

Wings for the Weary  
Isaiah 40:25-31

*They shall mount up with wings like eagles...*

Several weeks ago, the front page of newspapers across the country celebrated the news that the bald eagle has been removed from the federal list of threatened and endangered species.

I wonder: When it was first listed as endangered in 1967,  
did ministers avoid preaching this passage?

I, on the other hand, would like to take advantage of this perfect timing  
to probe the possibilities this reading offers –  
especially since the de-listing of our national bird might add insight to this familiar imagery of hope.

“Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles”  
...and their strength shall *not* be threatened by extinction.

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In our tradition, we have the freedom to read Scripture in many ways.  
In fact, not only do we tend to preach from an historical lens one week,  
an ethical or sociological context the next,  
a literary study periodically,  
and metaphysical interpretation, oh, every so often;  
but we tend to incorporate a little bit of several lenses each Sunday ...  
as well as a healthy dose of personal experience.

This week we read from a tiny portion of Isaiah.

In it, the author is speaking words acknowledging his people’s situation,  
words of comfort and encouragement to the Hebrew people in exile.

But they, Isaiah’s hearers in that time and place,  
are not the only ones to experience and interpret his words.

“Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted”: today, as well as then.

“God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless”.

Sometimes we hear these words and recognize them as speaking to an immediate, physical limitation;  
a body that’s tired or sick or overworked.

Other times these same words – “they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” –  
evoke an all-too familiar emotional exhaustion.

It can be different each time we encounter the reading.

How you will hear and interpret the passage depends on where you are in the moment.

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So how do you hear this passage today? “I will raise you up on eagle’s wings”,

Is there a sense of nostalgia because you grew up hearing the hymn that we’ll sing in just a few minutes?

Do you hear it with a critical ear toward the pie-in-the-sky expectation of a help from  
“above”?

Perhaps this is your first time hearing these words, and you’re just letting them settle  
in you.

...*Today, I* hear a question that emerges from last week's Instant Sermon.

As I pondered the scriptural images of weariness and strength,  
my experience led me to ask: *What makes my faith life weary? What exhausts my faith?*

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Last Sunday, as Hal, Julie and I parried your theological questions,  
my strongest and most instantaneous response came as a bit of a surprise to me –  
not the content, but the passion with which I answered.

The question was along the lines of:

“What do you view as the most important issue of faith in the next 10 years?” and my response was “unity”:  
the need to reach out across the lines that separate people of faith – especially Christians with such drastic  
theological differences.

You may be wondering: and what does that have to do with eagle's wings?

This same need that I see as urgent for our faith and for our commitment to Christ –  
the challenge of coming together rather than deliberately dividing ourselves by Christ's message –  
*is also the most wearying to me, the most exhausting.*

And I venture to guess that it is wearying for many of you, as well.

I think we at Plymouth are energized by joining hands with our neighbors in the progressive Christian community.  
We often talk about how we have more in common with liberal Mennonites and Episcopalians than with our fellow  
UCCers in this association.

And we're energized by working with the interfaith community,  
both here in Fort Collins and around the world.

Where stretching for unity becomes a challenge,  
where it begins to get and frustrating, infuriating,  
and definitely wearying,  
is in the contemplation of engaging our own Christian family,  
in loving our neighbor right next door as well as we love the ones across the globe.

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Let me give you a quick example about how this challenge wearies me, personally.

This past week I paid my dutiful 6-month visit to the dentist.

There was a new hygienist, who conversationally asked what I do for a living,  
*and immediately I became guarded.*

Now, so you know, sometimes I feel that just this simple question posed to me in Colorado should be part of some  
sociological study, because I'm not often surprised to get one of two general responses:

The first is

disbelief, discomfort or a soft scolding that a woman would claim to be a pastor ... sometimes it's  
accompanied by the underlying suggestion that, “what I mean to say” is I volunteer to lead Bible studies on  
Wednesday evenings.

The other response is

a sudden need to watch your language and hide your beer,  
because ministers keep track of these things!

These moments can be humorous, if I let myself laugh –  
but just keeping myself on guard, preparing for one of those responses  
is tiring.

Not only that, but it's tiring to constantly go into what are called teaching moments:  
“Yes, there are actual woman ministers;  
and no, we're not all that critical of your social life”.

Here, among you, I can be just who I am and who God has called me to be.

Among you, it's energizing and joyful to do so (most of the time)!  
But when I step out of this place and take my faith with me,  
I sometimes find myself in the midst of Isaiah's lament:  
“My way is hidden from the One,  
and my right is disregarded by my God”.

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This is my example, not yours.

And as a caveat, I recognize that part of my personal challenge  
is the fact that Christians have never truly been united in the entire history of our tradition –  
just look at our dueling Gospel stories,

the arguments between the apostles in Paul's letters,  
the many “heretical” witch-hunts we've endured,  
not to mention the thousands of splits into denomination and non-denomination.

So what makes me think this is something for my faith to work toward now, when liberal and conservative  
Christian dialogue acts more like the filibuster carried out in the Senate last week than like anything remotely  
resembling productive communication?

It wearies my faith life. And I'm more than ready for some wings.

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This is what I hear when I read Isaiah's passage today,  
that my most important issue of faith is also my most exhausting.

*What do you hear?*

*Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these?  
The One who brings out their host and numbers them,  
calling them all by name;  
because that One is great in strength,  
mighty in power, not one is missing.  
Why do you say... ‘My way is hidden from the One,  
and my right is disregarded by my God’?  
Have you not known, have you not heard?  
The One is the everlasting God...  
God does not faint or grow weary...  
but gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.  
Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;  
but those who wait for the One 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.*

Are you in the midst of needing strength, or are you currently flying high?  
Or do the two merge together for you right now?

How does the Divine's strength come to you in your life of faith?

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? The One is the everlasting God...*

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Lucky us, we don't have to believe the bible as a literal interpretation –  
I may feel renewed but I'm not going to sprout wings here.

We also don't have to be pie-in-the-sky in order to claim the power and beauty of these words,  
to take solace in believing that our Creator will lift us up and give us strength.

The strength you receive could be like eagle's wings,  
or it could feel more like a wave that buoys you up,  
or like stone holding you firm,  
or like a tree rooting you deeply.

I can't describe your experience of God's strength in your life when you feel weakest and most spent.

But I can know that others have found their strength on the wings of this passage.

And I can know that faith, even when exhausted,  
continues to search for something healing and strengthening.

May you also be able to name *your* faith's greatest need,  
and acknowledge where you are weary;  
then seek out your strength,  
and may it carry you through weariness  
without fear of extinction.

Amen.