

What If We Trusted God First?

Isaiah 40:28-31

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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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.

It's been one heck of a week, my friends. My plan for this weekend was to preach the first stewardship sermon and focus on trusting God as we make plans for the future of our beloved church. And I'll still get to that. But I can't go there until we name the elephant in the room. I know different people have different feelings about the election, and that's to be expected. But, as a pastor, what concerns me is that I have talked with so many people this week who are sincerely scared for their safety and their futures - many of them part of our own congregation. Women, queer folks, people of color, immigrants, disabled people, families that receive federal benefits, retirees. The list goes on and on. They're scared about their own futures, but they are also scared for their loved ones and, honestly, the whole country. Based on the number of people I've heard from, if you are not scared yourself, you certainly know someone who is.

And what do we do with that fear?

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.

Some translations of those verses read "those who hope in the Lord". Others say "those who trust in the Lord". It's interesting how close those three words are in meaning. These promises were written by the prophet Isaiah. In ancient Israel, prophets were primarily doomsayers. God would give them messages to convey to God's people. Usually, they were scathing pronouncements pointing out all the ways the people had been unfaithful to God and warning of God's coming judgment. But, while Isaiah certainly puts forth his share of doom and gloom, he also has these beautiful passages of poetry filled with comfort and hope.

Interestingly, his context was not so different from our own. Isaiah lived during the Babylonian exile. The Babylonians had conquered the kingdom of Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, torn down the temple, and taken God's people into exile. It was a time of tremendous fear and grief. Initially, the people felt lost without the temple, where they believed that the Lord lived. They worried that God might no longer be with them. They wondered when, if ever, they would be able to go back to Jerusalem. And if they did, would anyone who remembered the city still be living? Would there ever be a temple again?

And Isaiah addresses them with these beautiful words of assurance. Trust in God, hope in God, wait on God and God will give you strength - unlimited strength. Strength not only to endure this time of exile, but also to soar like eagles. They were words for those in exile hundreds of years ago and they are again today.

When I was younger, I didn't really know what that meant - to trust in God. After all, how do you trust someone or something that you can't even see? How do you trust a power that is amorphous and out of reach?

We humans are much more comfortable trusting ourselves. I mean, who is going to better protect my interests than I am? Of course, the great advantage of only trusting ourselves is that it puts us in control of how events unfold in our lives. Or, we think it does. We hold tight to our chess pieces, carefully plotting each move to protect ourselves and advance our own agenda. But then something happens that is outside of our control, and we are left frightened and insecure.

What trust in God offers us is the freedom to let go of control, get out of the game, and put our faith in a power greater than ourselves. An eternal force at work for goodness and life and love. We know that force is there because we can see it when we look back in time. There have always been times of darkness and exile, of oppression and hate, of violence and fear - and through them, God's light has never stopped shining. And it won't. No matter how the coming years unfold, God's light keeps shining. And therefore, when we trust in God, we have hope.

Which, interestingly, brings me back around to stewardship. For 2000 years, the Church has been an important vehicle God has used to release this force for good and love and justice into the world. Admittedly, there have been times when we've gotten it very wrong, when human greed and love for power have infiltrated the church and led it astray. Yet, even in those circumstances, there have been faithful communities of believers who have tended and carried God's light.

Christ-followers in the early Church shared their resources and cared for those on the margins, widows, orphans, and the poor. Centuries later, the Church helped bring an end to slavery in Britain and was pivotal in the underground railroad in the United States. Early Methodists joined in the Abolitionist movement and worked against other societal ills like smuggling, inhumane prison conditions, alcoholism, and child labor. Methodists and other churches played a vital role in the civil rights movement. And our own church has a long history of advocating for peace and justice and serving those in need. In recent years that has included offering food to the housing insecure, creating a statement of LGBTQ+ inclusivity and welcome, sending our youth to serve at Cass Social Services, volunteering at Hope Clinic, beginning the work of anti-racism, and so much more.

The Church has always been a dominant force for social change, compassion, and care in the United States. Yet, we now find ourselves in a time people are calling the post-Christendom era. The influence of the Christian Church is steadily declining just at a time when the witness we bring, the force of goodness and justice and love, is again desperately needed. People are scared. We have the love of God to offer them in real and tangible ways.

That's why I have been such an advocate of figuring out how we can adapt and revitalize our church as our culture is changing so we will continue to be part of God's light force in our country. We have been talking for more than a year now about how we might use our resources to both sustain ourselves financially for the long term and help to build God's kin-dom and serve our community. Our redevelopment team has met with more than a dozen groups, including experts and experienced individuals in affordable housing, senior housing, development finance, real estate, private development, church/developer partnerships, etc. I'll be sharing more about what they've learned in the third sermon in this series. In the meanwhile, I believe the coming year will be a time of honing in on what we, in partnership with Wesley, are going to do so we can continue to be a witness to God's love in the heart of Ann Arbor.

To do this, we again will need to trust in God - to believe that God is at work in our dreaming, our discernment, and our decision-making. And how do we cultivate this trust? That is where our other scripture reading for today comes to play. To grow in trust in God, to keep our hope in God, we need to deepen our own discipleship - to ask, to seek, to knock on God's door. We pray for our church, for our country, for the people who most need to know that they are beloved children of God. We come to worship so we can feel the strength of a spirit-filled community singing and praying, serving and learning together. We read scripture seeking insight and wisdom from our ancient ancestors in the faith. We reflect on what God is calling us to do as carriers of God's light.

And we give of ourselves - offering a little bit more than is comfortable of our time, our skills and abilities, and our money because that is part of discipleship. God has made us stewards of the church. To be a steward is to care for something for its owner. So, every year in November, we take a few weeks and ask you to prayerfully consider how you will support the church and its ministries in the coming year. This year, which feels especially important.

I chose "I Dream of A Church" as our theme because I think it's vital for us to dream about how the Church, our church, can make an impact in our country right now and in the future. And not just in our country, in individual lives, in the nurture of our children, in the care of our church family and community and planet. What do we hope our church will be doing ten or twenty years from now? How might God use us in the force for goodness, justice, and love? What do we hope for and what are we willing to invest in those dreams?

In the first 400 years or so of the Church, Christians faced persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. During that time, to wear or display the symbol of the cross was dangerous because it identified you as a Christ-follower. So, they adopted a different symbol - an anchor. After all, anchors are cross-shaped, but they were common enough not to give away a Christian's identity. Anchors can still be seen in the catacombs near Rome where these early Christians buried their dead.

For the early church, the anchor was a symbol of both the stability and security we have in God and the hope we have because of God's eternal force of goodness in the world. We find both meanings in Hebrews 6:19. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. As you leave today, I invite you to stop at a table in the doorway and pick up an anchor to take with you. Keep it nearby to keep you anchored in God as you dream. May the hope it represents give you strength, comfort and ground you when you are afraid, and inspire dreams of how God might work through you and through us.

May it be so. Amen.