

God Gives Power to the Faint

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Isaiah 40:25-31 NRSV

²⁵ To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
²⁶ Lift up your eyes [to the stars] on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.
²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?
²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
³¹ 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.
- Hebrews 11:1 NRSV ¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Nowadays when you look to cross at a street intersection, the crosswalk lights display an icon of a person standing or a person walking. But it used to be that those signs displayed words, not images. The one-word message told you to do one of two things: Walk, or Wait.

Waiting is not easy for most of us.

Think how hard it is for children to wait for Christmas Day. During the season of Advent, having a daily Advent calendar for children might help them manage their impatience... but for kids, waiting for Christmas is hard.

At the start of this pandemic, who among us would have imagined that waiting would have gone on this long? Back in mid-March we could barely imagine having to wait until, say, the end of April... or maybe June... or September?... or now maybe until May or July or *who knows* before it'll seem like life is starting to feel a bit more normal.

The frightening scenes at the United States Capitol Building last month had most of us waiting... anxiously... lest the violence that erupted there might emerge again, there or elsewhere. I felt like I was holding my breath for a few weeks, waiting with a feeling of anticipatory dread. I'm still waiting, and hoping... but waiting.

To be sure, waiting is not always a dreadful thing. I think of those who are even bigger fans of the Cleveland Browns than I am. We're accustomed to moaning, "Oh, wait 'til next year...." But this year we are saying, "I can't wait until next year!"

Still, waiting can often be exhausting. Waiting can make us weary. Waiting wears us out.

Maybe yours is one of the many, many households that is simultaneously a workplace and a classroom as well as a home. People not in that situation can't imagine how difficult it is trying to manage all those functions and people in that confined space. Going to work and going to school while going nowhere but home grew wearisome long, long ago.

Aren't you weary of not being able to see people's faces? Face masks are so important for getting this virus under control, but won't it be wonderful to see people's smiles again?

What else causes us weariness? Videoconferencing. Trying to have personal interactions with images of people's faces instead of being able to see them face to face and read body language and being close enough to sense how they're feeling and what they're thinking. How many times have you heard someone say, "I'm 'Zoomed out,'" meaning that they've had all they can take right now of screen meetings? We've grown oh-so-weary of what at first was innovative and exciting.

And let's face it – this worshipping on your TV or tablet or laptop or smartphone... I'm so glad we have this capability – it's been invaluable during the strain of this pandemic. Going forward we'll always have this worship video option especially for people who are homebound or traveling or are dealing with sickness in the family, or have to work on Sundays.

Yes, I'm glad we have this option... but we also remember.... We remember being able to actually gather in the same physical space for worship and fellowship, to inspire our hearts and for sharing our lives. We remember that. We miss that. This – this digital connection – is nice... but we can become weary of it when we remember what it's like to literally congregate.

We're weary of not being able to get together with friends and neighbors for a meal or a drink or just to sit around and talk.

We're weary of not being able to sing together.

We're weary of wondering and worrying about when and how the vaccine will end up in our arms.

We're weary of not being able to have holiday celebrations and informal gatherings with our extended families.

We're weary of intense political partisanship that impedes collaboration for addressing issues facing our state and nation and planet.

We're weary of wondering when our daily lives will feel normal again.

Where's God in all of our waiting? Where's God amid the weariness the world has inflicted on us?

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah knew the struggle of seemingly endless waiting. He knew how weariness took a toll on the spirit. He wrote to the Israelites in Jerusalem who were tired, weary, anxious, nervous. Their Israelite cousins in the region just north of them had been overrun by the armies of a neighboring nation, causing them to live under the strain of that military occupation.

Now the Israelites of Jerusalem were nervous – were they next? What did the future hold for them? They waited anxiously, wondering if and when “the other shoe would drop.” The possible threat, living with the unknown... it strained their nerves and unsettled their hearts.

So Isaiah issued words of comfort, assurance, hope, reminding them that God's compassion and power, God's strength and love were no match for whatever they faced.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God....” Of course they had heard, of course they knew. But in their condition they needed to be reminded.

And so Isaiah reminded them: *“[The Lord] does not faint or grow weary....”* In fact, Isaiah added, *“He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. [For instance,] Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted....”*

Then Isaiah delivered the good news. The hope. The reason to embrace the faith we hold. The vision for a new day beyond the challenges of the present day. Isaiah wrote, *“...those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength....”*

“...Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength....”

Do you know the words that follow? I bet you do.

“They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Imagine that: those who wait for the Lord will *fly*, they will *run*, they will *walk*.

Imagine that. Think of what we're doing because God is renewing our strength, enabling us to walk, and run, and fly.

Through this church for the last two weeks we've been able to look beyond ourselves to the needs of the homeless. We've been collecting socks and scarves, blankets and jackets to comfort and protect them. In fact, we're extending the collection one more week through Friday, February 12.

With God renewing our strength we're able to notice the needs of our neighbors and friends and respond as we're able: perhaps making a run to the store for them, or clearing snow for them, or watching their children for awhile for them, or simply giving an attentive ear allowing them to unload and vent some of their worries and frustrations.

God renews our strength so we can pray for others. Everyday life always has its challenges, but these days everyday life can include moments that simply overwhelm. From our reservoir of strength we can pray for colleagues and friends, relatives and neighbors, praying that their anger at life will be vented safely, praying that their

impatience with loved ones will be soothed, praying for an easing of their stressful worry about making ends meet.

Friends, my sisters and brothers in Christ, that ancient Israelite prophet Isaiah knew what his people then needed to remember: We can trust in God. That message is ancient... and also written for this very day. When waiting for our lives to improve wears us down, we can wait for the Lord because

- ▶ God is greater than anything that causes us to feel weary.
- ▶ God is greater than anyone who causes hope to slip away.
- ▶ God is greater than the forces in our daily lives that make us want to walk away, throw in the towel, give up, or as the Bible describes it, simply to “faint” and not care anymore.

Perhaps Isaiah

realized the only way to get through that worst hard time was to remember—to recall God’s holiness and majesty, the awesomeness of God’s works. Maybe the writer realized that praising God for being faithful and just, even if the world wasn’t, was an act of power... [an act of faith].... It still is.¹

As the familiar verse from Hebrews Chapter 11 announces, “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*”² We are able to hope for deliverance from the challenges of these days because of the faith we affirm, the faith we embrace. Our faith brings us back to remember God’s unstoppable goodness, God’s unceasing compassion, God’s generous mercy, God’s promise of hope. Oh yes, in God we trust, for as Isaiah assured us, “[God] does not faint or grow weary; [God’s] understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.”

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¹ Talitha Arnold, “Powered by Praise” in StillSpeaking Daily Devotional, January 27, 2021 at dailydevotional@ucc.org, accessed 1/27/2021

² Hebrews 11:1 NRSV