

COOLEEBAH

Isaiah 40:28-31

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Isaiah 40:28-31:

Why would you ever complain, O Jacob, or, whine, Israel, saying:

“God has lost track of me.

He doesn't care what happens to me”?

Don't you know anything? Haven't you been listening?

God doesn't come and go. God lasts.

He's Creator of all you can see or imagine.

He doesn't get tired out, doesn't pause to catch his breath.

And he knows everything, inside and out.

He energizes those who get tired,

Gives fresh strength to dropouts.

For even young people tire and drop out,

Young folk in their prime stumble and fall.

But those who wait upon God get fresh strength.

They spread their wings and soar like eagles,

They run and don't get tired,

They walk and don't lag behind.

This scripture passage from Isaiah, a favorite of many inside and outside the church, is part of a series of sermons that the prophet Isaiah preached to God's people in exile. The Israelites are still being held in Babylonian captivity. Because so many years have passed, they are now full of despair, seriously doubting that God will ever deliver them. They are wondering how the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient God can be omni-anything when they are so miserable. How can they be the chosen people *and* the demoralized people at the same time?¹

It's a tough crowd to preach too. Isaiah is trying to proclaim hope to a people that are mired in misery, are longing to see their homeland again, are feeling displaced, forgotten, and out of step with their God.

Can you identify with the people of Israel? Have you ever been in exile?

There are certainly people who are still being displaced from their homelands all over the world. Burundi, the third poorest country in the world, is being over-run with refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo. An African country whose people make an annual income of \$300—less than \$1 a day—are struggling to provide hospitality to men, women and children fleeing civil war. I have a friend who traveled to Burundi last year with a group of Christian leaders to see how they could respond to the crisis. He said, “The need is so great you don't know where to begin to respond. They are a people in desperate need of hope.”

What about soldiers who leave their homeland and go to fight a war on foreign soil? Do they feel like exiles? Embroiled in the middle of political power struggles, do they feel like hopeless pawns, wondering if their sacrifice is making a difference?

What about those who feel exiled by physical disabilities? Cancer? Alzheimers? Those who are in emotional exile due to loneliness, grief, anxiety, abuse. Those who suffer from mental exile, whose thoughts are in a continual fog with only glimpses of clarity? And then there is spiritual exile where one's soul feels stuck, paralyzed, or withered.

Most of us will experience exile in our lives at least once, if not more than once. A time of deep struggle. A time when we are trying to figure out how all the pieces of our lives fit together. A time when we might push God away in anger. Or, a time when we allow God to stay close, but we attack ourselves with so much self-blame that God doesn't have any room to move and act. Either way, we neutralize God in the equation.

And Isaiah would come to us with the same rhetorical questions: Don't you know anything? Haven't you been listening? God doesn't come and go. God lasts.

Isaiah says to the Israelites, and he says to us, "Look, I know it's hard to believe that our ideas of what is just, what is merciful, and what is best are not in sync with the mind of God. After all, they seem good to us. But we are not omni anything! We have some perspective, but not the omni-perspective of God."ⁱⁱ

"So what are you going to do?" Isaiah challenges. Are you going to slink away in despair and denial, or are you going to place yourself in God's hands? In the hands of this God who knows all, creates all, controls all, and plans all . . . **but also loves all**. God has no un-tended corners of the universe. You are indeed precious in God's sight."ⁱⁱⁱ

And so Isaiah tells them, tells us, "**Those who WAIT upon God get fresh strength.**"

Wait is an interesting word. In our Western culture, we hear the word "wait," and we think: just passing time, the sphere of the passive, what people do who can't find the resources to bring change, what one does when action fails.

But the concept of Biblical waiting is entirely different. **In Hebrew, it is the same word for "twisting," like making a rope.** It is not a passive state, but one of tension as you are being worked on. It also means to expect, gather, look patiently, and bind together. Strong.^{iv}

I like to think about it as "letting go more and more of me" and instead "letting myself getting twisted tightly into the will of God." Being twisted together with God's mercy, God's justice, God's peace, God's grace, God's joy, God's love.

