

Lent 2018

Week 4: Learning from Scripture

Wednesday, March 7

Isaiah 40:31

“But they 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.”

During Isaiah’s lifetime, the dispirited nation of Israel suffered a period of great distress politically as oppressive **Assyrian powers** invaded and conquered their lands. Isaiah chapters 40–48 contain promises of redemption and deliverance from the suffering. That section of the book starts with the words “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Israel had nearly given up hope, thinking God had abandoned them, yet Isaiah drives his point home in Isaiah 40:27–31, “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’? 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 to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they 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.”

Ancient Hebrew culture revered eagles as mighty warriors that also cared fiercely for their young. Eagles carry their eaglets to safety, away from the threat of predators. Eagles are also known for their strength and courage in dangerous, turbulent weather, soaring above storm clouds and to safety. Eagles’ wings was a figure of speech commonly used to attribute these characteristics to a person. The prophet Isaiah uses wings like eagles in the same way, attributing the great characteristics of eagles to those who remain faithful to God and look forward to their heavenly reward. The phrase mount up is a translation of the Hebrew word *'alah*, which means “to go up, ascend, to go up over a boundary.” Isaiah is communicating the promise that God will provide renewed strength and courage to overcome obstacles, if Israel would only have patience and trust in the Lord’s sovereign timing.

God in His grace will provide power, strength, and courage to the weary, weak, and downtrodden when they are willing to be patient and wait on Him. God will cause us to mount up on eagles' wings.

Prayer: Renew our strength and give us power, strength and courage. Amen

Thursday, March 8

Romans 15:4-13

<sup>4</sup>For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. <sup>5</sup>May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup>For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, <sup>9</sup>and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

"Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,  
and sing praises to your name";

<sup>10</sup>and again he says,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people";

<sup>11</sup>and again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,  
and let all the peoples praise him";

<sup>12</sup>and again Isaiah says,

"The root of Jesse shall come,  
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;  
in him the Gentiles shall hope."

<sup>13</sup>May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Romans, Paul neither minimizes his own anguish and questioning of God nor solves the mystery of God's ways of dealing with humanity. But he does give grounds for hope, in two ways. First, he reminds his hearers of the scripture's witness to the truthfulness and faithfulness of God. Second, he turns their attention to

God's presence in their midst, precisely and especially in the experience of mutual love and service between people who previously were enemies. "Welcome one another," he says, "as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God".

This is the gospel in a nutshell. Christ has welcomed us, all of us, and brought us home to God and to each other. Let us not be sentimental about this welcome; to open our arms to those who otherwise are strangers and even enemies is nothing short of a miracle of grace. The experience of that welcome is the way we learn that "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us".

Prayer: Help us to welcome one another. Amen

Friday, March 9

John 14:23-29

<sup>23</sup>Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. <sup>24</sup>Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

<sup>25</sup>I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup>But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. <sup>27</sup>Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. <sup>28</sup>You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. <sup>29</sup>And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

We live in a world where people are more technologically connected than ever before, but many seem to still be lonely. Feeling alone can be a profoundly difficult thing to experience. And this is what the disciples are likely to fear most: isolation from their teacher and friend. All that they have done has been about being part of Jesus' life and journey. But Jesus' promises mean that they will not be alone. Into this reality of impending absence comes the Spirit, the Advocate, sent by God in Jesus'

name to be present with the followers of Jesus. This is the first time we read about this presence as the Holy Spirit. The Advocate is a presence the disciples will need in order to love as they are called to love. It will, as Jesus promises, be as if he is still with them. Additionally, the Spirit will serve as their teacher in Jesus' absence. Jesus as teacher has been a profound presence in the Gospel message and continuing this teaching -- his teaching -- will be the Advocate's role.

Having a teacher who makes a difference in your life is an important thing. Countless stories have been told of teachers making an impact on a young person's life in ways that turned them around or helped them fulfill their potential in profound ways. Jesus taught the disciples in ways that lead them to leave their previous lives to follow him in ministry and to change the world in so many ways.

Prayer: Thank you for all of the teachers in our lives who have helped shape our lives. Amen

Saturday, March 10

John 13:31-35

<sup>31</sup>When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup>If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup>Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' <sup>34</sup>I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The new commandment in this text -- to love one another -- is arguably one of the more famous statements in the biblical text. Even people who are not active participants in a church know this commandment or ones similar to it. But is it new? Hardly. Loving one another is part of Jewish tradition, is present in the Greco-Roman world around them, and is seen in other religious traditions as well.

Loving those with whom we agree or are partial to is the easy part. Loving the rest of the folks we come in contact with is a much harder proposition. But this will not be news to those sitting in the pews of your church or next to you in Bible Study. It is a part of the human condition to love and to want to be loved. Reality is ... it's easier to love those who are more loving and lovable. It is said that John, in his old age, would remind those around him to love one another. When questioned why he told them this so very often, his reply would be, "Because it is what our Lord commanded. If it is all you do, then it is enough." He commands the disciples to love one another, but he also reminds them that they will continue to feel his presence despite the fact that he will not be with them. They will exhibit their discipleship by doing what he commands: by loving one another as he loved them.

