

Sermon, February 4, 2024

Isaiah 40:21-31

“Waiting Upon the Lord”

What is a prophet? Great prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were men called to rise up at times of crisis - at times when Israel's future hung in the balance. Part of the task of these prophets was to chastise the people for their sinful ways, but also to call them in the direction of their redemption - for as angry and disappointed as God may be towards them His compassion and love for them remains.

The Book of Isaiah is generally divided into two parts by biblical scholars, because it is clear that the two parts were written at different times in Israel's history. The first part of Isaiah, chapters 1 through 39, speaks of God's anger at the fact that the people of Judah had fallen away from him. They were guilty of various forms of political corruption, as well as corruption of a theological nature. Many had turned to idols of Gold and silver, leaving their covenant with Yahweh behind; and Isaiah chastised them for their corruption and idolatry, and warned them that they were headed towards disaster - a disaster that would be seen as punishment for their unfaithful ways.

Well, as it turns out, in the year 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, would lay siege on Jerusalem, leading to its destruction, including the tearing down of Solomon's Temple which housed the Arc of the Covenant and contained the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments. Many of the Jews would also be captured and carried off into exile. Isaiah had warned them that such a disaster would take place, but also foretold that in time a remnant of those who were exiled would return, and Jerusalem would be restored.

This brings us to what is called Second Isaiah, which begins with chapter 40, and which contains this morning's reading. Nebuchadnezzar had died and the redemption of the exiled and the restoration of Jerusalem was near. This is made evident by the very first verse of chapter 40, which reads, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins”. In other words, it is now a time for rejoicing. But Isaiah is not ready to completely let them off the hook. He wants them to be aware of why they have fallen. Verse 6 reads, “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it, surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.” What he is saying is that for us human beings our faith can be fragile. It may be healthy like the grass of spring, and it may even bloom with the beauty of a flower, but then, there comes times,

especially when we are faced with difficult circumstances, that our faith can wither and fade away. We lose sight of the steadfastness of our Lord.

He also draws attention to the problem of idolatry. The people had turned away from Yahweh, placing their faith in false gods that were created by human hands, just as we may be tempted to shift our allegiance, placing our trust in other things, such as money, or power, or even false prophets. Isaiah writes, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God; the Creator of the ends of the earth". He is asking us how we can place our trust in these other things, rather than in the One who brings all things into being?

Again, faith can be a fragile thing. Life sometimes has a habit of getting in the way, sometimes with the hard knocks that life can throw in front of us. Sometimes we are faced with doubts, and we may question the reality of God. We ask, if there truly is a God, and if so does he really care? What evidence might there be that could erase our doubts, and strengthen our belief?

I was recently reading a sermon by a twentieth century preacher named George Buttrick, which began like this, "When an Arabian chief was asked how he knew God, he answered, "How do I know when a camel has passed my tent? By the footprints ". Footprints are a sign of something that has happened in the past. Sometimes, when my faith begins to waver, I look back to past times when I have been faced with challenges, or felt helpless in the face a difficult situation, when all of a sudden something comes along and totally changes things for the better, I feel the strange sense that God has somehow been involved, and I can think of those times as evidence of God's footprints, giving me the faith to carry on.

In the ancient world gods were often thought of having human traits, and at times they could feel weary, but Isaiah says that is not the case with the one true God, that " he does not faint or grow weary", instead, "He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless". He continues, "...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."

I looked at this verse in different translations. Some say, those who wait for the Lord. Others say those who hope in the Lord. And if you think about it, the words 'wait' and 'hope' are intimately tied together. To wait recognizes that God works in his own way, in his own time, but what sense is there in waiting if you don't have hope? We wait because we have hope in the Lord. And then I read the same passage in the Tanakh, which is put out by the Jewish Publishing Society, and it reads, "...they who trust in the Lord shall renew their strength".

As I have mentioned in the past, in biblical terms faith and trust are synonymous. To have faith in God is to trust God, and having trust in God we then have hope, and because we have hope we are willing to wait!

Our reading says, "they shall mount up with wings like eagles", whereas the Tanakh says, "As eagles grow new plumes". As you may know, there comes a time when eagles shed old feathers so new ones can grow. For us it symbolizes renewal. When we trust, and hope, and wait upon the Lord, we are renewed and find the strength we need to carry on! Amen.

Let us pray: O Lord, our God, we thank you for this day, and for its many blessings. We thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus, and all that he has done for us. We ask that your Holy Spirit be among us this morning inspiring and guiding us. There are times Lord, when we grow weary, and are grateful that you strengthen us when we feel weak. Be with us as a congregation, that we might be a blessing to our community when we are faithful to you. Amen.