

SEARCHING FOR STRENGTH

[Written in oral form]

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39
Epiphany 5 Year B

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“...But **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.”

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Two bird stories:

The egg of a golden eagle was found by a young girl and taken to a chicken coop where a hen kept it warm until it was hatched.

This baby eagle found itself amidst the chickens, and followed their simple lead – clucking and pecking at the ground and only flapping his wings. He thought this was his life, never daring to fully test his wings.

One day a golden eagle saw this young eagle in the chicken yard, scratching the dirt and clucking. The eagle landed near him, and said, “Why are you pecking here in the dust when you could be soaring in the sky with the eagles?”

He laughed saying, “You must be crazy. This is all I can do; this is all I’ve ever known, this is who I am and.. this is all there is for me.”

This was the first time the *eagle-chicken* considered his potential, and it took another eagle to get him to ponder another way.

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There are too many furred wings. There are too many pecking at the ground because that’s all they’ve ever done.....

The Isaiah writer called them.... **not chickens**,but **grasshoppers**.

Another story:

There once was a merchant who lived in one of the big cities in Brazil. The merchant had come from a small rural village to seek his fortune in the big city, andhe had succeeded.

The only thing he had brought with him to the big city was his pet parrot. He had caught the beautiful parrot in the jungle just outside of his village.

He had gone from rags to riches, from a poor shack to a luxury apartment, and the parrot’s small bamboo cage had been replaced by a large gilded cage.

One day the merchant decided to go home for a visit, to show everyone how well he had succeeded in life. Before he left, he explained to his parrot that he would be away for a few days. He told the parrot that he was going to the place where both of them had come from.

He asked the parrot if he could bring anything back for him.

The parrot asked...if the merchant could do him one favour.

“What is it?” asked the merchant.

“Can you go out into the jungle where you first found me, and tell the other parrots there that I am happy in my cage.”

The merchant promised to do as the parrot requested.

He went home, and was received as an honoured guest. On his last day there, he remembered his parrot’s request. He walked out into the jungle, where he had caught the parrot when he was quite young.

He found a group of parrots sitting on a tree.

He spoke with them, and relayed the message, telling them how successful he had become, and how happy his parrot was in its gilded cage.

The merchant was shocked when one of the parrots suddenly dropped dead and fell out of the tree to the ground.

Shaken and confused, the merchant went home.

When he arrived back to his city apartment, he told his parrot all about how great a success the visit home had been.

His parrot asked, “Did you speak to the parrots in the jungle?”

“Yes, I did. I told them how happy you were in your cage. And, the strange thing is, as soon as I said that, one of the parrots fell down dead. I have never seen anything quite like it.”

No sooner had the merchant said this, when his own parrot suddenly dropped down dead.

The merchant was flabbergasted.

He opened the cage, and examined the bird. IT WAS MOTIONLESS. Sadly, he took it outside, and laid it on the ground, so he could dig a hole to bury it.

As soon as he let go of the bird, the parrot jumped up.

“Thank you,” said the parrot to the confused merchant.

“I needed to learn from the other parrots how to be free.”

With that, the parrot flew up into the sky, and began the long journey which would lead him home.

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There are a lot of parrots living in plush, gilded cages, living off the wealth around them,..... yet.... unhappy.

What does it take to be free? ????????

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Perhaps, we first.... need to learn how to let go and die?

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Isaiah was addressing people who had grown comfortable with their captivity. They were faced with a choice: to either remain in Babylon – which likely meant giving up their heritage and religion, and become like the Babylonians OR Leave as Cyrus, the new leader of Babylon, was demanding, and go back to their homeland.

Leaving meant a long journey to an unfamiliar place that they had left over two generations ago.

The choice was not easy. Leaving meant hard times, letting go of most of what they had,and it demanded faith– Faith in their own strength and in God’s help. This Faith is much like giving up power and agenda in order to "wait."

It was a scary and disturbing time!

Also notice, this is a message to the collective / to a people, and not to individuals.

