

“Wings of Eagles”

February 7, 2021

(Thank you to Lucy Forester who inspired this sermon)

Isaiah 40:21–31

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.

He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

He brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

No sooner are they planted,
no sooner are they sown,
no sooner do they take root in the ground,
than he blows on them and they wither,
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

“To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.

Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?

He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.

Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.

Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,

“My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;

The beginning of Isaiah 40 takes us immediately into the tragic loss of structures and institutions. It begins with the words, "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term – Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Isaiah is talking to people who have been in exile for about 160 years. Think pandemic quarantine. Everything they knew and depended on has been taken away. Nothing is the same as it was. Their lives were shattered.

And of course, they were angry, disillusioned and frightened. Life is not going as they planned. They were far away from any imagination of comfort and care. They were dislocated from their homeland and family, friends, ritual, temple, commerce, practice – far away from the familiarity of their relationship with Yahweh. Their very faith in God is in question.

Chuck and I attended a going away party for friends who had lived in Minnesota for many years and were retiring to New Mexico. We actually did not know them very well. We met them because we bought their condo.

It was not an exile; but hanging out with strangers was a little out of our comfort zone. But we were sitting outside on their large verandah and the weather was perfect. Wine was poured, hors d'oeuvres were served, veggies on the grill. Sun setting. It was a gorgeous evening on the Mississippi.

I sat down with about 10 people. Most of them knew each other.

They were friendly and invited me to their table.

I expect having a new person in the group, gave them permission to explore something they often don't explore (kind of like being on an airplane with a stranger). That night it was religion. It occurred to me later – they were kind of like the exiles in Isaiah, searching for a safe place, not

necessarily geographical – but a vocational, a calling. They were looking for something to define their life. They were seekers. Like the rest of us.

The conversation that night in my experience was not a new one – but I expect those at the table thought it was unique. When they learned I was a pastor and a Presbyterian one – the lone Presbyterian in the circle, who had long since left her Christian roots, started off: oh – the Christian faith doesn't mean anything to me anymore. All eyes on my reaction.

When I didn't judge her response, the floodgates opened. Everyone at the table proclaimed their disdain for religion, for the dogma, for the institution, for anything that would smack of rules or telling them what to think. There was the injured Catholic; the spiritual but not religious ex-Protestant; the member of the Atheist Agenda group who was dedicated to promoting aggressive activism against theology and theological institutions.

But that night it was Ann, who had been sitting quietly across the table from me. Our friend told us before the party started that she had lost her husband a few months earlier.

She and her husband had retired to Wayzata in their late forties, having made a pile of money in the Silicon.

He died suddenly. And she was living with a gaping hole punched by this loss that left her depleted, indeed in exile from all that delivered goodness, possibility, joy. She was the one who had the real questions. And she didn't hesitate to ask.

With something of an attitude, she fired a question at me: "What do you do as a pastor?" Subtext: Are you there to convert people?

I was a little put off by her edge, so I did what I often do in situations where I am on the spot: I responded rather casually. I said in my most low-keyed and easy conversational voice, "I have the privilege of supporting and caring for a community of folks; supporting them on their commitments to make the world a better place.

Ann fixed her eyes on me but with no giveaway response. I went on, "As a pastor, I am charged with the responsibility of tending to souls – and engaging the big questions of meaning and purpose that are so much at the core of society. Sometimes I have the privilege to listen to those talk about what they believe about themselves and the world and often God. I am always shaped by what they say."

Everyone was nodding. I thought, "OK, now I am off the hot seat."

But Ann was not finished and said, "You, and how about yourself?"

“Excuse me?” “What about you? What do you believe?”

It is one of those moments when I could relate to what I suspect the exiles in Babylon were asked: Where is your God now, when the temple is gone? Where is your God now, when your children have long since followed other gods? Where is your God now? This the captivity has gone on much longer than anyone ever thought!

And I imagined that Ann might have been asking, “Where was your God when my husband died and left me to raise four children on my own?”

What do you believe, Pastor? I took a deep breath hoping to say something that made sense to them and me.

I am sure I did not exactly say this because I do not speak well without notes – so some of this may be what I wished I had said. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t know any more than you do whether there is a God. Where I begin is with Mystery. When I stand on shores of Lake Michigan with billions of stars – I encounter mystery.

