

I always like it when we sing *On Eagle's Wings*. While this beautiful hymn was originally written for the funeral of a classmate's father, today it provides assurance for us both as individuals and as a nation. Now there are several references in the Bible to soaring on the wings of eagles. Our hymn book indicates that this particular hymn is based on Exodus 19:4 when God tells the Israelites through Moses: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." In the Song of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 32: 11, the Lord's care for us is described as follows: "like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions." This same thought is reflected in our Responsive Reading from Psalm 91. However, when I hear this song, I always think of verse 31 of the 40th chapter of Isaiah.

The prophet Isaiah wrote this particular passage during the stormy period of history when the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrian Empire. He warns his native country of Judah that they will be the next to fall unless they repent of their sins and honor the covenant that they had made with God. Unfortunately, they do not heed Isaiah's warning and his predictions later prove true and they are taken away into captivity in Babylon. In our text for this morning Isaiah is providing assurance for the exiles in Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. He provides words of comfort and hope to those who have lost hope. Let's look at these words of assurance that are recorded in the 40th Chapter of the Book of Isaiah, verses 21-31.

Isaiah 40:21-31

Have you not heard, have you not been told; that God is Lord, He is the great I AM, the creator of all around us. Isaiah speaks for the Lord in verse 25 when God asks: "To whom will you compare me? Who is my equal?" These are powerful words and a testimony to the Lord we worship and serve. With these words, Isaiah is setting the stage for the closing verses of this morning's text. In effect, he is saying to the exiles and to us this morning, don't think that your problems or current situation is beyond the ability and help of the Lord. Our God is all powerful; as stated in Matthew 19:26 nothing is impossible for God. He can handle anything that life throws our way.

Has life got you down? Are you overwhelmed by all the demands placed on you and the problems facing you? Then hear these words of reassurance from Isaiah: "Even youth grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

Have you ever thought of yourself as an eagle? Most of the time I feel more like a turkey than an eagle; although I can relate somewhat to a bald eagle. Now from my experience, a turkey is

not a very smart animal. They seem to move slowly and focus on what's right in front of them. They don't have the vision or broad perspective of an eagle. Have you ever seen a turkey soaring? Now I have seen both an eagle and a turkey flying; a turkey looks more like a flying box car while the eagle resembles an F-16 fighter. Sometimes we tend to tackle life's problems from the perspective of a turkey instead of God's way, on wings of eagles.

Have you ever had the opportunity to see an eagle in flight? I have been lucky to see eagles both here in New Mexico and in Alaska. In Juneau, Alaska, the eagles are as numerous as are the pigeons in Albuquerque and not as messy; as you walk down the streets of Juneau you see eagles perched on all the roof tops. Eagles are majestic creatures especially when you see them soaring high above the earth. Let me share with you some interesting facts about eagles that relate to verse 31 of our text from Isaiah.

The eagle is one of the largest and most powerful birds in the world. Some eagles weigh as much as 12 or 13 pounds and have a wingspan of about seven feet. The nests of eagles are built mainly of sticks. Once a year, the female lays one or two eggs, and they are carefully tended, sometimes even by the male eagle, until they hatch in about 40 days. Both parents guard the nest and take food to the young.

At about 11 or 12 weeks, a curious thing happens. If the young eaglets have not ventured out of the nest on their own, the parent eagle "stirs" the nest, tipping the eaglets out! The young eaglets flap their wings in panic, still novices at this flying business. The parent eagle hovers overhead, watching and waiting for the critical moment. With wings spread wide, the eagle then swoops down beneath their babies and delivers them back to the security of their nest.

This was how Moses described God's care in the verse from Deuteronomy 32 we discussed earlier. Our God is both powerful and gentle, and whose timing is always perfect. Like a parent eagle, He is sensitive to our needs. He knows when our nest has become too comfortable and needs a little stirring. But He also watches carefully, and as with spread wings, catches us, bringing us to Himself. But He also wants us to learn from our fluttering and flopping. He wants us to leave behind our panic and to learn to wait on Him, to trust in Him, to walk in faith. Then, with our eyes on our parent eagle, we will begin to know what it really means to soar on eagle's wings.

Now an eagle can also sense when a storm is approaching. It will fly to some high spot and wait for the winds to come up. When the storm hits, the eagle sets its wings so that the wind will pick it up and lift it above the storm. While the storm rages below, the eagle is soaring above it. In reality, the eagle does not escape the storm; it simply uses the storm to lift itself higher. It rides the winds that bring the storm.

In this verse, Isaiah is comparing us to eagles. When we walk in faith and trust in the Lord, He enables us to ride the winds of the storms that bring sickness, death, tragedy, failure and disappointment into our lives. God gives us the ability to soar above the storms of life. Hopefully we can all look back over our lives and see times when we have grown spiritually from the storms that God helped us endure; like the eaglets, we have learned to fly. Remember it is not the burdens of life that weigh us down; it is the way that we handle them.

