

February 5 – Isaiah 40:21-31 ‘You Can’t Do it Alone’

When you are feeling beat up by life, where is the good news? When you are feeling weak where can you find the strength to go on? When you are feeling lost where do you look for direction? When you feel like you are mired in the mud of futility can you even contemplate being free of the muck, much less soaring? I ask these questions because we have all had those times of discouragement in our lives. Right now people we care about, friends and family, are asking these questions as they struggle with lost jobs, mounting debt and the possibility that they will lose their homes. The people of Judah, to whom Isaiah was speaking, were probably asking many of these same kinds of questions. Not too long before, they had been carried off into exile. Some were questioning whether God cared about their situation; others were struggling to find meaning in their faith in such a time; and some, looking towards the future, saw no hope. Their existence as a people was at stake. Earlier conquerors had carted off the northern tribes of Israel never to be heard from again. Would that be their fate as well? Isaiah was given the task, by God, to try and answer some of their questions and to give them the hope and the courage to live faithfully in such unsettled times.

Isaiah begins by reminding them that God is bigger than this moment in history. He does this by celebrating the limitless power and concerns of God. We hear in verse 28, "the everlasting God" (literally "the God of forever") and "creator of the ends of the earth." The rest of verse 28 affirms this as it indicates that God's capacity is endless as God's reach is inexhaustible. God does not grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable. Earlier we humans have been compared to grasshoppers or tender seedlings that perish in a hot wind. Isaiah is painting a pretty impressive picture of God's power and our weakness. Isaiah goes on to stress how inadequate we are to handle the long distances of history and the circumstances of life. Hear those words again, "even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted." He was helping them to understand that even though this was a pretty bleak time, God was in control. God had not given up on them. God had not been defeated by the gods of the Babylonians. Try as they might they won't be able to figure out how this time fits into the bigger pictures of life and history, but they are called to be patient and faithful.

We can identify with them, can't we? When we are going through a tough time all of our energy is focused on just getting through today and maybe tomorrow. We don't have the time or the strength to step back and see the big picture. We get mad at life and at times at God. So, we too need to be reminded that this trying time is but a blip in our life. It only has the power to define all of our life for all time if we let it happen. Even though we can't make sense of why it is happening we are told that we are to trust in God who can see the big picture. We are challenged to have hope even when it seems hopeless because the God of all history holds this moment in God's hands and in faith we will be given the strength to get through it one day at a time and can, some day, look back at this moment as a footnote in our history.

Think of one of the worst times in your life. Now think of the blessings you have experience. Do you see that that time, no matter how bad it was or is as you might be going through it is just a small part of your life. Ultimately you moved beyond it and found ways to incorporate its teachings into your life. Often you are a much stronger person because of it, but you didn't see the growth taking place at that time. I need to be clear here. Isaiah was not saying that God causes bad things to happen so you will learn to trust. He does say when bad things happen trust and have hope because God is with you.

But Isaiah doesn't end there. This isn't a word to just be quiet and take what life has to dish out and wait until God decides to act. When we are feeling discouraged we think God doesn't care and doesn't know about our situations. The people of his day were talking that way, saying "my way is hidden from the Lord." Isaiah says this great all powerful creative God knows what is going on and cares. God gives power to the faint and strength to the powerless. God sees you and sees the future fully where you cannot and if you are willing to follow God's direction with strength you can move confidently towards new beginnings.

This is one of the hard parts of faith. When we are mired in the mud of futility and hopelessness, to remember God is at work in this situation is so challenging. At those times when there is no immediate help for our situation it doesn't feel like God cares and at times as if anyone else cares as well.

How do we tap into this care and find the strength and power we are promised? One of the things we have to understand is that we can't do it alone. One of the great sins of humanity is believing that we have the resources to handle all of life's issues. We believe independence is a virtue while asking for help is somehow a moral failing. We take pride in our successes, hide our failures and often find ourselves struggling needlessly. This idea comes from the Puritans. This valuing of self-initiative, which we so treasure, is not really Biblical. The quote "God helps those who help themselves" is our motto. We want to believe it is in the Bible but it actually comes from Greek philosophy.

Isaiah has a different view. It isn't about us but about our relying upon God's help. We are called to wait upon the Lord and if we do God will help us. We know this passage well. "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." No where do I see this saying, try doing it all yourself until you are completely exhausted and then turn to God. Or God will only help you if you have tried and tried and tried on your own. It is talking about partnership. We turn to God in trust, waiting upon God and God's timing and being open to how God will work and if we do we will find the strength needed.

Here is an interesting side note: This part of Isaiah was written during the time of the exile in Babylon. The images of verse 31, wings like eagles, unwearied feet, and boundless stamina invoke that of a winged animal with a human head that was one of the predominant images of Babylon. These hybrid creatures represented strength and power. It is as if Isaiah was saying our God is this and more!

God cares and will give us the strength we need. We are all right with this but where the snag is we often get the help God is able to give by asking for it from others and this we do not like to do. We want the help on our terms.

I am reminded of the old joke about the man whose town was flooded. He prayed to God asking for help. He heard a voice saying, "Have no fear, I will save you." The waters rose and soon he was hanging out of a second floor window. A rescue team in a

boat came by. He refused to get in saying, "God will save me." Later the waters continued to rise so he climbed up on the roof. Another boat came by to rescue him but he refused saying again, "God will save me." Now he is on the peak of the house and the waters continue to rise. A helicopter comes by and he refuses to take the rescue line saying, "God is going to save me." Next, he drowns. Now when he gets to heaven he is really mad. He demands to see God immediately. He says, "I don't know why I am here. You said you were going to save me." God replies, "I don't know why you are here either. I sent two boats and a helicopter."

First of all hear the good news. We are in no situation alone. God cares. The people of Israel were feeling beaten down by life. They were in exile and their future looked less than hopeful. There was nothing they could do to make things better. It would have been easy to give up. Isaiah reminded them that God knows, God cares and so they are to have help. We have all had those times where we cannot do it alone. We are discouraged. Isaiah reminds us that there is help. Often, as I said it is through others. By waiting upon God, listening to what God wants, we can find that strength to deal with the issue and soar with the eagles. Jesus would talk about this as well. He would say, "Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find...." God wants us to help each other, care for one another and in this way we mount up with wings and run without being weary. The weak, the faint, the despairing, and the doubting get a do-over and perhaps also a makeover. God's creating power can transform us and give us the ability to deal with the terrain of our new circumstances.

Newness is possible because God stands at creation. Transformation can happen because God is the only source of power as seen in creation. Life can take a new start because the one who keeps creation together acts in the events of history for good. Second Isaiah advocates waiting, not as a neutral activity but waiting with hope for optimistic results because God acts in history. Part of the active waiting is being willing to see where God is at work now, how we can find the resources we need by asking and in all be filled with trust. This helps us get past this moment of difficulty, gets us out of the mud that mires us and allows us to, with anticipation, look forward to the time we will be soaring again.