

## On Eagles Wings

### Isaiah 40: 6-31

I am a backyard bird watcher and a bird lover. For me there is something fascinating and comforting and uplifting about watching birds. Thanks to Amy's devotion both to keeping her feeders full, and to buying special seeds that attract goldfinches, her yard is like an Audubon watercolor. And so, as a fortunate guest at this free show, I reflect. I meditate. I pray. Actually, I worship. Birds, for me, are theological. Birds, for me are simile, metaphor, poetry. You know—as in “fly like an eagle” or “strut like a peacock” or “as innocent as a dove”. Ever since there were writers, birds, especially in flight, have prodded the imagination and provided the imagery. No. I do not watch as biologist or naturalist or even artist. I watch as a theologian. For from creation through Noah, from the dove of baptism to Francis of Assisi, birds often turn our thoughts up toward the sky and things we do not understand. I am sure it is because they fly.

In Genesis God creates “every winged bird of every kind.” God “...let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” A few chapters later Noah sends a dove to see if life exists. Ravens offer home delivery to the prophet Elijah. In Luke's baptism story the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus “in bodily form like a dove.” As he teaches Jesus assures the crowds that if God cares for sparrows God surely cares for them. Throughout the Bible birds are somehow more than birds. They are symbols. They are signs. They are metaphors. And that avian imagery soars to great heights in the fortieth chapter of Isaiah. For here we encounter the exquisite image of prophet's promise and poet's song. Those who wait on the Lord shall soar with wings like the wings of eagles.

To really understand what the prophet is saying, however, it is essential that we place in the context of what is said before. For if you study Isaiah 40 you will see it is a climactic verse. In this text written by "...an anonymous Jew who lived precisely in the time of Cyrus, when the Babylonian exile was just coming to a close and when Israel's religion was fast becoming one of unequivocal monotheism..."<sup>1</sup> the prophet undoubtedly speaks to those not in power, those going through difficult times, those exiled from what they call home, those who are exhausted, those, perhaps, who have lost their homes, their jobs, their self-esteem, their sense of future, their strength. They are tired, tired, tired in all the ways you can be tired. And so the prophet paints an astonishing word picture of God, of the capital "D" divine as opposed to those who would make themselves divine, of those who promise salvation compared to the only One who can save.

To do this, the prophet turns poet to and attempts the impossible, to express who God is and what God is like. Here is poetry at its most expressive, exalted, excellent. The prophet begins with things beyond the imagination. When you stand at the ocean's edge can you visualize the whole Atlantic? How much does Everest weigh? How many grains of sand in the Sahara? You aren't sure? Well God can measure all water and sand in the hollow of God's hand, and God can weigh the mountains. Who can conceive, create, understand, envision, grasp the universe? Surely not Galileo, Copernicus or Einstein. For those great minds and for our not so great minds the universe is beyond comprehension. And who, the poet adds with wonderful tongue-in-cheek wit, does God go to for answers? HA. Who is the Lord's spiritual director, pastor, priest rabbi, counselor? HA. Who

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 561.

taught the Lord the meaning of, and the way to, justice? HA. No one. No one. No one. Because this great Lord is Spirit, counselor, enlightenment, justice, knowledge, understanding.

Then, after that breathtaking display of creative writing imaging the omnipotence, power, might, scope, mystery, inscrutability of the Lord, the prophet drops the zinger. Listen up national leaders. It's not too late. Listen up leaders to come. It's not too early. "Even the nations are like a drop in the bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales...." All of the campaigns and elections and bitterness and positioning and bragging and power struggles are nothing compared to the mighty, awesome God of creation and covenant. If you could get that in your heads—and keep that in your heads—it would surely help put everything in perspective.

Think of it this way. Where are they? Where are any of them that ravaged and oppressed and tortured and murdered? Where are those kings of Philistines and Assyrians and Babylonians? Who, you say? I don't even know who those people are. Exactly. And where are the governors and tsars and senators and generals and tyrants and titans? Where are Caesar and Attila and Stalin and Hitler? Think of all of those kings and queens and emperors and sultans and chiefs and CEO's who wielded so much power. Think of all of those who ruled by fear, intimidation, genocide, holocaust. Where is their power? Where are they now? "Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket....All the nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness." Where are they now?