Buried deep in most of our bones is the idea that we are in control. That with the proper action and strategy, we will bring the planned results. However, the discipline of waiting demands that we relinquish our idolatry of outcomes and face the truth: Change and transformation are rooted not in our power, but in God's.^v

Dee Dee Risher, co-editor of the Christian Journal *The Other Side*, writes: “For 33 years, *The Other Side* has grappled with waiting and action. We have borne witness to overwhelming human suffering and ecological devastation. I write these words in the shadow of emaciated children dying in Iraq and the Sudan for lack of medicines, ruthless famine in North Korea, murderous tyranny in Burma, ethnic massacre in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and families in Brazil who stave off starvation from one day to the next by salvaging scraps from first-world garbage dumped there. Today, my newspaper devoted 30 columns to stock market fluctuations and one column to all these situations of suffering combined.

“Has our work changed the sweep of this great suffering? No. Do we continue? Yes. Waiting on God. It is the Gospel of Foolishness that opens our eyes so that we can be surprised by the vibrant, mysterious ground of hope surrounding us. Even in the midst of great suffering, we begin to uncover unexpected compassion and abundant joy. The reign of God begins to be unveiled in our midst. Even now.

“And like the Psalmist, we too can sing: *I would have despaired unless I believed I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord. Be strong, let your heart take courage. Yes, wait for the Lord.*” (Psalm 27:13-14)^{vi}

Are you in exile?

Is your gut being twisted up as you wait on God?

Isaiah would tell you that you’re on the right track. You’re moving from despair to hope. In fact, he says that this tense-filled waiting will result in soaring. We will soar like eagles.

Now, before you get caught up in that beautiful, poetic image of soaring over the mountaintops like an eagle, let me ask you this: do you know how a mother eagle teaches her young to fly?

An eagle’s nest is a work of art. Perched high on cliffs or treetops, it is woven together using great branches. The inside of the nest is lined with feathers and leaves until it is downy soft. When the eaglets are approximately 2.5 months old, the mother uses her head to nudge each eaglet to the edge of the nest. And then, she pushes it out. And as the little bird is flapping and flailing down the face of the cliff to what seems its utter destruction, the mother goes down in one mighty swoop and catches the eaglet on her wings and brings it home. She does this over and over again. She pushes it out of the nest, never letting it fall all the way to the ground, until it begins to fly.^{vii}

Once the eaglet learns to fly, then the mother eagle does something even more fascinating. She destroys the nest. Every stick, every branch, every soft comfy feather is tossed down the cliff until nothing is left. She knows that her eaglet was made to soar and as long as it can return to the nest, it won’t discover its full potential. By pushing it out of the nest, the mother teaches the eaglet to fly. By destroying the nest, she teaches her eaglet to soar.

I think the analogy is rather crystal clear: God is like a mother eagle. God wants to mature us. Have you ever felt like things were all coming together—*finally*—and then it seems like you’re cast out of the nest? And as you’re plummeting to the ground thinking, *this is the end*, God

swoops underneath you with his everlasting arms to bear you up and to help you learn to fly.^{viii} And then, you're just getting the hang of flying, when everything safe and normal—the place you'd go home to perch—disappeared? You're forced to soar into a new situation whether you want to or not. But in the process, maturity happens.

God's desire is to mature us, not to let us become comfortable. But thank goodness, it is a process! There are times of being nurtured and cared for. There are times of being pushed out of the nest in order to fly. There are times of trying to return to that big, comfy nest and finding it all destroyed and God asking us to move forward, to soar. There are so many stages of growing up. But through it all, God is always there, making sure we don't crash and burn. Swooping underneath us until we get it right.

Exile.

Wait.

Soar.

As a Christian community, what would happen if we were more vulnerable with each other during our moments of exile? What if we took a risk with just one person and said, "I'm struggling with depression. I'm struggling with alcoholism. I'm struggling with gossip. I'm struggling with debt. I'm struggling with infidelity. I'm struggling with lying. Will you pray with me? Will you hope with me?" And then, the two of you, together, began waiting . . .

