a life there. But he was being called away from a sedentary life. He was called to wander, to take his message into the countryside and give it away to any who had need.

In that calling Jesus found the energy to run and not be weary, the strength to go on in spite of all the fears and uncertainty. That's what Isaiah is trying to call to memory for the Israelites in exile. God has called them into being and will give them the strength to overcome their peril if they can hold onto their sense of call and not give in to their anxiety and fear.

"Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength." Waiting isn't some passive exercise in patience. As Jesus demonstrates waiting for the Lord means going forward even when it's not certain what the outcome will be. It means putting our trust in a God who insists on being present and refuses to let us go. Too often we find ourselves in the place of the Israelites or the disciples around Jesus. In the face of so many things happening all at once, when disappointments and difficulties multiply, we become paralyzed by our fear. We forget who this God is we're dealing with.

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?" When we look back at the sweep of our lives, how we've made our way through difficulties and disappointments before, how we've endured losses and survived illnesses, we can see that God has not been silent. We've found inner strength to carry on. Even now, as we find ourselves struggling with the effects of this illness and the restrictions we need to observe to keep ourselves and others safe, we have found the strength to carry on. Listening to God's call on our lives, we've discovered we can worship and serve and care for one another in new ways. This time is shaping us. And it will change us permanently. We will not be the same people we were before all this started.

Embracing that change and allowing it to direct our movement forward is how we wait on the Lord; it's how we put our trust in God who continues to walk with us and mold us into a new creation. Do you think when they returned from exile the Israelites were the same people they had been? Were the disciples the same after following Jesus on his journey? We cannot go through a time of trial and expect to return to the way we were. We are being transformed in this moment into a new people; a people able to run and not be weary.

So, we need to pay attention for God's voice during this time of separation. We need to remember how God has been present with us before so we'll recognize God's presence with us now. Soon we'll begin the journey of Lent. I encourage you to decide now if you are willing to adopt practices that will help you discern God's presence. Decide now if you're able to do what's needed to let go of your anxiety, to raise your gaze above your circumstances and see God's presence on the horizon. We can do this. We can wait for the Lord so our strength is renewed. We can be a new people with hope and healing to share in a world longing for release. Have you not known? Have you not heard? God will lift us on wings like eagles and we will be new again.

Amen