

When the Worst Comes ...,God.

Isaiah 40: 28-31. 2 Corinthians 12: 8-9a.

Sometimes a text of scripture is illumined by life, other times a sermon can illumine a text and life and faith itself as never before. Such happened to me years ago as I read John Claypool's sermon on today's passage from Isaiah 40. I was in my late 20's. I had suffered things I could not talk about. The sermon's title: "Strength Not to Faint."

At the time of his sermon, he was at Crescent Hill Baptist in Louisville Kentucky, gaining a reputation as one of America's finest preachers. I was blessed to follow him at two of his churches. Seriously blessed. The occasion of the sermon was the tragic illness of his 8-year-old daughter, Laura Lue, who died after an 18 month long battle with childhood leukemia. During those 18 months, Claypool turned his suffering and sorrow into four courageous sermons, and those sermons became a book which he titled *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*. That book has helped thousands through the years, especially those suffering profound grief.

In the first of the sermons he said: "See me this morning as your burdened and broken brother, limping back into the family circle to tell you something of

what I learned there in the darkness.” These sermons became the basis of his style of preaching called “Confessional Preaching.”

The sermon which overwhelmed me as a young man and still overwhelms me was the one based on the end of Isaiah 40, our text for today. In it he speaks of a specific moment in his daughter’s illness. She had enjoyed nine months of remission. She was taking her medications and enjoying her third-grade year in elementary school. John and his wife Lou Ann were buoyed in hope and had even begun to wonder whether maybe the original diagnosis was wrong. Then on Easter Sunday Laura Lue woke up in great pain and was re-admitted to the hospital. Her leukemia had returned with a vengeance.

All of us have experienced the dashing of our hopes, but few of us have had our hopes so crushingly dashed. Soon after his daughter’s relapse, he returned to the pulpit with this text from Isaiah, a text that had been given him to help him go on. He raised the question, “What good is religion in such a time?” And he talked about the expectations we sometimes bring to any difficult time, expectations which may block us from receiving what God can bring. What good is religion when God seems to have absconded with our hope? When God seems more absent than present?

In Chapter 40, we see Isaiah, the prophet of the exile, the one we call the Second Isaiah, addressing the Hebrew people in Babylonian Exile, telling them that their liberation and return home from Babylonian captivity was soon to happen. Deliverance was on the way.

“Have you not seen?” he asks, “have you not heard? The Lord is an everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. Our God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted to the ground. But those who wait on 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.”

It is a beloved passage. But some have used this text in a way to give false unrealistic hope, what some have called “inspiration porn”, that is, inspirational stories that temporarily raise hope but, in the end set us up for despair.

Sometimes God does renew our strength, helps us mount up with wings like eagles. Have you had such exhilarating times? You felt as if you could fly. Anything felt possible. Times of ecstasy where you soared in spirit. Life was good beyond measure.

Other times God comes, and we are given strength to run and not be weary. And God is in the middle of it all. These are times when we are embarking on

some great new endeavor, a new calling, a new challenge, and we feel God's strength in us, sometimes even God's pleasure in us, as Jesus felt God's pleasure in him.

And then there come times in life when we grow weary and wonder if we can make it, complete the work, get to the finish line. And God brings strength to us, helps us run and not be weary.

But then comes the unexpected, the most terrible unexpected, those times we cannot fly, cannot run, and we wonder if we can even walk, whether we can get out of bed and begin the day. We wonder if we can go on.

When John Claypool's daughter suffered her relapse all he could feel was his utter helplessness. And into this darkness Isaiah's last promise, to walk and not faint, became like a life raft to him. He closed the sermon with these words.

Well, that is how it was, and here I am this morning—sad, broken-hearted, still bearing in my spirit the wounds of the darkness. I confess to you honestly that I have no wings with which to fly or even legs on which to run— but listen, by the grace of God, I am still on my feet! ...All I am doing is walking and not fainting, hanging in there, enduring what I cannot change but have to bear.

This may not sound like much to you, but to me it is the most appropriate and most needful gift of all.... And who knows, if I receive this gift, and just

hang in there... maybe the day will come that Laura Lue and I can run again and not be weary, that we may even soar someday, and rise up with wings as eagles! But until then —to walk and not faint, that is enough. O God that is enough.¹

That day did not come, at least not in this life, but God's gift to him was real, and Claypool was able to love and care for his little girl for the months she had left to live. Sometimes we consider God at work only when we mount up with wings as eagles, or when we run without growing weary, but God is here too, in the strength not to faint.

Years after I heard this sermon, when I was pastor of that same Crescent Hill Baptist Church, a brilliant young professor of theology, Frank Tupper, went through a terrible tragedy. Frank's wife, Betty, died of cancer, and Frank was left to raise their two young children alone. Out of the agony of that grief he rewrote his theology. He no longer saw God as the God described by Isaiah, limitless in power. Sometimes all God can do is to weep with us. The God Jesus called Abba was not the omnipotent God who controlled all and could do all, but the God of patient sometimes suffering love who worked with us for all that is good.

From his sorrow, Frank wrote a major theological book named *A Scandalous Providence*, where he re-examined God's Providence and power to accomplish all God wishes. Frank concluded: *God always does everything God*

can do. Sometimes that issues into a healing or a deliverance, but sometimes not. Sometimes grace comes as “healing grace”; other times, Frank said, God brings us what he called “sufficient grace”, the grace to go on when our best hopes have been dashed, when our deepest prayers have not been answered. Grace sufficient for the hour.

He had in mind, I think, the Apostle Paul who struggled terribly with what he called his “thorn in the flesh.” The guesses through the years as to what Paul’s thorn might have been could have filled a medical textbook, from bad eyesight, to some chronic disease, to a debilitating psychological condition. Whatever it was, it was torment to him and was a public weakness that exposed him to the ridicule of his theological opponents who wanted to undermine him. “He can’t be a true apostle of Jesus with that affliction!”, they said.

Paul prayed over and over to be released from that thorn. Agonizing prayers, long prayers. But God did not deliver him of the illness that hindered his plans and exposed him to ridicule. But God gave him what God could: grace sufficient to bear it and keep on with his life and ministry. Here is what Paul heard when on knees worn from kneeling:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

Did he hear God right? Could God use this hounding infirmity to help him spread the gospel? Was this part of the gospel itself?

Here is a mystery of the gospel: that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness, our human weakness, the weakness we sometimes hate with all our being, the weakness that some days causes us to hate ourselves. In one of Thornton Wilder's plays, a physician comes to the waters of the pool of Bethesda described in John's gospel. The physician has come to be healed. But the angel who stirs the waters of the pool says to him, "Healing is not for you.... In Love's service only the wounded soldiers serve."

By God's unimaginable grace we can become "wounded healers" ourselves. "By his wounds we are healed", Isaiah wrote of God's suffering servant and so God can use our suffering as we become healers. One day recently, our Susie Wiberg showed up for chemo dressed in a bright pink Barbie costume she and Tom had come up with. Chemo Barbie! She cheered everyone around.

God uses our strengths, yes, but also our weakness. Can we believe this? God can use us not just on those days when we soar with wings as eagles, not just on the days when we feel like we could run forever, but even on those days when we can only rise from our beds and walk and not faint.

All this may not sound that much like good news to you today, but tuck it away. One day it might be just what you need. It has been for me.

It's like the old hymn some of us have sung, sung many times:

When though the deep waters I call thee to go,
the rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie
my grace, all sufficient, shall be your supply....
Shall be your supply.

Amen

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1. John Claypool, *Tracks of A Fellow Struggler: How to Handle Grief* (Waco, Texas: Word Books; 1974), 61-2.