

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

First Sunday After Christmas Day
Midway Presbyterian Church
December 31, 2017

Soaring, Running, or Walking

Introduction to Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson we hear of God's majesty seen in creation, his incomparable nature, his care for the weak; these all should reassure exiled Israelites that God has not abandoned them. Listen to these words from Isaiah 40:27-31...

Introduction to Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson today we hear of Jesus' healing of Simon's mother-in-law, a summary of his healing ministry, and Jesus' withdrawing to a deserted place; while Simon and others expected something else. Listen to these words from Mark 1:29-39...

Sermon

How do you feel about yourself as a disciple of Christ as we enter the new year of 2018? I read of a Baptist minister describing what he, as a young person thought it meant to be a Christian. He said:

I developed an idea when I was young that was going to cause me problems. It was a picture that I had formed of what a Christian was supposed to be. For me, a Christian was someone who was always joyful and peaceful. No matter what situation they were in, they were always full of faith and hope. A Christian always kept his cool, never got upset or lost his temper.

Furthermore, I assumed that Christians always had the right answers, no matter what question they were asked or what situation they were in. If you ever needed advice, they were ready and able to give you sound counsel.

And of course, Christians were always loving and caring. When anybody needed help, they were there, first in line to assist.

So, why might such an image of a Christian cause someone a problem?

Because [said the minister] I could never live up to it. I tried, but no matter how hard I tried, I always seemed to fall short. And I felt defeated. I did not always feel joyful. There were times when I felt sad or overwhelmed. I did not always keep my cool. There were some situations where I succumbed to worry. There were other times when I got angry. I did not have all the right answers. In fact, I had a few questions of my own that seemed to have no answer. I felt guilty about not being able to live up to my ideal.”

Have you ever felt like that? For those of us who have, we need to hear again an ancient word from the prophet Isaiah. The situation is this. The people of Israel had been held in captivity by the Babylonians for seventy years, but now the Persians were going to come and set them free, free to go back hundreds of miles to Jerusalem to rebuild. They were told “to wait on the Lord.” That meant to depend upon God to get them where they needed to be. But there were different kinds of moods and outlooks among the people. That meant God was willing to be with, help, and use people who were not the same.

First, he was going to help and use those who could soar, those who were excited and enthusiastic about making the journey back to Jerusalem to rebuild. There *were* those who felt that way. Going back to Jerusalem brought them great joy. Isaiah spoke of it as being like an eagle, soaring in the sky. They were thrilled about what they were going to do, ready to do it, and felt that the work would be well within their abilities. Sure they had to make a long trip. They had to rebuild a city, the walls, and the temple. But God would help them. They were ready to go, encouraging others—perhaps surprised when not everyone shared their same enthusiasm.

Eugene Smith, who served in mission work in the Methodist church, told of his one experience of singing in the choir. His teenage daughter had talked him into being part of the church’s Christmas musical. Well, they were practicing the Hallelujah Chorus, when Eugene

Smith got carried away singing all those “Hallelujahs.” Suddenly the choir director stopped the music and Mr. Smith still had a couple more Hallelujahs left. Later he said, ”All of my life, I’ve been walking around with a couple of Hallelujahs inside of me, just waiting for the opportunity to shout them out.”

Maybe you remember a time when you soared like an eagle. Perhaps on your wedding day or at the birth of a child. A Baptism. A Communion. A Confirmation. Getting your Driver’s License. A Graduation. A night viewing the stars of the skies. Perhaps it was at Christmas during a worship service where it seemed that the angels of heaven were right there, right here, singing, “Peace on earth, good will towards men.”

Yes, those moments happen. But most of us do not live on that plain, day in and day out. Those times come and they go. Sometimes they come when we least expect it. Sometimes they don’t come for a long time. Most of us do not routinely soar like an eagle. If you do, great! God can certainly use you. Your inspiration reflects his light.