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*Sometimes “Home” is a geographic location, but it is mostly a sense, a situation, .... even a calling, to be where we need to be.*

*Home is a place of safety, nourishment, acceptance and growth– a place where we can be free to spread our wings.*

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Where are we today? What is our condition?

Are we inside the cage or outside? ???????

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From the media and social buzz, we are told that we are living in scary and disturbing times. The world situation feels like a cold winter wind through an open door.

Even so, perhaps the swirl of unease is causing us to consider another way?

Yet, most of us are quite comfortable, albeit concerned about the political climate.....and worried about the decline of the church, too.

We don't like the news we are seeing and hearing,.....when we look out from our secure place.

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?Have we been seduced and entrapped by our culture?

Life is pretty good and predictable,.....for most of us.

Nevertheless, we do care and we are deeply troubled by the conflict and injustices in the Middle East, the plight of fleeing refugees and the growing violence and injustices throughout the world.

Vitriolic threats certain leaders are spewing increases our anxiety and concern. It seems the world is becoming more polarized.

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It is fascinating how we reject extremism and polarization, yet we Mennonites refuse to let go of our differences. We keep emphasizing them as we move to opposite ends of the Mennonite table.   ????

How do we reconcile our attitudes, our behaviours and our apathy to our Mennonite values?

How do we measure and compare our lives to the example Jesus gave us?????????????

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In a time of transition and upheaval, where do we look for strength and hope?

What is it that makes us afraid?

Are we worried about our future? And, if so, why???????

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To the children of God, Isaiah proclaims:

Have you not heard? Do you not know what kind of God we have?

Political leaders are Nothing compared to God.

No one / nothing compares to God – the creator of all things.

Lift up your eyes.....to the stars.... and see. It is God who made each and every one.

Then the writer asks a sharp question, “Why do you feel as if God ignores you and has abandoned you?

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To that question comes the cutting response:

Don’t you know that God gives power to the faint, God strengthens the powerless.... and all this comes to those who Wait FOR God?”

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The tacit message leaves an open wound.

That unspoken warning is:

“OH, you are not the one of the weak and powerless, and you are wanting to proceed on your own,.... but with some help. OH.....that is a problem, isn’t it?”

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This passage also includes the moving words of encouragement about lifting up with wings like eagles. That is wonderful imagery. The mental picture of an eagle's strong giant wings, grabbing the air and lifting off the ground is truly moving.

And of course, this analogy is about the human spirit – having confidence and strength to take “symbolic” flight.

This is good.... motivational, hope granting.... inspiration.

We want our religion to give us hope.....

Yet, ..... did you happen to notice the dynamics of the movement?

Who’s doing the movement?

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The implied message is very different than that old popular poem “Footprints in the Sand.”

That “Footprints” verse suggests that during tough times God rescues us by picking us up and carrying us.

I imagine there are some people idly anticipating that will happen,..... assuming “if they only had more faith” God would sweep them away.

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Do you want Myth..... or reality?????

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Personally, I’ve never seen it happen, and I don’t think the Bible teaches that rescue plan. [sorry]

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Even so, don’t underestimate the power in Isaiah’s message, in spite of the fact.... that it states **we will do** the walking, running and flying with wings.

Which begs the questions that tie us to the Mark passage:

how can that be... and where do we get the strength?

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The Mark passage gives us a glimpse of a day in the life of Jesus.

After Jesus finished teaching in the synagogue, he went to a Simon Peter's house where his mother-in-law was quite ill.

A brief aside: Did you catch that – Peter's mother-in-law?

Peter was married! The disciples were not a group of bachelors with lots of free time to roam around. Obviously, some of them were married, and likely had families. Interesting to think about, isn't it?

Back to the text:

Jesus took the sick lady by the hand, and touched her. A touch was enough, *along with all the prayers and support she was getting from the others*, and..... she became well.

There is a clue here. To demonstrate that she was really healed, Mark notes that she began to serve her guests.

I don't think that observation was an example of being a subservient woman, but rather it was a sign that her focus and life had changed. She shifted to direct her energies to others – a sign of healing and strength.

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By evening, everyone in the town had brought their sick and needy to be "touched" by Jesus, and one by one....he ministered to those around him. The text says "Many were cured, but not everyone?"

