

“GOD’S FORGOTTEN ATTRIBUTE”

Isaiah 40:27-31; Mark 1:29-39

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At first glance, today’s two Scripture lessons seem to be worlds apart in substance and style; but in fact, they speak to a common issue. Both readings are about persons who are bone-tired, battle weary, utterly exhausted. Isaiah is addressing Israel’s exiles, who are worn out from their captivity in Babylon, suffering in body and spirit, separated from each other and their homeland, with no end in sight to their misery. And then there is Jesus, who turns out not to be from the planet Krypton, who is completely spent from a non-stop day of teaching and healing. He has moved rapidly from one urgent demand to another, and now faces more of the same the next day.

You and I resonate with these persons because, no matter how vigorous we are by nature, we all reach the point of exhaustion. My grandson Allen, who is about to turn five, constantly amazes me with his get-up-and-go. He is like the Energizer Bunny: he just keeps on ticking long after my battery has run down. A week ago last Friday, Kate and I took him down to a state park on the Long Island Sound, where he climbed on the rocks, romped on the beach, and even splashed in the frigid water. It wore me out just to watch him play! But when we got back into the car and headed home, Allen surprised us by announcing that he was tired and wanted to go to sleep. By then it was late in the afternoon, so we tried to coax him to stay awake for supper and keep him on a normal schedule. But by the time we pulled into the driveway, he was in a deep slumber. Old Isaiah was right: “Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted” (Isaiah 40:30).

And so, it’s no surprise that when I ask adult friends like you the routine question, “How are you?”, some of you don’t just respond glibly, “I’m fine”; you offer an honest answer: “I’m weary.” However, I’ve learned that your response could mean a lot of different things. When you say, “I’m weary,” you might be saying that you’re physically tired from manual or mental labor, or that you’re emotionally tired either from having too much human interaction or too little. “I’m weary” might refer to your exhaustion at the end of a single day, or it might refer to a cumulative state of weariness, a kind of tired that can’t be alleviated with just one good night’s sleep. “I’m weary” might be traceable to a particular stressor like working on your income tax or cleaning out your basement, or it might reflect the way you feel about life in general – a pervasive angst about what is happening inside you and all around you.

When the pandemic struck a year ago, I actually had to go to the dictionary to remind myself what the word “pandemic” refers to. And then, as the crisis wore on, I had to get acquainted with another term that was new to me – “pandemic fatigue.” It refers to the weariness many of us feel about living in the presence of an invisible killer, in a chronic state of fear and uncertainty, in a new normal of reduced activity and relative isolation. We get tired of Zoom meetings and virtual classrooms, of seeing important events get erased from our calendars and not seeing our family members and friends for what seems like forever. Pandemic fatigue also refers to our growing impatience with all these restrictions, which tempts us to ease up on the precautions we’ve taken for so long. We are fed up with being starved – starved for human contact and opportunities for

celebration. Millions of people will proceed with their Super Bowl parties this evening, and it will have less to do with their passion for chicken wings or Tom Brady and more to do with pandemic fatigue.

Getting tired comes with the territory of being human. Isaiah reminds us that “even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted.” But Israel’s exiles are suffering from a more profound malady, something more akin to pandemic fatigue. It is a kind of weariness that is all-encompassing and unrelenting and leads ultimately to despair. Which raises the suspicion that the exiles have not just run out of steam; they’ve run out of something else, something more than their physical energy.

I’ve read or preached from this passage on many occasions, but I noticed something this time around that I had never noticed in the past. Before Isaiah addresses the exhaustion of these exiles, he poses a question to them: “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?’” (v. 27). Do you catch his drift? Isaiah suggests that the exiles’ underlying problem is not physical, but spiritual: in their dire circumstances, they feel godforsaken. Then he asks two more questions in rapid succession. Again, he doesn’t inquire about their physical condition: “Have you not been exercising regularly? Have you not been eating properly?” No, he asks about their spiritual condition: “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” (v. 28a). In other words, “Have you not been paying attention? Have you forgotten what you have been told about God?”

Sometimes, you and I make mistakes simply because we haven’t known or heard a certain piece of information. One Sunday every June, we change our worship service starting time from 10:30 to 9:30. Inevitably, a few people show up at 10:30 just as the benediction is being pronounced. It’s not that these folks have overslept or been lazy; they haven’t done anything morally wrong; they just didn’t get the word that the worship service was starting an hour earlier. They made an innocent mistake. My younger daughter Beth had two friends in high school who were of different faith traditions. One was Jewish, the other was Roman Catholic. The Jewish girl attended mass with her Catholic friend one Sunday. Feeling welcome and not knowing any better, the Jewish girl came forward to receive the Eucharist. By Catholic tradition, she made a mistake, but no one admonished her because it was an honest mistake.