When I fly on an airplane, I like to get a window seat so that I can see the view of the earth below. This gives you a totally different perspective of Albuquerque and New Mexico than you get from walking or driving around the city or state. This is the same kind of perspective that God can give us when we face the problems of life. When we trust in God and focus on Him and not on our current crisis, we get a different perspective; we begin to see the situation differently.

Scott Peck begins his book *The Road Less Traveled* with this observation: "Life is difficult." I don't think any of us would disagree with this statement; we have all had enough experience to verify this fact. The original readers of Isaiah knew firsthand what Peck was talking about. They lived in an uncertain and rapidly changing world filled with political unrest and international intrigue, warfare and violence, prosperity for a few and poverty for the majority.

Of course, while some things have changed over the centuries, many things have remained the same. We too know the challenges associated with the uncertainties in life. Ours is also an uncertain and often difficult world. In these verses, Isaiah gives us a glimpse of God's presence in the midst of life's difficulties. As hard as it may be some time to sense God's presence in difficult times, we can be assured that God's grace and mercy surround us in each of the seasons and circumstances of life. Given to all, young and old, rich and poor, the prophet describes a vision of a time of renewed energy and strength even in the midst of life's problems. Strength is promised, not to fix the problem but to see us through it; strength for the journey, energy for the long haul, and hope for the future.

Now eagles can fly at an incredible speed, from 60 to 100 miles per hour. They can do rolls and loops like fighter jets doing tricks. However, eagles do not fly like sparrows, robins or pigeons. Most birds fly through the air by flapping their wings, but because of their large wingspan eagles cannot flap their wings for very long. They are built for soaring, and thus they can go much farther on less energy.

God created our planet with invisible columns of hot air called thermals rising up here and there from the surface of the earth. Eagles find these air columns, fly into the invisible currents, stretch out their wings, and are lifted higher and higher into the sky as though ascending on an elevator. They may rise as high as 14,000 feet, so high in the heavens that they

cannot be seen by the naked eye from earth. When they reach those heights, they emerge from the updraft, wings still spread, and they soar this way and that way, downward and sideward, traveling miles with little exertion of strength.

Isaiah seems to be telling us that like these invisible uplifting air currents on earth; God is present in the lives of His people. When we search Him out, claim His promises and trust in Him, spreading our wings of faith, we are lifted to a higher ground. We mount up on the wings like eagles. We can run and not grow weary; we can walk and not be faint. The strength we need for holy, effective, victorious living comes not from frantically flapping our wings like sparrows in distress, but from trusting in God and resting on His Son Jesus Christ. There's an old saying: "Let go, and let God!"

The same Hebrew word is used for waiting and hoping. Hope is not rooted in unrealistic optimism but in faithful activity and an active faith. Faithful perseverance and patient endurance matter. But we do not wait or hope alone. Although life is difficult, we are surrounded by strength and energy rooted in the grace of God; a grace that knows no bounds. "Lift up your eyes on high and see," says the prophet.

The writer of Psalm 121 that Jane/Janet read to us earlier knew what Isaiah was talking about. Listen again to his words: "I lift up my eyes to the hills; where does help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." Too often we walk with our head down, while focusing on the problems right in front of us like a turkey. God is telling us, look up, look beyond the immediate problem and realize that He is in control and He will help you get through this current situation. The psalmist reassures us that God is watching over us and all we have to do is walk in faith and trust. The psalmist reminds us that we must not make the mistake of assuming that since God is so great that He will not be concerned with our little problems. The real problem is not the magnitude of God, but the size of our faith. We must remember that God not only observes but also cares about our every move. He is with us both during the mountain top experiences and as we travel through the valleys of life.

From a human point of view it might seem that being God is a tiring job. However, verse 28 tells us that God never grows tired and never ceases to give strength to the faint and power to the powerless. Sometimes young people seem to have boundless energy like my grandchildren, but God is forever energetic. God keeps seeking, strengthening, and working out His divine plan.

In some translations of the Bible, verse 31 starts with "but those who wait on the Lord," while other translations state "but those who hope in the Lord." The Hebrew word for "wait" also means "to bind together," like the process of twisting or weaving small strings together to form a rope; the more the strings the stronger the rope. Waiting on the Lord requires true faith. It

requires going through the fire sometimes and still trusting God to bring you through the crisis. It also requires that we believe in the impossible, look for the unseen answers, and know that God will take care of us.

Baby eaglets, in their nest, can do nothing but wait until their parents return with food. We also must stay in God's nest, in relationship with Him, trust in the fact that He will bring us what we really need, and then accept and digest what comes our way because we know it's for our own good.

So the next time you feel down, tired and worn out, overwhelmed by life, at loss, no glimpse of hope, then remember the words of the great prophet Isaiah: "But those that wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on the wings of eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not grow faint." So how do you want to go through life – acting like a turkey or soaring like an eagle? Put your trust in the Lord and let Him carry you over the storms of life. Lift your eyes to the hills, for your help and strength comes from the Lord. One final thought: God loves you and cares for you. What more can you ask for from life? Amen