When I look at my children, the way their smiles are like Chuck’s family, their eyes are shaped like my mother’s. And their lovely hair is like mine. It is totally a mystery.

Perhaps the world is an accident of coincidences, but when I held my nephew’s newborn baby – and I looked into her eyes wet with the pools of birth, I was touched with mystery. It is haunting. It is magnificent. It defies explanation.” Ann held my eye – I went on.

“Mystery shows up in moments of when we can finally connect deeply with each other.

It shows up somehow trusting this pain is not going to last forever. My life and death are also in there. It is a mystery how we’ve managed to survive as a species. And I believe in a loving God who holds it all, weaves us together, with joy and hope.

“And, of course, we have a choice: to dismiss it all—the coincidences of life as mere coincidence; the deep connections as hormones or plain old emotions; the mystery of your own life, where you came from / where you are going as age-old, unanswerable questions that defy and lead nowhere or somewhere.”

I stopped then. I had started preaching and they had certainly not asked for a sermon. But as I sat looking around that room, I had the distinct feeling that all of us were exiled in some ways. Like Isaiah’s prophecy, we stand with a people who had waited a very long time for an answer to the question: Where is your God?

This was a people whose structures and assumptions that shaped life had not only come unraveled but was feared to be gone forever.

Do you ever feel like that?

When everything you counted on is being swept away, what is familiar is uncertain?

It happens. When we lose our dream of life – we can feel like exiles. Trying to figure it all out. And like Ann, have the courage to ask our most pressing questions: Where are you, God? Have you forgotten us? Have you left us to duke it out on our own? How long will you hide your face from us?

Pastor, what do you believe?

And then the prophet Isaiah who is now exasperated – “Have you not known, have you not heard? The Lord is an everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”

God doesn't magically cure and make everything better. God isn't a genie in a bottle, but Yahweh is a God of miracles – of creation.

The prophet turns the question: Where is your faith? What is at the core of your belief? Do you mount up with wings like eagle?

Isaiah realizes the exiles are tired and weary because the wait has been so long. And says: you are called to “Mount up with wings, but if that doesn't work, then at least try to run, and well, if running isn't in the cards, then walk and do not faint.” (from a sermon by Lucy Forester)

You see, the power of God disrupts, comes to exhausted exiled lives, to those of us who doubt things will ever change – and joins us with mounting eagles' wings. This God – challenges what is expected.

And you are exactly right – being in-fused with God-life is a very counter-cultural way.

Those new friends around the table quite suspicious or even turned off by the church, yet like the rest of us are longing for something else: God, faith, an experience that holds the transcendent, the mysterious, something that stirs imagination, something so compelling they will give their very life.

Sometimes this Mystery comes when suffering and pain slaps us in the face.

Or like last night, when I came home in the cold dark, and looked up to see amazing bright stars in perfect constellations. That was energy giving. Hopeful remembrances. Mounting on Eagles.

For me, in these difficult and unpredictable times, I will do my best not to rule out this Mystery – even in the most broken human heart, the angriest spirits.

And mindful that Isaiah said something like this to those in exile: You are agents of challenging change, mounting up with wings like eagles, or walking wearily into the storm. Yes, right in the midst of these shocking, sorry, malicious moments – this mysterious God will arrive with gracious goodness, holding the tears, fears, and hope as a gift to be carried from that gathering into the hard work of facing each other the next day, and the next, and the next . . . on eagles' wings. That is our deepest courage.

Those of you who watched the inauguration of Joe Biden were certainly moved when Amanda Gorman's recited her own Mount on Eagle's Wings with poetry. "The Hill We Climb".

This is the last part –

"So, let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left with and every known nook of our nation and every corner called our country our people diverse and beautiful will emerge, battered and beautiful. When day comes, we step out of the shade aflame and unafraid. The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light, if only we are brave enough to see it, if only we are brave enough to be it."

"if only we are brave enough to see it if only, we are brave enough to be it."

Listening to the sound of her cadence and eloquence and immovable hope – gave me a moment of clarity. That in the midst of all my questions, doubt, and unanswerable pain – that there is a Light with "strength like an eagle" that is gentle, with mysterious grace – whose purpose is love. That is what I thought as I stepped out into the darkness.

That is our promise. That is our mysterious hope.

Amen.