

A Progressive Reflection on the Sovereignty of God

“Those who wait for the Lord will mount up with wings like eagles.” Isaiah 40:31

Isaiah 40:21-31
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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February 7, 2021

Let's be honest, we are an impatient people. We simply aren't very good at waiting. Having to wait for just about anything often causes a great deal of anxiety, frustration, perhaps anger, whether it be a long line at a store, a slow computer, or finding a time and place to get a COVID-19 vaccine shot. In those kind of situations, for example, perhaps it might help to take a deep breath and remind ourselves to be grateful that we have stores to shop in with finances to purchase, computers to use, and actual vaccines that have now been developed. All of us, of course, are indeed tired of waiting for this pandemic to subside to the level when we can greet each other again in person on Sunday mornings, let alone gather with family and friends.

An old motivational poster created by the British government in 1939 in preparation for World War II, stated, “Keep Calm and Carry On.” Good advice – and so very British. On the cover of today's worship bulletin there is a mock-up of that poster using the words, “Keep Calm and Wait Upon the Lord.” In a way, this perfectly summarizes the theme found in Isaiah 40:31, “**but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.**” Yet, being told to wait is sometimes problematic. For instance, many supporters of the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. told him to wait, because the time just wasn't right in the country for him to march for equality. Hence his profound declaration, “Justice delayed is justice denied.” So sometimes, maybe a good dose of impatience is actually a good thing, especially when it leads us to take action. Perhaps we can all reflect a bit more on that during this Black History Month.

Now, I had initially planned for this sermon to be a reflection on finding both endurance and rest when we find ourselves weary. But it took a dramatic turn. I have renamed this sermon from “Renewing Our Strength,” to “A Progressive Reflection on the Sovereignty of God.” Please don't turn to another video quite yet.

I must confess that I have a theological problem with the phrase, “wait for the Lord.” If you haven't thought about it before, a statement such as that presupposes a belief that God constantly works behind the scenes to guide (perhaps even to control, manipulate, or at least allow) all of life to unfold according to God's divine plan and timing. That's certainly the understanding of the ancient prophet in the Hebrew Scripture, our Old Testament, Book of Isaiah. There's a growing number of Christians in our day and age, however, that no longer believe that the nature and character of God involves intervening in the created order of life in such a controlling and straightforward fashion. Yet saying that, I am one of those that still finds meaning in reflecting back upon the living of my life, including the previous day, in a way that I

hope to recognize the Sacred Presence of God working in and through my life, and the life of others.

The challenge many of us face with the line of theological thinking that supports an understanding that all things are part of God's sovereign and providential timing, is that **it forces us into a position of making judgment calls of why God seems to intervene at some points in life and not in others.** Speaking personally, yet as a pastor and preacher, I no longer believe in the simple platitude that is often given as a response, "God's ways aren't our ways," or, as is the answer in this biblical passage, "It's all in God's timing." So just wait. Both of those ways of thinking rely on the understanding of a God "out there" somewhere who has such control over the universe that everything is basically pre-determined, or at least directed by a God who intervenes in our lives in specific ways. **A potentially harmful result in that belief is if a person doesn't find their strength renewed, or have wings like eagles, or can run without getting weary, then it must be God's doing because it's obviously not within God's timing. Or worse, we blame ourselves,** thinking that we haven't done whatever we think we need to do in life in order for God to make certain needed circumstances or transformation come to pass. It can also lead to doing nothing for ourselves or others.

Yet, it's not hard to see why the ancient Israelites needed to believe in such an interventionist God. Chapter 40 of the Book of Isaiah begins the middle section of this large book. Modern biblical scholars call it "Second Isaiah." Most believe, without question, that a second prophet, one who came after the original prophet named Isaiah, wrote this portion of the Book of Isaiah. The first prophet warned the people of Judah, known as the Southern Kingdom, to change their ways or risk being destroyed. They didn't change, so the prophecy came to pass when the Babylonian Empire attacked them in 587 BCE. The conquerors destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and carried the ruling elite off into **exile in Babylon**, where they remained for 40 years until the Persian Empire conquered the Babylonians.

