

February 4, 2018 • Holy Communion

“Wait for the Lord”

Homily by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Isaiah 40:21-31

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? 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; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. 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. To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. 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.

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”? 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. He 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 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.

We thank Leanne and David for that beautiful reading of Isaiah 40. Perhaps we know this passage best from having heard it at memorial services....”those who wait for 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.”

It was written originally to speak into a very bleak time in the life of the Hebrew people. It was the time of their exile in Babylon when they were captives, forced from their homes. The temple had been laid to waste. They were refugees from the land that had held such promise and hope for them. Remember another passage that speaks to that time, full of tears, broken hearts, and dashed hopes, Psalm 137: “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.”

You know, I love that the Bible intentionally contains passages such as these that express what God’s people were really feeling. You might think that those who pulled together all the stories to go into it would have picked only the high points, the stories of victory and triumph, the stories that show God’s people at their best, full of trust and confidence and joy. After all, if the Bible is supposed to convince people to believe in God, might you not want to prove convincingly that God is faithful, always honoring the covenant, keeping promises, rescuing the people, proving his power and might?

You know---this is a God you should stick with, folks, like your favorite Super Bowl team. Our God is a winner!

Oh, those kinds of stories are in here, too, of course. Lots of them. And they DO convince us of God’s ultimate triumphs. But then, there are also these totally honest stories, too, about the times when the going is just too tough, the way ahead is not at all clear. Stories about those times, in our own lives as in the lives of all God’s peoples, when we just sit down and weep, because it feels to us like God has gone AWOL. Times when nothing makes sense. Times when our questions and doubts far outweigh our certainty. Times when, as the Scripture says, even our youth are weary and the young fall, exhausted.

These verses from Isaiah 40 are addressed to God’s people, to us, at just such low times. They have been lamenting, complaining, weeping. The prophet asks: “Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, [challenging God and saying] “my way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God”? They have been calling out to God and heard no reply.

Thanks to Scripture itself, we learn that when we feel that way, we are not alone. We have not failed. We see that we, too, are simply God’s very human children who sometimes are driven to our knees by suffering, and loneliness, and grief that seems too much to bear.

Scripture itself creates a space for us to be totally honest about all that we feel and experience. We can see ourselves in these pages, these stories. We can hear ourselves asking the same questions, challenging God with our doubts and our worst fears, telling God the truth of our lives in our darkest moments.

So it is to us that the prophet speaks directly this morning, not shouting at us to get over it or to shut up, but lovingly and poetically coaxing us back into the memory we had forgotten. Reminding us, as Jesus often did with his first disciples, reminding them of all he had said to them. Almost whispering, lovingly: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you from the beginning? ...The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary,,, [but] gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.”

Kind of like saying: “take a deep breath. And then another. Remember...wait for the Lord.”

Wait for the Lord.

You know, I'll confess to you that "wait" is sometimes the last thing I want to hear. Sometimes I truly want to fast-forward to the resolution of troubling things, or better yet, to a happy ending. I bet I'm not the only person here today who feels this way with the old prayer: "Lord, give me patience--AND GIVE IT TO ME NOW!" Don't you feel exactly the same way sometimes?

Perhaps one of the greatest spiritual challenges many of us face is how to grow into becoming the kind of old soul who knows how to wait for the Lord. The kind of person of whom the Psalmist sings in Psalm 130: "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem."

Wait for the Lord.

The Catholic writer and Pastor Henri Nouwen once wrote: "A waiting person is a patient person. The word patience means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us."

Being part of the life of a congregation is one very important way of learning this kind of patience, learning how to wait for the Lord. There's spiritual wisdom to be found in doing the same things over and over again—worshipping, praying, singing, sharing the sacraments. Years of learning, seeking, studying. Working alongside God in service to God's people. Giving, giving back, paying it forward. Practicing hard things like generosity, forgiveness, hospitality, and patience. And over time, as Nouwen put it, something hidden in all this will manifest itself to us, as together, over time, we wait for the Lord.

There's another Scripture passage often read at memorial services, the perfect book-end to this one from the prophet. It's a promise from Christ Jesus to those who wait for the Lord. He says to his disciples, in the 14th Chapter of the Gospel of John:

"the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Notes:

Bartlett and Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

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