

“A Time for Renewal”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, February 4, 2018

Isaiah 40

Our lives are busy. We take out our little pocket calendars and see if we can fit in an appointment or a family event or a church meeting. We come to church. We drive our kids. We get to bed at the end of our day. And sometimes it's then that our mind is active with too much thinking and sleep alludes us.

Spiritual writer, Joan Chittister captures our wandering night mind in her book, “Between the Dark and the Daylight”, “It is that very noise that emerges in babble and prate when we're alone. When it's night. When there is not other noise to drown it out. It is the noise of the agitated soul. It is confusion. Or fear. Or pressure. ....

It is the call to our souls of the unfinished business of our lives, of the tensions we never lifted, the relationships we never resolved, the promises we never kept, the dreams we never achieved, the things we never became.”<sup>1</sup>

When Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army ransacked Jerusalem in 587 BC, they forced the people of Jerusalem from their homes and took them captive back to Babylon. Psalm 137 captures their despair:

“By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?”

And Joan Chittister's modern words equally lift up the despair of these people, so many centuries ago, where, at night, as they laid their heads down to sleep,

‘the noise would fill their minds, of the ‘agitated soul, the call to their souls of unfinished business in their lives, of the tensions they never lifted, the relationships they never resolved,

the promises they never kept, the dreams they never achieved, the things they never became.”

And Isaiah asks the people, “Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"?”

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, *Between the Dark and the Daylight*, (New York: Image, 2015), 135.

The people clearly felt that God was nowhere to be found. Perhaps they felt that the ‘gods of Babylon were stronger than their God or that god really does not exist at all.’<sup>2</sup>

The people have forgotten what they once knew very clearly. They have forgotten their own story, the story of God’s love for Israel.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.”  
(vs. 21-22).

Isaiah presents this ‘God-in-relation-to-humanity’<sup>3</sup> comparison in his words. God is clearly ‘greater than’ ..... us.

“To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal, says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.”

Where did God go, the people ask. Isaiah reminds the people that the answer to their question isn’t anything new that they need to learn. But rather it is something that has been known from ‘the beginning’ and from the ‘foundations of the earth.’

For the problem isn’t with God but rather with the people. Where memory fails, the faith of the community is threatened.

Isaiah then repeats again the words he started out with, “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.”

God will give power to those who faint, and strengthen the powerless. And those who wait, and remember the story of God in their lives shall renew their strength.

And they shall mount up with wings like eagles, and they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

John Claypool was pastor to the congregation of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky when his ten-year-old daughter, Laura Lue was diagnosed as having acute leukemia. Only eighteen months and ten days after the diagnosis, she died.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 316.

<sup>3</sup> Feasting on the Word, p. 314.

<sup>4</sup> The story about John Claypool is from a sermon posted on [midrash@lists.joinhands](mailto:midrash@lists.joinhands) by John Donst, Fifty United Church, Winona, Ontario, Feb 4, 2018, with permission to share.

The sermon John preached two weeks later to reflect on that experience was based on the same reading we have heard today from Isaiah 40.

John titled the sermon “Strength Not to Faint.”, and it was centered on the strength and deep encouragement he found in the words of Isaiah.

“Here I am this morning,” John Claypool says at the end of his sermon, “ – sad, broken-hearted, still bearing in my spirit the wounds of this darkness.

I confess to you honestly that I have no wings with which to fly or even any legs on which to run – but listen, by the grace of God, I am still on my feet! I have not fainted yet.

I have not exploded in the anger of presumption, nor have I keeled over into the paralysis of despair.

All I am doing is walking and not fainting, hanging in there, enduring with patience what I cannot change but have to bear.

My religion has been the difference in the last two weeks; it has given me the gift of patience, the gift of endurance, the strength to walk and not faint.

“And who knows, if I am willing to accept this gift, and just hang in there and not cop out, maybe the day will come that Laura Lue and I will run again and not be weary, that we may even soar some day, and rise up with wings as eagles!

But until then – to walk and not faint, that is enough. O God, that is enough!”

John Claypool, because of the way he shared his experience, strength and hope,

helps us to listen to the hope in God’s words to us today,

and gives us encouragement to wait upon God,

who will renew your strength,

and you shall mount up with wings like eagles,

you shall run and not be weary,

and you shall walk and not faint.

Thanks be to God. Amen.