It was during this **time of exile** in a foreign land that another prophet, now called Second Isaiah, came to them with a word of hope. In beautifully poetic language, the prophet reminded the people that God is the creator of all that is, who "sits above the circle of the earth," and reminds them that all people are simply, "inhabitants that are like grasshoppers" (Isaiah 40:22). In the prophet's understanding, there is a word of hope only when they grasp God's awesome power and their powerlessness. To become hopeful in such a time of despair and crisis begins with remembering the remarkable works of God in Israel's history.

For the exiles, captivity in Babylon was a painful reality. They were forced from their homes, scattered as the temple in Jerusalem was laid to waste, and became refugees from the very land that held promise and their very identity. They were indeed impatient, weary, and had grown faint. In the ancient world, they could have concluded that the gods of Babylon were actually stronger than their God, Yahweh. But their conclusion, based on the belief that there is only one God, was that they were simply "disregarded" by the One who sits above the circle of the earth. With God located at this remote and powerful distance, we too may conclude that God is only **transcendent** – beyond all of us up there in the sky somewhere. But the prophet also reminds us that God exists not just "out there," but also close to us, that God is **immanent**.

As Isaiah recites earlier in chapter 40, the Lord God who sits above the circle of the earth is, at the very same time, the Shepherd who gently claims, gathers, names,

and carries us (vv. 10-11). **The scriptures are filled with this dual understanding that God is both transcendent – beyond us, and immanent – with us.** My primarily theological question, however, is just how does that work? Admittedly, that may be the wrong question, one that can only be answered with, "It's just a divine Mystery." But it's a question that hounds those of us on the progressive side of the theological spectrum.

Does the theological concept of God's sovereignty mean that we should just sit back and wait because God has it all under control, that everything happens for a reason no matter how tragic, that it's all simply a matter of God's will and timing? I used to fervently believe that. But I am now at a point in my own theological understanding of the nature and character of God that I answer those particular questions, while not with an emphatic no, but with a less absolute, "**I don't think so.**"

And yet, there is much good news to find in this poetry from Second Isaiah. The good news is that there is a way for the exhausted, faint, powerless, and weary to renew their strength, to mount up with wings like eagles, to run without growing weary, and to walk without fainting. The way suggested by the poet, is to *wait* for the Creator who names and gathers the lambs and does not faint or grow weary in doing so. But again, that answer presupposes that if something doesn't happen it's simply not God's will, or in God's timing. That's why many of us ponder and **question if God really is in charge of the universe in that kind of intervening and controlling way.**

Yes, I realize that most church going Christians still consider it heresy to even question the all-powerful omnipotent sovereignty of God – if by sovereignty one means complete control over all that happens and exists in the universe? Yet, with the insistence on this belief, many have simply left the church and turned their back on organized religion altogether.

It is with issues like this that I mightily struggle and find hard to preach. So, with me as your pastor **you will not get easy answers to life's problems, no simple statement that the cure for your weariness, for instance, is simply to wait on God to act or intervene.** But let me be clear, **that doesn't mean that God doesn't provide us with strength and power, with renewal for our bodies, minds, and spirits. I'm just not so absolute anymore in how that all works.**

And know this if you don't already. College Hill is a safe place where you can bring your struggles and doubts and theological questions about what you believe, or have been taught to believe, concerning the nature and character of God. I do every week. Also, let us not forget the prophet's point is **that our reflection upon who God is should give us comfort and faith in God's love and care for us, regardless of the difficulties we may face.**

So, as we struggle together, especially in our time of exile and weariness caused by this pandemic, perhaps the best version of that poster for us involves a combination. Keep Calm and Wait Upon the Lord, as You and I Carry On.

Amen.