

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:29-39 and Isaiah 40:21-31

Rev. Rebekah Sweet

Gospel Reading ~ Mark 1:29-30 NRSV

Old Testament Reading ~ Isaiah 40:21-31

There is a text from the book of the prophet Isaiah, a part of today's lectionary readings, which is one of the most sublime passages of Scripture in the Old Testament. To set the context, here Isaiah describes the cries of the Hebrew people in exile yearning to be as free as the eagles soaring overhead. Some, beginning to doubt that God still cared for them, seek the assurance that God will deliver them from this time of oppression. Isaiah, then, delivering God's message, offered eloquent words of encouragement:

Do you not know? Have you not heard?

*The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of 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.
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.*

Are you weary of all of the political wrestling of our day? Are you fatigued by concerns over paying all of your bills? Do you worry about the health of family members who may fall prey to addiction? Do you feel trapped in a relationship which is doing more harm than good? Are you being abused, harassed, or shamed, or feel lacking in your ability to help those who are? Do you wonder if you have enough faith to survive?

In **their** exile, the Hebrew people were ready to give up, and yet Isaiah was trying to tell them that power and strength were available to them in a **renewable form of soul power**. According to Isaiah, hopeful waiting would put them well along the way to enduring every hardship, running a successful race, playing the winning game. The Hebrews need to know the game plan for being able to win over their own weariness and discouragement, and that is what Isaiah gave them in this poetic expression of God's gift of courage. **Soul power** is available to each of **us** just as it was to God's people in exile, and this is what will give the endurance to run across the finish line, in the race of life.

Athletes who participate in the Super Bowl, Olympic Games, the Stanley Cup, the World Series, and other championship contests, know well the importance of hopeful waiting. It is the time when long hours are spent in practice, while skills are honed, timing perfected, and risks taken. It is a busy, productive time, and yet a time of waiting for the moment of ultimate performance and the anticipated victory.

Life demands as much faith, courage and hopeful waiting from **us** as it does from great athletes, and the exiles of our ancestors in the faith. Most of us express our courage in

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ways that are not in the spotlight. For example, there is the family who receives the word of cancer in a loved one and finds the courage to go through the “valley of the shadow.” Or, the families who are going through devastating infidelity, and know humiliation and insecurity but manage to know that they do not stand alone. God does not abandon us. God does not grow weary. A rebellious teenager, the death of a spouse, or debilitating mental illness present an unwanted opportunity to “wait and hope” for the strength of God to uphold and renew our courage. Life demands winning courage from each of us at different points in our lives.

The encouraging words of Isaiah to God’s people can be ours for living in these difficult days. Isaiah assures the people that God has power, and God gives power to the faint and weary. Isaiah then moves into a half-time locker room motivational speech about waiting hopefully on the Lord. Isaiah delivers God’s promise, that with the Lord guiding us, there will be some days when we will soar, some when we will run, and some in which we just walk, or perhaps stumble, or meander. **And God is with us no matter what our pace may be!**

You may recall that Peter Ueberroth was in charge of the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Someone asked him about the defining moment in the Olympics for him. They expected him to relate a story of a great athlete with sinewy muscles and years of training. But Ueberroth said that the most defining moment for him came in the torch relay across the United States. People from all walks of life were selected to carry the torch, and every town along the route saw it as a major event.

According to Ueberroth, the torch went through a particularly small, windswept village in the western part of the United States. It was almost a ghost town with just a few stores for the local farmers and ranchers. This was the biggest thing that had ever happened in that town. The citizens wanted to find a way to choose the most representative person, so they decided that all the names of the townspeople would be placed in a hat, the mayor would draw a name, and that person would carry the torch. The mayor drew the name of a little girl, Amy, who had been physically challenged all her life. She could walk, but not very well. She could take only a step or two before she would have to sit down. Her family had done everything possible for her, but she was confined to a wheelchair most of the time. For all practical purposes, Amy could never walk more than just a step or two. The selection committee didn’t know what to do. They couldn’t bear to tell Amy that she couldn’t carry the torch. That would crush her. So the word in town was to just ignore the event. Maybe they had made too big a deal out of it anyway.

So the great day came and the mayor was there with just a few people. Amy, dressed in white shorts and t-shirt was there with her family. National television cameras were there, but only a few townspeople were present. Amy was handed the torch. She got out of her chair and took one shaky step. Everybody gasped. Then she took another step.

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Another gasp. Another step, then another, and another. It took about thirty seconds before the national news commentators realized what was happening. The tone of their voices and their enthusiasm for Amy went through the national television media. The people of the village at home, watching their television sets realized that heroic history was being made in their little town. They came from their homes, ranches, and farms and almost instantly the street was lined with people who had come to see Amy carry the torch. Little Amy, with both hands on the torch, took it one step at a time. The people started chanting, "Amy, Amy," with each step until a crescendo went up in the village, "A—my, A—my, A—my," one step at a time until she stepped across the line and triumphantly handed over the torch.

Only you know what burden you are carrying. Why not exchange your weakness and doubt for God's strength and companionship today? In response to whatever is making you feel trapped or confined, God wants to give you **hope and freedom**. Receive the gifts of wings and legs of **endurance**, and a heart full of **courage and peace**. This is the **renewable soul power** that is our hope in God today. The sacramental covenants of Christian Baptism and the Lord's Supper are forever reminders of God's gift of LIFE that conquers sin and death. Renewable Soul Power – may we soar upon it as an eagle soars on the wind, the very breath of God. Amen.