

**ISAIAH'S TURN; ISAIAH 40:21-31; FEBRUARY 8, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY;  
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There are glorious moments in Scripture, great crescendos of vision, in which the writer extols the magnificence of the Creator God. The psalms are littered with such episodes of praise: Psalm 8 – “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you have established, what are humans, mortals that you care for them?”

Or the wondrous chapters 38 and 39 from Job – “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements? Or shut in the sea with doors? Or made the clouds like a garment? Can you bind the chains of Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion?”

The New Testament is not without its ecstatic utterings either: The Beatitudes of Jesus; St. Paul on the nature of love; the Book of Revelation on the vision of a new heaven and new earth where God himself shall be with them and wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Sometimes we need to be reminded of God’s grandeur and glory. Maybe our faith has been shaken by an unexpected grief or loss or some task we must pursue against overwhelming odds. We begin to question the order and fairness of things, we question the existence of a higher power or one, at least, one aware of our plight.

This is the situation when Isaiah speaks to the people of God today. The people are in exile, under the thumb of their Babylonian overlords, longing for their homeland, despairing of their purpose as God’s people, questioning God’s presence, God’s ability to deliver them, even God’s existence.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that in addition to the formidable reality of the Babylonian military and political machine the Babylonian gods are in the background of this story; gods who guaranteed the regime and who appeared to be stronger than the countering power of Israel’s own God.

In the face of Israel’s despair and doubt Isaiah reminds the people that their God, Yahweh, created the heavens, the earth, and life upon the earth; in other words – all that is. This is a power not claimed by Babylon’s or anyone else’s religion; a power that is then greater than the oppressor Babylonian regime.

But first Isaiah pricks the conscience of the Hebrews, “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” Of course he knows that they have heard what he is about to say for indeed every time they light the candles of Shabbat they sing of God’s glory; they remember he laid the foundations of the earth, that he sits high above it, that he stretches the heavens, spreads them like a tent, that he brings princes to nothing, and makes rulers as naught.”

Isaiah reminds the people that this great God does not grow weary or faint, that his understanding is unsearchable, yet he gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Indeed, those who wait upon the Lord renew their strength and mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

When fear and despair kick in the world which is large and dynamic grows small and static. Our vision narrows into a tunnel focused on the very thing that ignites our fear and despair and we enter into a repeating cycle of fright and flight.

But Isaiah wants to interrupt that self-defeating cycle; he wants the people to know that their God will protect and watch over them. And further that their God is bigger and stronger than any calamity or oppressor they might face.

And this is the story of much of the Bible: as the little tribe of the Hebrews seek a promised land and are delivered from slavery in Egypt and as they meet the armies of their enemies. David and Goliath is a parable of their existence: tiny Israel against overwhelming odds. It is what God calls his people to do: to stand up to circumstances of injustice or brokenness or disease, whatever the world presents us with, and carry out our mission knowing we are not alone.

It reminds me of the summer I worked in the steel mill in Pittsburgh. My brother-in-law's father, who was then just the father of my sister's boyfriend got me the job—he was a foreman in the rolling mill that shaped red-hot ten ton ingots; he said that a summer in the steel mill would make me appreciate my college education.

But after the first week of work I was not sure that I had made the right decision. Our bosses were slave drivers, we worked one, sometimes two shifts cleaning out the steaming-hot sluices of the rolling mill that carried slag to the river with just two fifteen minute breaks in each shift. Each day I dreaded facing the supervisors. At the end of that first week, I think I'd lost nearly ten pounds of baby fat and water weight; before we got our assignments for the morning one day our supervisors shrewdly asked us who got us our jobs, since all the summer help had someone with a connection to the company and the supervisors wanted to know who our connections were.

The others ahead of me mentioned vice presidents, executives of major vendors and customers then it was my turn and I said "Al Bell. Al Bell got me my job." There was a stunned silence. It was as if I had uttered the unutterable name of God. Did you say "Al Bell?" the supervisor asked to make sure he had heard me correctly. "Yes," I replied and said the holy name again. "Al Bell is a terror," the supervisor told me, "Everyone in this steel mill fears him. You're golden, kid."

I felt like the weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders. Even though I think I only saw him once or twice that summer, it was as if Mr. Bell was by my side wherever I went. Of course, I worked hard because I did not want to disappoint him but I also knew that I would not become a pawn in the hands of the supervisors.

That's what Isaiah wants to convey to the people of God in the furnace of life, in their Babylonian captivity. He wants them to know that though their circumstances are harsh Yahweh is with them and watches over them.

The people could take refuge in the fact that their God was more powerful than the proxy gods of the Babylonians. In fact, they had nothing to fear. What they had to do was to trust and wait patiently for the Lord to lead them.

And just to make sure they would try that, he gave them a promise; he said, that their God was never tired, weary or faint; so when it seemed as if they had been waiting for God with no sign yet of God showing up; they had to trust that their God was never exhausted or ready to call it quits.

And this restored them; learning to wait with hope gave them the resolve and perseverance they needed to face another day and in what seemed an interminable captivity.

You shall run and not be weary; walk and not faint. You shall mount up with wings as eagles Isaiah told them.

Just as there is a cycle of fright and flight there is also a cycle of fright and fight; not where we run from the battle but stay to engage it.

One of my clearest memories of 'staying to engage the battle' was in the swim of the Ironman in 2011 at Lake Placid. We'd been up since 4am getting breakfast, checking our gear, assembling our nutrition for a day long triathlon; but the scariest part of it for me was 7am 2.4 mile swim with 2,800 people – a mass start in which everyone crosses under the starting flags at the same time and tries to get the best advantage.

For some reason, as my son and I were treading water before the gun went off I remembered that all of you were praying for me as were my family and friends who knew where I was on that day, at that hour. So rather than hyperventilating in my wetsuit, I was calm and confident. Although I was surrounded by almost three thousand other swimmers in the water, many younger and stronger than me, I knew that I was where I was supposed to be and that I would be fine.

My guess is that some of us find ourselves treading water today; some of us find ourselves living in harsh circumstances, perhaps the mental/emotional equivalent of working in a blazing hot steel mill with drill sergeants for supervisors.

Jesus knew this very plight throughout his life. Today he faces an entire city in need; an endless sea of people who want him, need him to pray for them, touch their wounds, bring some relief and healing.

In the morning, the Gospel says, he went out to a deserted place and prayed. We can imagine what was on his mind: the endless need, the limit of his capacity as one man, yet the hope and relief he gave them as he proclaimed good news and brought healing. We know that on another occasion when he was in a garden on the night before his arrest he teetered between weakness and strength but when he turned everything over to God and let go he was able to face his accusers, the trial and eventually the cross which he would defeat.

Today's story is about finding faith in hard times, trusting God in our circumstances; Isaiah tells the people to remember how glorious and great is their God.

That this God who spun the whirling planets also stands by them.

Such a God lifts us up and gives us the wings of eagles to fly through and above the storms of life. Amen.