

The Rev. Sharon A. Benton

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Plymouth Congregational UCC

Live Our Faith, Free Our Future
Isaiah 40:21-31

What a wonderful reading for trying times. Isaiah's familiar, uplifting words bring us to flight. Hopefully just hearing them read lightens some of the load each of us carries.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The people of God shall have strength!

Fly! Run! Walk! – Make it!

It's a grand "saying 'yes!'" to life.

Isaiah may have been one of the greatest spiritual encouragers of all time.

His purpose in many of his writings was to hold his community together during some really difficult periods.

Not hold them together for togetherness' sake;
but to help them remain faithful to their deepest selves,
to their spiritual core in a hard and demanding world.

Isaiah helped hold them together
for the sake of their covenant to be God's people.

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?"

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth".

This is the God of all things;
the God of all of us.

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It's good to reconnect with such passages of hope,  
reminders of God's expansiveness beyond any of our full knowing.

Readings like this one also remind us that we're not the first to struggle with the troubles of this life.

That those before us felt the stress and strain ... and that they made it through.

"Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted".

Yes, there are times when it seems that even those who appear to have it all going for them need God just as much as anyone else.

Thank God we have these reminders that God is for *all* of us!

That God will give *even us* strength,  
if we but give ourselves over to her care.

God will give us wings to fly.

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It's been important to me that this beautiful image of being lifted up –

as if on powerful wings gently riding a continuous breeze of God's spirit –

not become trite.

That the hope and perseverance Isaiah offers be more than a platitude used to quiet us –
to deny our very real fears – during challenging times.

And really, it couldn't be used as such, because his hearers wouldn't have stood for it!

Isaiah offered these words of encouragement to the people of Israel in exile –
no soft words are going to comfort them.

They have been lamenting to one another,
“My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”.
They feel abandoned by all the security they once knew,
and it turns their world into a fearful place;
they are unsure of their futures,
unsure how to survive their new circumstances –
(such anxiety may sound familiar to some of us).

And yet, Isaiah is able to bring them back from despair,
refocus them on what matters,
on that center from which every other part of their lives flow –

God.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?”

Of course they have!

God’s promise is in their blood, their bones, their souls.

This *is* where their strength comes from.

And that reminder is part of what allows them to wait on the God who shall renew their strength.

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As the practical people we are, we may wonder how we can plug in to this resource today.

Beyond Isaiah’s poetry,  
how does God give you strength when you’ve  
lost a job or  
received a devastating diagnosis or  
had some other challenge hit you upside the head?

Or even the quieter crises that seem more everyday  
that we don’t often name them during prayers of the people:  
how to deal with raising a child or  
a parent’s deteriorating abilities or  
no longer connecting with a dear friend.  
*How does God renew our strength when we  
just can’t bring ourselves to run or walk,  
much less dream of flying?*

I believe that one of those ways is physically all around us.

I think of Isaiah’s care for his community;  
his encouragements that held the people of God together.

In our context, that community of fellow weary but supportive travelers  
would be the Church.

Sometimes our culture wonders about the Church’s relevance in our time;

but what is its relevance if not to encourage one another,  
to find strength to honor our covenant as the people of God;  
to live our faith;

to remind us that there is something greater than any of us as individuals –  
something we are an important part of.



I know this depth of caring by a church is not unusual,  
and I'm sure you know of others in this congregation who've been sustained in similar ways.  
Perhaps you yourself have been on the receiving end. You know there is nothing like it.

As I continued to talk with John this week, he expanded on my broader theme for today:  
that at first he thought the church building was not a very important aspect of who we are:  
it's just a building.

But then over time he came to recognize that this building  
is what housed the small groups, hosted the art show,  
and everything else that made him feel he'd found a home.

Without this building, he never would have been  
a part of an open and affirming church community:  
where he could be surrounded  
with prayers  
and love  
and continue to live a full life  
as long as possible.

Are we a part of a ministry that helps people to fly?

When one of our church members was laid off 2 weeks ago, we invited a team of various professionals to  
come together to brainstorm ways we can be of support to unemployed members;  
how we can help them fly when, perhaps, too weary to walk.

But again, amidst these greater crises, there are *everyday* ways that God's church serves the whole people  
of God.

The strength of wings and God's love comes through the quieter sustenance of a  
Sunday School program that gives parents the peace-of-mind that their children  
will come away *knowing* that the Creator loves them unconditionally  
alongside values of care for self and others.

The strength of wings and God's love is  
in every prayer shawl given to someone who needs healing,  
in every meal delivered to an overwhelmed family,  
in every small group that helps create new relationships,  
and in every potluck that brings us together in fellowship.

Are we a part of a church that helps people to fly with the knowledge of God's love for them?

As your Associate Minister for Congregational Life and Care,  
this is one of the things I see as the relevance of Plymouth's ministry;

I am witness to the care that this congregation provides  
to so many people both outside and within these walls,  
to the many ways that God lifts you up through this church –  
and it is NOT insignificant.

As a people, we are sometimes uncomfortable focusing on ourselves as well as others;  
 giving financially to support our own ministries stirs up  
 an inherited guilt or expectation that somehow  
 naming our own needs is sinful or indulgent –  
*but we DO have need of God's strength!*

We, each of us, sometimes need the encouragement to fly, to run, even to walk.  
 To make it.  
 To say “yes” particularly amidst life’s challenges.

And seeing the many needs as well as the deep deep care of individuals in this congregation is why,  
 especially in this difficult time,  
 I add my voice in absolute support of sustaining all of Plymouth’s significant ministries  
 through the Live Our Faith, Free Our Future Campaign.  
 We are the people of God *acting together* to help one another fly.

We contribute to our collective strength to rise up –  
 me lifting you when you need it,  
 you lifting me when I need it,  
 and all of us lifting others around the world when they need it.

*Because God is for all of us;  
 wants all of us to experience that strength of being lifted up  
 just when we think we can't do any more.*

We are called to support this ministry, this building, this campaign and all that God provides through it.

We are called to *live our faith*, people of God.  
 Live our faith knowing that we are upheld for the journey:  
 that through God we shall indeed run and not be weary;  
 we shall walk and not faint.  
 ...We may even fly once in a while.  
 Thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> “The People Who Could Fly” by Otis Moss III on *30 Good Minutes*, first aired Dec. 31, 2006.  
[http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/moss\\_5012.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/moss_5012.htm)