Prayer: Help us to love one another and help us to feel your presence with us. Amen

Sunday, March 11

John 10:22-30

<sup>22</sup>At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, <sup>23</sup>and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. <sup>24</sup>So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." <sup>25</sup>Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; <sup>26</sup>but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. <sup>27</sup>My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup>What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. <sup>30</sup>The Father and I are one."

Jesus is telling the doubters that he is one with God, that he knows his followers, and that they know him. He is continuing a strand of teaching from earlier in the chapter. He is using the same vivid image of sheep to describe his followers from the Good Shepherd passage. And he is declaring that he knows all who follow him and they know him for who he is. Jesus is once again providing proof that his actions are sanctioned by God.

Again we hear the allusion to a thief coming to steal the sheep of Jesus' flock, but his followers are protected by One who is more powerful than any thief coming to do them harm. There are two marks to being part of Jesus' flock: hearing his voice and following him. The folks who are once again pestering him about his identity are not part of this flock.

This text speaks to people who have known hard times, who have been afflicted by disease and lost loved ones, who have been addicted and known loss, who have not felt protected from loved ones who abuse or belittle them. This is the context into which we are called to bring the Gospel message of peace and grace. This is the context into which we are called to bring a word of hope. We are called to help folks hear the voice of the shepherd and to follow him in their lives.

Prayer: Help us to hear the voice of Jesus and to follow him. Amen

Monday, March 12

John 17:20-26

<sup>20</sup>I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup>that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup>The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. <sup>24</sup>Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

<sup>25</sup>Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup>I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

This passage is part of a prayer that looks to the future. Jesus was praying not only for the people seated around him at table that evening but also for his future followers, which thanks be to God, includes us. And it is a prayer that focuses on unity, on all being one.

As the disciples gathered for what would be their final meal with Jesus, they did not feel like one. They were no doubt frightened, uncertain, insecure, scrappy, and squabbling. Peter was petulant, Judas plotting, and James and John were probably still jockeying for promotions.

As it was for the disciples then, so too is it crucial for us today to return to Jesus' prayer, for it describes his hope, his vision, and his picture of what we, his followers, are to look like and how we are to live our lives together. It is very clear that his words are meant for everyone -- then and now -- as he prays for "those who will believe in me" through the words of the disciples.

It is a prayer for community. Jesus prays that, "all may be one." To be a follower of Jesus is to be a part of a greater whole. Within that community the prayer is for unity: "that all may be one." We are one in Christ whether we agree with each other or not. We are one in Christ whether we like one another or not. To become a part of Christ is to become a part of the community; a part of the one.

Jesus' prayer reminds us that our unity, our "oneness" is to be a sign to the world of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Oneness and unity is about love. And if you have been a part of a family, a member of a church, or a community, you know that within that love there can be disagreements and squabbling. We are human. But the mystery of the incarnation is that God desired unity with us so much God became one of us. And in that moment we were drawn into the oneness of God, the Son, and the Spirit. It is with God's help that we can live into that oneness.

Prayer: Help us to be a part of a community of unity. Amen

Tuesday, March 13

John 14:8-17

<sup>8</sup>Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." <sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The

words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

<sup>15</sup>If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup>And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup>This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

The good news of the gospel is that, in knowing Jesus Christ, we have come to know God. In hearing the teachings of Jesus we have heard of God's love for us because Jesus is "in the Father and the Father is in me". All that Jesus said, all that he did, he declares, are not his words or his works but are those of the "Father who dwells in me".

Over and over again Jesus challenges us to believe that he is in the Father. And if we believe, he declares to us, not only will he also be able to do the same works that he did but "will do greater works than these". But how are we able to believe? How are we able to do great works in the name of a person who was crucified, died? Christ is risen, but he has also ascended. He is no longer with us. How can we, who were not with him, did not hear his teachings, did not see him, believe? We are able to believe through the power of the Advocate.

As they sat in the upper room, with the power and hate of the Jewish leaders and Roman oppressors filling the air around them, Jesus assured his disciples that he was "going to the Father." And he offered them words of comfort, "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it". Little could they know how much they would need his help.

Finally, Jesus challenged them to love him and to keep his commandments. I suspect everyone seated in that room nodded their head and thought, "I do love you and of course I will keep your commandments." But in a few short hours their teacher would be arrested and tried. In a few short hours his life would be ended and their lives filled with fear that the same thing would happen to them. Would they still love him? Could they keep his commandments?



They, and we, are able to love and keep the commandments because of the Spirit, the Advocate sent by God. Jesus declared to them and to us that the Spirit of truth would be with us forever. The Advocate would help us to hear the words of Jesus even though he has gone to the Father. The Advocate “will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you”. We are able to love God and others because the love of God in the gift of the Spirit will “abide with you, and he will be in you”.

**Prayer: Come and abide with us as we seek to love others and keep your commandments. Amen**