

“Rely upon God and wait for the Lord”

Isaiah 40:25-31

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To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? 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. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but 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.

Since you are here this week, you are among the select. The Easter crowd has gone, the chocolate candy is eaten or thrown away, and your basket of lilies is probably wilting. But you know these trappings are not the main thing, because you are here on this, the second Sunday of Easter. We will celebrate six more weeks of Easter before the Holy Spirit blows in at Pentecost. You have the inside scoop, because you know that Easter is not just one Sunday in the year.

Or you may be here because you are a scout, and a guest today, and if that's the case, we welcome you and invite you to come back often. Besides being the 2nd Sunday of Easter, today is the day our church has chosen to welcome scouts and honor the institution of scouting.

Last Sunday, on Easter, I spoke of the disturbing, unfinished story of Easter. Today I am going to talk about the power of God.

This beautiful passage in Isaiah describes eagles soaring. Isaiah uses the image of eagles to communicate the idea of God's power.

Most of us think of the eagle as *our patriotic bird*, its great size and majesty somehow reflecting our national identity. But this has not always been the case. Not always the first thing that came to mind when people thought of eagles.

Far older than the history of our country, far beyond the boundaries of our soil, the eagle has long been associated---not with a nation---but with God. Native Americans honored the eagle. Ancient Aztecs, Babylonians, and Egyptians incorporated eagles into their images of their gods.

To the ancient mind, the **eagle *was* a god.**

So when we hear the prophet Isaiah promise that those who wait for the Lord will soar on wings like eagles, we know for certain the prophet was evoking images of God. Not images of national power or human accomplishment, but images of God.

When the ancients heard this sure and certain promise of strength, they knew *exactly who and what* Isaiah was talking about. And it didn't have anything to do with nationhood. It didn't have anything to do with politics, or presidents, with kings or kingdoms.

It had to do with God.

Oh, the Israelites may have forgotten about God for a while. But they had known. They had heard. They may have lost touch with the source of their strength. They may have been unplugged from their power, way out there in the land of Babylon, far from the home they loved. But they knew. They knew the story. They carried it in their memory. They knew it deep within their bones. And Isaiah was nudging them. Isaiah was encouraging them to wait for the Lord. He was lifting them up. Because they needed lifting up. As we all do. In the big problems we face, and even, sometimes, in the little disappointments in life.

Some time ago I and my family planned a trip. We were going to see the bald eagles wintering on an Arkansas lake. There was a little company that provided boat cruises on the lake. We made our reservations. Bought our tickets. Not cheap. I was feeling especially smug, because I was sure there would be something awesome to see and weave into a sermon sometime, something having to do with eagles.

Well, long story short, we missed the boat.

A big disappointment. Four hours in the car for nothing. No eagles, but more important to me, no sermon example.

You can relate to this, I am sure. You make big plans. You set everything up, just right. You make sure you have your map, your directions, your gas tank filled. You've got your money, your tickets.

You are full of anticipation. And then something goes wrong. The best laid plans sometimes fall short. The hoped-for job doesn't materialize. The knees hurt too much to run anymore. The corporation downsizes, the brakes fail, the house burns. Someone dies, someone leaves. We cannot hold up our end of the bargain. We grow weary. We come crashing back to the ground, bruised and cranky. Or worse, shattered and despondent.

This certainly was where the Israelites were. Shattered and despondent, their lives turned upside down. They were taken away from their homeland, and God seemed far away and not at all powerful. Their plans for their own future had been destroyed.

After this failed attempt to see bald eagles wintering in Arkansas, I had pretty much figured I wouldn't ever get to see them. But I remembered someone in my former congregation who had told me he had spotted bald eagles over the Arkansas River. I thought I might be able to get a story out of him. A second hand story is better than no story at all. Well, I got more than I bargained for.

As I talked to David on the phone, he said, "Do you want to go look for some eagles?" "Sure!" I said. "How about this afternoon?" "Why not?" I thought as I scribbled directions to the private airfield.