But what if you are not like that? Secondly, God helps and uses those who run. There were those among the people of Israel who did not soar like an eagle back to Jerusalem. Instead, what they did was do their duty. They loved God, they believed in him, they wanted to follow him, and so they did what they thought he wanted them to do. There wasn’t much in the way of mountaintop experiences, heavenly trumpets, or Hallelujahs. But as they looked to God, they found strength to follow and serve and not grow weary in well-doing.

We all know that some run faster and with greater endurance than others. John Wesley, at age 82, declared:

Mr. Henry said, “I bless God that I am never tired of my work, yet I am often tired in my work.” By the blessing of God, I can say more: I am never tired in my work. From the beginning of the day or the week or the

year to the end I do not know what weariness means. I am never weary of writing or preaching or traveling; but am just as fresh at the end as at the beginning. Thus it is with me today, and I take no thought for tomorrow.

John Wesley was endowed with extraordinary physical vitality, and doubtless his faith had something to do with his health and well-being.

Sometimes people discover that when they are moving along, absorbed in their work, they are most efficient. At a maritime inquiry considering a collision in which a small vessel was run down by a huge Atlantic liner, the liner's captain testified that, at a reduced speed his ship was less readily responsive to her steering gear. Sometimes we are more capable and efficient and happy when running. "They shall run and not be weary."

But what if you neither soar nor run?

Thirdly, God helps and uses those who merely walk. This category of "walkers" probably described most of the people of Israel in Isaiah 40. They looked ahead to a long trip home, to go to a city that was in ruins, to many years of rebuilding their homes and the temple. And as they looked toward all that lay ahead, they might have grown weary just thinking about it. Perhaps some of them felt at times that they just could not do it. Maybe it would be better to stay where they were—in exile.

What Isaiah said was that if those people who felt that at best they could only be walkers, if they would wait upon the Lord, depend upon him, he would help them to be his people and do his will. He would use them in his service. "They shall walk and not faint."

So, God renews and uses not only the soarers and runners, but also the walkers. In fact, this latter category probably fits the main company of God's people. It's been said that the largest part of the world's most useful work is accomplished by plodders. This is just as true in the church as it is in education, government, business, and industry. Preachers in their pulpits,

teachers in their Sunday Schools, Elders in their churches, visitors in hospitals, members delivering Meals on Wheels, missionaries in the fields, scholars in the church's institutions of learning.

Not people who are always full of enthusiasm. Not people who never get angry. Not people who always have the right answers. Not people who are always considering the needs of others. Not people who never have any doubts.

Sometimes life is so difficult and painful that about all we can do is to hold on. Making it just one day at a time. Putting one foot in front of the other. A pastor tells of visiting a woman dying of cancer. Though she put up a magnificent battle and was a radiant witness, it was a struggle, to say the least. And one day she said, "There are times when I despair, but then I remember, God is holding on to me, loving me, so I just try to hold on to him." Sometimes that is the Christian faith. To remember that God is with us, his everlasting arms underneath us, loving us, helping us to get through the dark valleys, to walk on.

Sometimes a Christian may soar, sometimes he may run, but I suspect that most of us are glad just to walk. When we are weary in well-doing, we can remember that even though Jesus healed many sick people, he withdrew to a deserted place and there he prayed. When we are not full of joy, we can remember that Jesus wept. When we struggle and do not find ready and easy solutions, we can remember that Jesus struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying that if it were God's will, the cup of the cross be removed. When we feel that we don't have all the answers, we can remember Jesus from the cross asking, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and seeming to get no immediate answer. We can remember that if Christ can be like that and yet be used so magnificently for the redemption of the world, then God can also use us in his kingdom's work.

Isaiah says that the strength to carry on, to walk, as well as to run and to soar, comes from waiting on the Lord. As we enter the new year of 2018, maybe you are soaring. Maybe you are running. Maybe you are just walking. But whatever, God wants all of us. God loves each of us. God needs us. And God can use us for his good purposes, for the building of his kingdom here on earth, for the mission and ministry of the church of Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.