

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, B
Isaiah 40:21-31
I Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

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An article on pandemic parenting included a certain photo I can't forget. It shows a young mother named Mercedes who has crumpled down in exhaustion. She is sitting on the cold laundry room floor right in front her dryer, her arms wrapped around a big load of multicolored laundry she's just taken out of the heat. Her back is curved over the pile of laundry, her head laid down on that warm pile of sheets and covers, eyes closed, just completely drained, grabbing a quick moment of rest before heading back into the fray. Mercedes has been running a pandemic household for almost a year, plus holding down a job and caring for a 3-year-old daughter who has taken to screaming out every time she opens her laptop: "Mama, no work now!!!" Between the mother-guilt and the chaos, Mercedes just really needs a rest. (NY Times, *Three American Mothers, On the Brink*, 2/4/21)

We might not be young mothers, but we can sympathize with the weariness. Families are frazzled, workers are stressed, and those without work are struggling even more. We're worn out by the rapid change and the worry, the constant vigilance against the virus. And so many activities that would ordinarily bring relief—a cozy meal out, a getaway trip, a stress-relieving exercise class—are out of bounds for now. If you google "how to deal with anxiety" there's no lack of good advice: eat healthy, avoid alcohol and drugs, get plenty of sleep, keep up a regular routine. Get out in nature, take a walk, exercise, connect with others, find ways to laugh. Practice mindfulness, self-care, boundary setting around news and social media... the coping strategies abound, and we need them! We might not be collapsed in the laundry room floor right this moment, but we sure are tired, and we sure could use some encouragement to keep the faith and keep on keeping on.

This morning our weary hearts find a clear and beautiful promise spoken by the prophet Isaiah, who lived over 500 years before Christ. Isaiah's voice travels across a gap of some 2,600 years to speak right into our lives:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the ends of the earth.

God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable.

God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. (Is 40:28-29)

Isaiah was speaking to people who were weary. Not just over-extended or over-anxious, these people had been through the wars, literally. Their parents were run out of Jerusalem when Babylon's armies conquered the city. They were deported, forcibly marched 1000 miles east to Babylon, where they eked out a hard living as foreigners in exile.

There's weary and then there is *weary*. And what these sisters and brothers felt was more than physical weariness. It was spiritual weariness too. They were always longing for home. Always wondering if God had forgotten them. Wondering if God was even *able* to do anything to help them. Some gave up on God. Others barely held on, weighed down by worn-out spirits.

The prophet didn't offer the people dietary advice or sleep strategies to revive their weariness. Instead Isaiah reminded them of the Everlasting One whom they belonged to, the One who was getting ready to save them-- physically, spiritually and every other way. History shows that their exile was destined to end with dizzying speed, within a generation. Just as quickly as the Babylonians came to power, the Persian Empire would sweep them away, and the Jewish exiles would be free to go back home to Jerusalem and rebuild.

But for now, the spiritual task for these sisters and brothers was to hang on and keep hoping in God. So Isaiah reminded them of something marvelous: No matter how bone-weary human beings may become, the Almighty God, their God, never gets tired. God *does not faint or grow weary*. God's everlasting stamina is never exhausted. And out of God's great well of vitality, God shares with God's people what they need.

*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. (Is 40:30-31)*

How many times have we heard these words read from scripture at a funeral service, speaking hope right into a community's weariness, grief and loss. And how many times have we heard these promises sung around a campfire by children and teens, young and fresh and confident:

*Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles—*

And maybe we've said to ourselves, "I want some of that!"

Today God replies, "*It is yours.*"

The prophet doesn't tell us to "buck up" or "shake it off" or "adjust our attitude" -- instead Isaiah invites us to *wait for the Lord* and trust in God's presence. Trust God to give us a second wind and put a new spirit within us. *Wait on the Lord*, says Isaiah. Take a step back from that consuming anxiety, take a deep breath and pause. Keep silence before the majesty and mystery of God... who *stretched out the heavens like a curtain* and *calls all the stars by name*. Allow God to make that divine majesty and mystery somehow part of us. Allow God to enter into our weariness and heal it, and lift us up on those very same eagles' wings.

Waiting for the Lord is the spiritual equivalent of gazing into the heavens on a starry night. Getting lost in the vast beauty that speaks of God's eternity. Marveling at God's endless love, love as endless as all those universes upon universes that somehow God is able to number and name. Inviting God's infinite love to fill us and carry us and lead us forward in hope and courage. *Waiting for the Lord* is an open spiritual posture. A place to be in prayerful communion with God who cherishes us and makes us new, and helps us move ahead.

When we are weary, God invites us to this waiting, hopeful place of prayer. *Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength*. Notice it is *God* who does the renewing. Not us, not the people praying. Our job is to stay open to what God gives. Praying is not about trying harder or having all the right words. Instead, it's about waiting on God, reverently. Waiting on God, patiently, trustfully. In the midst of pain and struggle and weariness, expecting God, allowing God, trusting God to bring relief and show us the next step.

Jesus knew what *waiting for the Lord* is about. Our gospel reading described a kind of "typical day in the life of a Savior" — a very full, very busy day-- filled with, you know, healing people, casting out demons, directing disciples around. All the normal things the Lord of Life might be expected to do. But what I particularly noticed about this typical day in Jesus' life is how, early in the morning, before any other people were awake, Jesus began his day by sneaking off to a deserted place to pray. Jesus knew about *waiting for the Lord*. He knew how to stay connected with his divine parent, let God *renew his strength* in the midst of all those competing needs, let God show him how to do the next right thing.

We know about *waiting for the Lord* too, in the midst of anxiety. I think of a woman named Lauren who struggled with her tendency to become anxious over things both large and small, both real and imagined. Lauren wrote about one year when she decided to *give up anxiety for Lent*. What she did was to replace anxiety with prayer – and it became a powerful spiritual journey. Every time that familiar feeling of panic started to

rise in her, Lauren said she intentionally “sidled up alongside her anxiety with a prayer.” Sometimes she prayed from the psalms: *“Be pleased, O God, to deliver me.”* Sometimes she prayed from the hymnal: *“O God of peace, let quietness and confidence be my strength.”* At night she prayed the way she did in childhood: *“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.”* Ten times a day or more, Lauren would turn to prayer, waiting for the Lord, expecting, hoping, trusting – and receiving. She was lifted up, by God’s presence, as on eagles wings. She was carried by her loving God. And she found that each day God did give her enough to go on, for the next moment, the next decision, the next step forward. (Lauren Winner, “My Lenten Fast,” *The Christian Century*, 2/8/12)

In the midst of pandemic, I wonder how our own exhausted pauses might become moments of prayer. I wonder what we will receive.

God does not faint or grow weary. *That’s amazing.*

Not weary of stretching out the heavens.

Not weary of calling the stars by name.

And God does not grow weary of meeting us in prayer,
where out of God’s endless well of stamina, out of God’s endless well of love,
God gives strength to the weary and power to the faint.

Thanks be to God. Amen.