

Strength for the Powerless
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Isaiah 40:21-31

- ²¹ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
- ²² It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
- ²³ who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
- ²⁴ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.
- ²⁵ To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
- ²⁶ Lift up your eyes 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.

Mark 1:29-39

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

As we have frequently in recent weeks, again we encounter the Israelites in exile. There isn't a direct equivalent to exile in the United States today; displacement here might be the result of homelessness or perhaps because of the search for work or the need to sell a farm or, maybe, because of a tornado, flood, or hurricane. Isaiah, having experienced the same plight with the Israelites, spoke of hope with authority. If he had been through the same things and remained ever hopeful through faith in God and God's power, then they could as well. So I wondered how I could speak with authority about God's wonder and might without my words seeming empty. I have not been homeless or suffered unwanted displacement from my home.

And then I realized the exile itself was not what united Isaiah and the people but the despair in missing God. Isaiah knows the people think, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God." The shared experience of despair was theirs and, Isaiah hoped, so, too would be the experience of hope beyond that despair. Who among us has wondered how something seemingly wrong could ever be righted? Before I came to you, that was certainly me. In my line of work, a common interview question goes something like this: "Tell us about your faith journey and what brings you here." And, like any other interview process, it's not best to mention despair. But, indeed, there was an element of it in my call process.

You see, I went to seminary as a not-so-young youth group advisor who really liked working with teenagers and who felt that this must surely be the direction God was calling me. After all, I enjoyed it and, I had been told, I was good at it. So my time in seminary passed and, when it came time to begin looking for employment, I looked for roles which allowed me to use a skill set which, I believed, favored youth. I found a church looking for a non-ordained Youth Director and we liked each other so that's where I went, knowing I still wanted to be ordained one day. The work was good and so were the kids and, as time passed, I began more and more to desire ordination so that I could be part of the sacredness of communion and baptism that I was only experiencing in some in-between sort of way. I

interviewed at length on multiple occasions with two churches about ordained Youth Ministry positions but neither seemed to be a fit. One of those churches was the one where I was employed.

And I unexpectedly found myself wondering if I had even heard God's call correctly. Was I supposed to be seeking ordination? Was I really supposed to be working with youth? How could I have misinterpreted God's call for me those years ago in such a big way? I began to despair that I had spent four years of seminary and three years in youth ministry for nothing. I began to despair that I had paid all that tuition for nothing. I began to despair that God and I were not communicating clearly like I had thought. And that despair was not fleeting.

None of us will despair in the same way but we can all know how it feels for one another. I haven't watched someone I love struggle with a deadly addiction. I haven't been homeless. But I have despaired and my heart breaks for those experiencing it, too. So I stand before you having shared the experience of despair and I have hope with the authority of someone who has been there, too. Isaiah tells the people that "those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength." Reading this in English, I thought surely there must be other meanings to the Hebrew word for "wait." We can't be expected to just wait for God, can we? Isn't there something we can do? So I went to the Hebrew, confident that I would find a better way to translate it. What I found was an anomaly; one of the few words I've come across in Hebrew that really only has the one meaning. To wait, with the implication of tenseness or excitement.

Well, that wasn't at all what I expected. So I read it again. "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." There *are* things we must wait for and one of those is healing, a return to wholeness. In our reading from Mark last week, we heard of a man whose demons were exorcised in the synagogue. Our story today picks up right where that one left off and Jesus goes on to heal Simon's mother-in-law and then all who were sick or possessed from the whole city. Some undoubtedly had been afflicted for a long time, even from birth, and so their waiting for healing and wholeness was extended. God's power is revealed to them in preaching and healing. God's power is revealed to us in preaching and healing.

And wholeness doesn't necessarily mean returning to the exact same state of being. During my call process, someone mentioned they could see me as the solo pastor of a church. Now, I've learned the hard way to never use the word "never" with God - so far, I have been proven wrong 100% of the time - however I had not thought that God's direction for me at that time was to be anything beyond a youth pastor. But I felt not-just-a-little-bit faint and a great deal powerless at that point so I waited - impatiently at first - and for quite awhile. The impatience and the despair were a dastardly duo. And

then, months later, I realized I wasn't getting anywhere trying to turn God's hand so I decided to try letting God turn mine. I began to pray that I be open to whatever God had in store and I began to pray that God would open my eyes to where God was directing. And within a few weeks I heard about this church in Waukesha who was looking for a pastor, I mean *really heard* instead of dismissing the words because they involved "solo pastor."

I cannot adequately describe the wholeness I feel growing in relationship with you and with this community. And it's nothing, nowhere even close to what I imagined wholeness would look like when I was stubbornly only looking to work with youth. God's call for me those years ago was not wrong; it had simply changed. And so had I. I listened for God's word and I was made whole, not like the man who heard Jesus' word and whose demons were exorcised or the woman to whom Jesus spoke and for whom the fever left, but in a way as unique as I am. I know how some of you despair or have despaired and some of you I don't. I have been in that despair with you and I waited with both tenseness and excitement and I've come out on the other side with hope. So have your ancestors on the pages of our Bibles. God gives strength to the powerless and power to the faint. Whatever you have made it through so far, you will make it through what ails you now. Maybe not exactly as you imagine, probably not as you imagine, but that doesn't mean God is hidden from you or disregards you.

"The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable." We can try and try and try to turn God's hand, trying to create a life of our own making, refusing power and strength from the unexpected places where it can be had. Or we can heed the advice of Isaiah and the experience of those who have come before us, waiting for the Lord, maybe with tenseness, maybe with excitement, wait with hope and a willingness to find yourself somewhere you never thought you would be.

Let us pray: God of power, we wait for you. Amen.