*I'm not going to address the acts of restorations or the exorcisms*, except to say, we don't know the nature of the demons. They could include the demons of fear and selfishness.????

Jesus did do amazing things, and this brief passage gives us a snippet of a day in Jesus' life. He **did** a lot of preaching and reaching out and helping and healing people. He was all over the map, literally.

When our church contemplates the desire to have a focussed ministry, let us remember that Jesus didn't focus on one ministry.

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Still,.....where did Jesus get his strength to do all that he did?

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Being a follower of Christ can be draining, be it serving in a church, being a nurse, a social worker, a parent, a teacher, a professor, as student.... or any activity that takes more than it gives.

Standing up and speaking out against the destructive current in our culture takes a toll. It is **HARD** being a pacifist, and striving to follow Christ's example is challenging.

It tempting to just go with the flow. It seems a lot easier to just go along, and are we really making a difference?

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Kaj [Kazsh] Munk, a Danish pastor wrote the following:

Perhaps all this talk about God and Jesus Christ and the salvation of man [sic]is just a collection of fairy tales.

And, I am a minister. I am in the employment of Jesus Christ, [and I am paid by the church.] Perhaps this is a mistake too. Perhaps it is a mistake to preach love and forgiveness in a hate-torn world, to rescue those who are in need, to teach the children, to comfort the lonely and the dying. But, if it is a mistake, then it is a beautiful mistake.

If Christianity should turn out to be true after all, then unbelief will have been a very UGLY mistake...

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**Kaj Munk was murdered by the Nazis because of his opposition to the persecution of the Jews.

In the face of hardships, where do we find the strength to carry on / to be followers of Christ????

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If we are followers of Christ, then let us do just that. Let us follow Jesus' example.

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We are told in the Mark passage, that in the wee hours of the morning, when it was still dark, Jesus got up and went out alone to Pray!

BUT, he was NOT alone. Jesus was with God.... praying, and no doubt, “Waiting FOR God..... to lead him on and to empower him.”

When it comes to mimicking Jesus, we tend to focus on the preaching, teaching, justice work and the going about doing good / helping people. However, we must not gloss over the many examples of Jesus pausing to spend time with God.

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Not only is God’s Spirit affective and powerful, but also we need quiet time to get in synch with the natural cadence of creation / with God. Call that quiet, still time “Waiting FOR God.”

Moreover, we must remember that Jesus did NOT do his ministry / his life ALONE. God was with him, and so were others!!!!

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There is truth to the cliché—“There is strength in numbers.”

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To put it bluntly: WE Need each other and we need God; we need to be in relationship with a community of believers with God.

The church is critically essential for being a following of Christ.

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To be our true selves..... we need help, just as the eagle-chicken needed insight from a peer.

To avoid being captives of our culture, we need the advice and support of others just like us.....who are striving to be followers of Christ.

That’s the lesson in the Parrot story, and....Isaiah’s message was encouragement to all God’s children, not just one at a time.

Jesus could not do what he did without the help of others, and of course God. Jesus' first priority was to recruit help – disciples,.... so he could be who he was called to be.

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This is the wonder, the beauty,,.....THE GIFT of the CHURCH.

We are a supportive community. WE are all in this together, and by faith we carry on.....together...by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

I don't believe it is possible to be a Christian without being deeply invested in a community of believers – the church.

**\*\*IT is Impossible....** because Jesus was not alone. He was in community, and therefore a follower of Christ must be in community.

In fact, maybe we should tell all of those who don't go to church that they may be admirers of Christ, but they are not followers of Christ.

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We live in challenging times, and it is easy to become weary and faint.

So, let us look for strength by being in a solemn and dedicated relationship with God.

Let us not focus on our differences, but instead focus on Christ.

And, let us look to each other, too!

WE are NOT alone on this journey.

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That *footprints in the sand poem* should not end with a single set of prints; there is not much hope in that happening.

That poem should end with the person on the beach looking back to see, 10 or 50 or 100 or 1,000 sets of footprints.

Our faith must be in God.....AND..... in each other!