As I drove out to the tiny hangar, images of small plane crashes flashed through my mind. *Then I saw the plane.* This plane looked a like an oversized remote control airplane. You know, one of those toy planes. I asked David, "what do you call this kind of airplane?"

"Experimental". *I thought he was joking.* Then I saw the decal emblazoned on the side window. In bold, black letters: "Experimental".

I stifled my anxiety as I climbed into this very tiny airplane with a spectacular 300 degree view. My stomach fluttered as I settled into my seat. I looked over the instrumentation. It *looked* pretty official. A GPS navigation system. Altimeter. Clock. I did a double take when I read the small metal plate with the words imprinted on it. Something to this effect. "This aircraft does not meet FAA specifications for commercial use".

With a start, I realized this was all outside of my control. Definitely outside of my plans. The plane, the pilot, the engine, the weather, the wind. Whether or not we'd see any eagles. At this point I'm not sure I even *cared*. I had sit tight and wait.

We do this all the time, though we don't always experience it quite so strongly in our gut. We sit back and wait. We expect so many things to happen outside of our control. For the traffic to flow in the right direction. For our drinking water to be clean and safe. The medicines we take, the food we eat. Most of the time, our loved ones act in predictable ways and we depend upon this. So why is it so hard for us to put our own plans aside and wait for God to give us strength? Why do we insist on rushing headlong into our own agenda? Why do we behave as if it's all up to us?

"Let's get closer to the Lord!" the pilot called out as we took off into the brilliant blue sky.

I was saying something **different**: "Help me, Lord!"

In just a few minutes, though, I was transported into another world. The world of God's creative power, with stunning views of the river below and the blue gray mountains off in the distance. God's creation, teeming with life, even in the middle of winter. Buzzards and hawks, a flock of white pelicans in flight just off our left wing, their orange beaks flashing in the sun. A great blue heron taking off from the river. Snowy egrets and ducks and cranes, scattering as we came near. An eagle nest, in the tree tops below us. And there, perched high on a branch, a bald eagle.

There for a while I forgot where I was. I forgot my dependence on the engine, my total helplessness in case something went wrong. There for a while I got to feel God's power. I got to soar with the birds. I got to see the ground from a different perspective.

It was powerful and inspiring. It was a gift. Unexpected. Unplanned. Outside my control. But really more inspiring than the beauty of God's creation was how God used this experience to lift me up, to encourage me, to give me strength.

When we rely on God, we find things happening we did not expect. We find strength in community, and we discover gifts we didn't know we had. One of the gifts we have had in our community here is the gift of scouting.

What scouting does, is take an unruly, disheveled boy (we all know what kind of a creature *that is!*) and turn him into a godly, disciplined, law-abiding young man. Seeing the potential every boy has, and unlocking that potential, whether it be in personal fitness, in creative craft, in community service. Nothing ordinary about that. Powerful stuff. But it takes a LONG, LONG, TIME. A lot of waiting is required. A lot of

patience. And a lot of hope. Sometimes it takes years before you can see how God has acted in the lives of young people.

At its best, scouting taps into the power of God. The power of God's community, the knowledge that together we are much bigger than we are individually, the hope that turns adversity into a learning experience, the wisdom that sticks with it through thick and thin. Whatever it is that keeps young people coming back week after week, trying and failing and trying again. Whatever it is that keeps us plugging away at helping young people, tired as we are, hopeless as it might seem. And every once in a while we are lifted up. We sense God's activity in the work we do, in the changes we see, in the growing up and the moving forward. In the surge of strength we didn't know we had. We experience a gift of pure grace, something totally unexpected, maybe even out of this world.

There are many times in life when we have to wait on God's power rather than rely on our own steam. There are many times when we have to just "let go and let God" be active and powerful in God's own way. In God's own time. And God has promised us strength and power to get through it all.

To soar above the eagles, to peer into the majesty of God's creation. That is privilege indeed. To rely upon God, to wait for the Lord. That is strength, indeed.