

Epiphany 5 (B)
February 8, 2009
Texts: Isaiah 40:21-31
Mark 1:29-39

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I can remember the first time I got to go on an airplane. It was very exciting. I remember getting a pair of wings from the pilot to pin to my shirt. They were nice, but what I really wanted was real wings, to really fly. I loved building model airplanes. I loved flying remote control model planes. Of course, sooner or later they'd crash, but that was OK. Because I loved the smell of the fuel and the sound of the engine, and seeing the plane take off. But what I really wanted was to fly.

Now, when I was growing up, I'd spend every summer with my grandparents in Kansas. And each summer I'd see my optometrist who lived nearby. He was one of the most friendly people I've ever known. He'd always ask what I was doing, and what I was interested in. And I'm sure I must have told him a dozen times about being interested in airplanes and interested in flying. Well, as it turned out, he was a pilot, and had a plane that he kept at a nearby airfield. And one year, I was about 11, maybe 12, he asked if I'd like to go flying. Like to go! I'd love to go! I'd been wanting to fly my whole life! We met out at the airfield. He showed me around the plane. We got in and buckled our seatbelts. I got to sit up front in the co-pilot's seats. He checked everything over, and started the engine. We taxied to the runway, and stopped. And then when everything was clear, he pushed down the throttle, the engine speed jumped up, and it was really noisy. Then he released the brakes, and we started to roll down the runway. Slowly we picked up speed, then he pulled back on the wheel and we started to climb. I was very exciting. It was beautiful looking out over the countryside. The fields were so green. You could see everything was planted neatly in rows below. There was the black-top highway, with little gravel roads going off to the sides here and there. As we got higher, the cars and houses below became tiny little things. He leveled off and banked to the left, then straightened out. And he asked if I wanted to take the controls. He showed me how to bank, how to pull up, or descend, how to level off. I had a smile that went from ear to ear.

I have no idea how long we flew. Time ceased to exist. It could have been just a few minutes, or maybe it was hours. I banked, I straightened the plane out. I learned what to look for in the instrument panel—to know what my altitude was, and where I was in relation to the horizon. Even now, all these years later, it makes me smile just to think about it, because it was such an amazing experience. I was flying.

When the prophet of the exile addressed the people of Israel in Babylon with the words from our first reading, from Isaiah 40, they were most definitely

not flying. Life was hard for them. It had been their parents' generation that had seen the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army. They'd seen the temple burned and the city walls pulled down. And they had been taken away to live in exile in Babylon, 1000 miles from home. But that had been 40 years ago. That older generation was gone now, and the people living in exile had never seen Jerusalem, yet they knew the place they were living was not the land God had promised their ancestors. They eked out a living day to day, like people without a true home. They felt that life was grinding them down, and they wondered whether God had—maybe—forgotten them. Or maybe God was powerless to do anything about their situation. Maybe they were just condemned to waste away in a foreign land.

To them the prophet speaks the most amazing promise. God, who created the universe, is not only powerful enough to do something about their state, but God cares for them. And soon, God will act. All the people have to do is wait and trust. God will give them wings to fly like eagles. God will renew their strength, and speed them home. And it happened with dizzying speed. The Babylonian Empire had seemed permanent, eternal. But then the impossible happened, as the Persian conquerors swept away every last remnant of Babylonian power. Then the Persians opened the way for the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland, to rebuild Jerusalem, and the temple, so they could worship their God again. They were going home. God was bringing them home—on eagles' wings.

It's such a beautiful and powerful image. There's a biology professor at OSU who has studied eagles, and who says that when a young eagle is ready to learn to fly, the parents don't just push it out of the nest and see what happens. As one of the parent eagles nudges the young one out of the nest, the other is flying below, waiting to see how the youngster takes to the air. And if the child has difficulty, if it seems to lose the rhythm for flapping its wings, the parent will fly underneath to support it, until the child can follow the parent's movements, and find the right tempo to fly. Then the parent backs away to let the child fly. It's a wonderful picture to help us imagine how God cares for us, supporting us through painful and difficult times, giving us strength and hope to endure, showing us in Jesus what a genuine human life looks like. In all of these ways, and more, God is giving us wings to fly.

And there's one more important part to this picture. Elsewhere the prophet told them God was bringing them home to make them a light for the nations. This gift of wings to fly them home—it wasn't a gift purely for their own enjoyment. God gave this gift because God wanted for this people to help the whole world see the greatness and goodness of God.

It's a bit like what we hear about Simon's mother-in-law in our gospel story. Jesus saw her need, her fever, her illness. So he took her by the hand and raised her up, and she was healed. And what does she do? She began to serve them. Maybe in part it was because it was her house, and she was going to

tend to her guests. And maybe in part it was proof she was really healed. But most of all, I think Mark wants to see her as a sign of what happens to everyone who comes in contact with Jesus' power for life and healing. They are raised up—restored and renewed—and they serve.

In Jesus we see what a real human life is like—it's not all about self, but a gift given for the sake of love. We are given to rise up on eagles' wings—for God's purposes. Jesus' healing power is at work in our hearts and minds and souls—so that others can see God's care and God's goodness. We are showered again and again with the gifts of God—of forgiveness and hope, of peace and joy—so that we can be witnesses to the goodness of God. We are given strength for the journey, renewed day by day, to give us power to follow in Jesus' way—to serve our neighbor in need, to forgive those who wrong us, to care for those who suffer, and to be moved by God's Spirit to be signs of a world made whole and well. Thanks be to God. Amen