Waiting on the Lord. Twisting with the Lord. Being bound together in a cord that can not be easily broken. Being pushed out of the nest. Feeling like you're about to smash on the rocks, only to discover God continually swooping beneath you to let you try again. Soaring on wings like eagles. Running and not getting tired. Walking and not lagging behind. Learning and maturing in Christ together.

There is a story that has been passed from mouth to ear somewhere along the palmetto dunes of South Carolina, a story passed down from West Africa to the North Atlantic. It is the story, a unique story, of the people who could fly.

The story takes place in St. Johns Island, just off the coast of South Carolina, as Africans who had been mislabeled slaves are toiling in the hot sun. They are working so very hard to pick cotton. There is one young woman and beside her is her small boy, maybe six or seven. She's working in the fields and she has such incredible dexterity that she is able to pick cotton with her right hand and caress the forehead of her child with the left. But eventually, exhausted by working so hard in the fields, she falls down from the weight and the pressure of being—in the words of Dubois—"problem and property." Her boy attempts to wake her very quickly, knowing that if the slave drivers were to see her the punishment would be swift and hard.

He tries to shake his mother, and as he's trying to shake her, an old man comes over to him. An old man that the Africans called Preacher and Prophet, but the slave drivers called Old Devil. He looks up at the old man and says, "Is it time? Is it time?"

The old man smiles and looks at the boy and says, “Yes!” And he bends down and whispers into the ear of the woman who was now upon the ground and says these words: “Cooleebah! Cooleebah!”

At that moment the woman gets up with such incredible dignity. She stands as a queen and looks down at her son, grasps his hand and begins to look toward heaven. All of a sudden they begin to fly. The slave drivers rush over to this area where she has stopped work and they see this act of human flight and are completely confused. They do not know what to do! And during their confusion, the old man rushes around to all the other Africans and begins to tell them, “Cooleebah! Cooleebah!”

When they hear the word, they all begin to fly. Can you imagine? The dispossessed flying? Can you imagine the disempowered flying? Three fifths of a person flying? The diseased flying? The dislocated flying? They are all taking flight! And at that moment the slave drivers grab the old man and say, “Bring them back!”

They beat him, and with blood coming down his cheek, he just smiles at them. They say to him, “Please bring them back!”

And he says, “I can’t.”

They say, “Why not?”

He said, “Because the word is already in them and since the word is already in them, it cannot be taken from them.”

The old man had a word from West Africa, *cooleebah*, **a word that means God**. It had been placed into the heart of these displaced Africans and now they had dignity and they were flying.

Is it not the job of the Christian community to make sure that the people of God fly? Fly from breakdown to break through. Fly from hurt to healing. Fly from heartache to being mended to a whole person. We are called as a people to ensure that those who have been marginalized have a word in their spirit that allows them to fly. Cooleebah. And the question for you and me today: Is Crossroads a community that causes people to fly? Are we helping each other to soar?^{ix}

Isaiah says it: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not get weary. They shall walk and not faint.”

When the word of God is in us, we are no longer exiles. We are waiting on a God that renews our strength. On a God that enables us to fly. To soar.

Let’s pray . . .

ⁱ Anderson, Mary W. The Christian Century, January 26, 2000, page 87, read online at (www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1951)

ⁱⁱ Anderson, *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Anderson, *ibid.*

^{iv} Epiphany 5B (www.home.roadrunner.com/~lyndale/Epiphany5B%202009.htm) February 8, 2009.

^v Risher, Dee Dee. The Other Side. November-December 1998, Vol 34, No 6

([www./web.archive.org/web/20050314235517/http://www.theotherside.org/roots/roots_nd98.html](http://www.web.archive.org/web/20050314235517/http://www.theotherside.org/roots/roots_nd98.html))

^{vi} Risher, *ibid.*

^{vii} Fullam, Terry. "Life on Wings" from (www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/article_print.html?id=50027).

^{viii} Fullam, *Ibid.*

^{ix} Moss III, Otis. "The People Who Could Fly," from (www.csec.org/csec/sermon/moss_5012.htm)