However, there are other occasions when our mistakes are not so trivial or innocent. We hear information of truly vital importance, and we allow it to go in one ear and out the other; or we know a deep truth that should be indelibly printed on our minds, but we allow ourselves to forget it. It is then that someone might rightly ask in exasperation: “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” A frustrated parent says to a stubborn child, “How many times do I have to tell you to straighten your bedroom?” A frustrated boss says to a toxic employee: “We’ve been over all this before. There is a right way to relate to your co-workers, but you insist on doing it the wrong way.” A frustrated teacher says to her clueless student: “I gave you the instructions repeatedly and carefully; but it’s like you forget everything I’ve told you.”

One often hears this exasperation from the Old Testament prophets. The people of Israel are hardly ignorant of God’s promises and expectations. God has made a covenant with them which involves certain privileges and certain responsibilities; this covenant is conveyed loudly and clearly by word of mouth and is even preserved on tables of stone; but the covenant is not written onto the peoples’ hearts, and it vanishes like disappearing ink. It’s no wonder that the primary

message of the prophets can be summarized in just a few words: “Remember. Remember what you once heard and knew but have now forgotten.”

One senses the prophet Isaiah’s exasperation with the exiles: “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” What they have known and heard is not trivial information; it’s about who God is and what God has done for them. But it’s like the exiles have amnesia; they have lost their long-term memory; and this, Isaiah says, is why they live in weariness and despair. They surely recall some of God’s attributes and affirm them in theory, as the classic theologians of the Church later do: you know, God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Any God we can describe in an adjective with the prefix “omni-” – meaning “all” – is a God to be reckoned with. Surely the exiles remember that much. But according to Isaiah, the attribute of God the exiles have forgotten is that God is inexhaustible. “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable” (v. 28).

Friends, have you ever thought about what it means to say that God is inexhaustible? It means that when you and I get to the end of our rope, God is not at the end of his rope. God’s energy is boundless; God’s patience is endless; God’s mercy is limitless. Across the eons, God has faced enough opposition and felt enough disappointment to knock the wind out of anyone else, but the wind of God’s Spirit still blows where it will. In the race to redeem creation, when you and I want to call time out and collapse on the sidelines, God is kicking into a higher gear to finish and win the race. God “does not faint or grow weary.”

And what is even better news, God “gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless” (v. 29). God doesn’t just flex his own muscles and flaunt his own energy; God shares his energy with us. God’s energy is contagious, like being around another person who exudes vitality and confidence and strength – only more so when we are in the presence of God. A fitness trainer can show us how to renew our strength, but then we are left to our own devices either to shape up or ship out. God can give us a direct infusion of energy that no human being can.

This is an attribute of God that you and I know in our heads but not always in our hearts. Have you ever gone on a trip and forgotten the charger to your cellphone? You know that a power source is available, but you’ve left it behind, and your cellphone soon runs out of juice. Has your car battery ever gone dead on a remote highway, and you had to wait for AAA to arrive and give your battery a jump start? If you were running late for an appointment or it was freezing cold outside, waiting was the hard part, just like waiting is the hard part of living in exile or living through a pandemic. Well, Isaiah says, “Those who wait for 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” (v. 31). A power source beyond ourselves can be ours – if we don’t forget about it, if we’re willing to seek it, if we are willing to wait for it.

Which brings us back to Jesus in that breathtaking first chapter of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus is tired to the bone after a hard day at the office, and there is no rest for the weary. He faces another day of demands as relentless as the previous day’s. As much as he needs a break from the pursuing crowds, this is an occasion when Jesus can’t get away from it all.

So what does he do? “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35). This is Jesus’ consistent pattern: when he feels overwhelmed and exhausted, he doesn’t escape to a beach on the Mediterranean, much less

abandon his calling to live and even die as the servant of God's kingdom. He simply pauses and puts himself in a place where he can speak and listen to God, where he can replenish his energy with resources from beyond himself. Then he goes right back at it, stronger than ever.

A college chaplain was leading a group of students in a discussion about prayer. One student said, "I don't have time to pray." The chaplain replied, "It's not a question of having time; it's a question of making time." Another student said, "I don't feel the need to pray. I feel perfectly self-sufficient." The chaplain replied with a touch of sarcasm, "It's remarkable that someone as powerful as Jesus does not feel self-sufficient, but you do."

Friends, the source of Jesus' power can be ours as well, provided we exercise what a monk in Massachusetts calls our "miracle memory," provided we remember our power source and plug into it; provided we humble ourselves enough to pray and draw strength from a Higher Power as Christ does; and, yes, provided we allow ourselves to be nourished and strengthened at Christ's table.

I hear people say that they are "sick and tired" of the pandemic and of everything else that ails them as individuals and us as a nation. Once again, the wisdom of persons who are in recovery from an addiction can be a balm in Gilead for us all. 12-Steppers often say that they hit bottom and started going back up, not when they were sick and tired, but when they were "sick and tired of being sick and tired." Does that describe you? Have you finally grown weary of being weary? "Those who wait for 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."