

Sermon for February 5: Strength for the Weary

by David Beagley on Sunday, February 5, 2012

Based on Isaiah 40:21-31

This weekend is one of the great American holidays. The Super Bowl. Millions will gather together at parties with friends and watch the game, or at least the commercials. About 111 million people watched last year, and the numbers will be similar this year. The only event that isn't a Super Bowl on the list of most-watched television broadcasts was the series finale of MASH. The Super Bowl is a big event.

As you watch the Super Bowl, one bit of advice; make sure you watch the fourth quarter. That's most likely going to be the most exciting part of the game. Over the span of the last four Super Bowls, an average of nine points was scored in each of the first three quarters, but an average of 19 points was rung up in the fourth quarter. In the three most recent games between the New England Patriots and the New York Giants, an average of eight points was scored in the first three quarters, and an average of twenty five points was scored during the fourth quarter. Why? We see the answer in the reading from Isaiah. "Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men fall exhausted" (Isaiah 40:30).

In football, the players are at the peak of their physical abilities. They spend weeks, months, even years training and conditioning themselves to be able to perform at a peak level. They make themselves stronger, faster, with more endurance. But even they will get tired during the game. After a long run, you'll see players run off to the sideline to breathe in some oxygen. Players will get substituted in and out so that they don't get too tired. No one will play every down. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men fall exhausted.

It's not just football players that will get tired and weary. Other young people do, too. Students are far enough into the semester that their new classes have lost their newness, and projects and papers and exams and experiments threaten to overwhelm them with work. Extracurricular activities are also in full swing, and late nights and early mornings come all too often for many of you. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men fall exhausted.

It's not just students, either. Although the normal winter weather of snow and ice has, for the most part, passed us by, we still have to deal with shorter days, grey clouds, fog, and plants and trees without blooms and leaves. At least six more weeks of it, if we can believe the groundhogs. While we've passed the most depressing day of the year, (January 24th, because of lack of sunlight, Christmas bills, and failure at New Year's resolutions), we still can get down in the dumps. Parents of young children who don't sleep through the night certainly get weary. Once the children start sleeping through the night, though, then you move on to shuffling them from sports practice to music lessons to school and back, tiring for both you and your kids. Those of you in the so called sandwich generation, raising your children while caring for your aging parents, have even more to do and not enough time to do them. Others get weary from being in a dead-end job, or not being able to find a job. Still others get weary of waiting for the treatment to work, or going from doctor's appointment to doctor's appointment. There's a lot of weariness in the world.

Today's reading from Isaiah reminds us of that. Isaiah is talking to a beaten, broken down people. Discouraged and depressed. In 587 BC the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and take the people away into exile and captivity. Far from home, they wondered if they'd been abandoned by God. Far from home, they were weary and worn, wondering how they would go on.

Isaiah gives them a message of hope. "Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:30). He points them to the eagle. It was a familiar image to them. In the Exodus, God told them "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Exodus 19:4). Eagles and other birds were familiar sights, and they knew how an eagle flew.

It's important that Isaiah points to the eagle. Isaiah doesn't point them to hummingbirds, constantly flapping their wings and flitting from flower to flower.

Isaiah doesn't point them to the duck, that looks calm on the surface but is paddling up a storm underneath the surface. Isaiah doesn't point them to a vulture, which is attracted to dead and dying things. He doesn't point them to the peacock, which spends all of its time primping and preening itself. Isaiah points them to the eagle.

Eagles don't just fly. They soar. They rarely flap their wings. One researcher notes that eagles flap their wings less than two minutes an hour. The rest of the time, eagles soar. They don't stay aloft by their own efforts. They couldn't. The amount of exertion they would have to do to stay aloft by their own efforts is impossible to maintain. They are dependant on the thermals, the wind rising from below, to keep them in flight.

That's why Isaiah points them to the eagle. Like an eagle, they are to wait for the wind to blow. The wind blowing from God, the one who is in control of the wind and the waves, the stars and the sky. The wind that will blow them back to the promised land, back home, back to freedom. They would wait for that wind, but even after their return from exile, they stop letting the wind blow them. They put all of their efforts into raising themselves up, instead of letting the wind of God keep them aloft.

Then something new blows into the world. The one who created the wind and the waves, the one who the wind and the waves obeyed, came into the world. In Jesus, God came into the world to bring again that good news of God's grace. The good news that, like an eagle in flight, we are carried along by God. And when we are weary and worn, tired of flapping our wings and trying to stay aloft on our own, we need to just spread our wings and trust in God.

In the season of Epiphany, we stand and wait after Jesus' birth and baptism and await his crucifixion, resurrection and glorification. Jesus did all of this so that the wind may blow. "For the wind blows wherever it pleases," Jesus once told Nicodemus (John 3:8). And the wind blows where Jesus is forgiving sins. The wind blows where that forgiveness comes as a free gift, not as something we earn or work towards.

That free gift lifts a burden off of us. It keeps us from getting weary from striving for something we can never get. Instead of being like a boat moved by the power of oars, we're like a boat using sails to harness the power of the wind that goes farther, faster, easier than by muscle power alone, as long as we go the way the wind blows.

In the film *Remember the Titans*, a high school in Arlington, Virginia, undergoes struggles as it is forced to integrate students from different races. The film focuses on the football team, and the struggles that the African-American head coach faces. At one point, the students on the football team take matters into their own hands, calling a meeting without the coaches to deal with the tensions head on. One of the white players talks about the encouragement that he got from one of the black players, and quotes this passage. He says, "Rev, what's that you're always telling me when I get sick of trying to keep up with my grades and stuff? Even youths grow tired and weary, even young men stumble and fall, but those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength."

After all these players had been through... the racism, the hard work, and the team losses... they were at a breaking point. In the face of all the adversity, one player, Lastik, remembered a Bible passage that "Rev" was always talking about. He quotes that passage from Isaiah to encourage his team to stay strong. Like the Titans, we rely on the Lord's help if we are going to endure the hardships we face.

We will still grow tired. We will still get weary, no matter how young or old we are. But if we trust in God, when we, like the eagle, trust not in our own strength but the power of the wind, our strength will be renewed. We will soar on, held in the palm of God's hand.