But even although the honchos come and go we are still raised on empire. We are raised to compete. Parents compete to get their wee ones into the "best" pre-schools. The "smart" kids compare SAT scores; the gang kids

cruelties. And the grown-ups compare not just degrees, titles and salaries but also houses, cars, and clothes. As individuals and as nations we use any way we can to be somehow better, somehow richer, somehow stronger, somehow superior to everyone else. I am talking about the epidemic of marginalizing others, demonizing others, using others, de-valuating others, de-humanizing others, ignoring others, stepping over others, stepping on others, doing whatever it takes to others to get me my fair share.

Then it is on to the idol makers. C'mon. C'mon. Tell me. Which one of your idols is this God like? No! Still, we spend so much of our lives worshiping, honoring, worrying about, kissin' up to, and schmoozin' these folks that we get tired, really, really tired. So next, the text screams for the attention of the star struck, the sycophants, the apple polishers, the groupies, the posses, the lemmings, the idolaters Hear me! According to the prophet, according to these lyrical verses, the comfort, the strength, the ascension, the lifting, the take off, the raising comes to those who wait on the Lord. The Lord. No one else. That is what Isaiah is saying again and again and again. The ones who "get it" are the ones who "wait on the Lord." This central truth is not only revealed in Isaiah. It is revealed throughout Scripture. Remember Mark?

The Gospel of Mark records a 'barrage' of healing stories and accounts of casting out demons at its start. The effect of these episodes is to help the reader recognize who it is here who proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15). These stories in their own way pick up on the theme of divine power which lies beyond the realms of earthly experience, but which is perceptible to those who 'hear and understand' **and wait**. At the start of Jesus' ministry in Mark we are reminded of the one who is sovereign over all creation, who can strengthen the weak and faint, whose word is one of

promise and hope, and who is present in the activity and proclamation of Jesus. We have every justification for hope and confidence in the coming of God among us. As with Isaiah's audience, however, realizing that hope is not always easy. We may not be in physical exile in the church today, but there are enough 'powers' (or should I say demons?)...who continue to play on our insecurities, our hopelessness, and our malaise, that we are overwhelmed by another kind of exile..."<sup>2</sup>

If you hear a voice that always plays on your insecurities, if you hear a voice that always says "be afraid; stay afraid"; if you hear words that say 'buy me and all will be well'; if you hear a voice that says turn to me, turn to us for strength and power; if you hear words that somehow bruise your soul they are almost surely not the words of the prophet. If you hear a voice that brags and boasts and threatens and belittles, that is not the voice of the prophets. If you hear only words that tell you to buy more, hoard more, stockpile more and share less, those are surely not the words of the prophet.

But the words of Isaiah are the words of the prophet. The Isaiah of chapter 40 is known as the "prophet of consolation".<sup>3</sup> Isaiah is not, however, consoling by saying my bombs are bigger than your bombs. He is not consoling by telling everyone how brilliant and rich and strong THEY are. He is consoling by saying that no one, that nothing, that no mortal, no leader, no nation was, is, or can ever be God. The comparisons are ludicrous. There is no comparison! Yet "...far from being justification for him to abandon us as worthless, the first part of the chapter serves as a setup for his condescension, his awesome majesty stooping down to lovingly care for his

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<sup>2</sup> footnote

<sup>3</sup> Norman Podhoretz, *The Prophets* (New York, The Free Press: 2002), 269

people.”<sup>4</sup> The Lord God is where the protection is, where the security is, where the comfort is.

Look. This particular moment in which we live is a scary one. Things have changed. This is a very good time to ask yourself: who are my gods? Who is my God? Who, or what, do I worship? This is a good time to ask yourself whether you really do hope, trust, believe, wait on the Lord. This is a good time to ask if your faith goes down every time your mutual fund goes down. This is a good time to ask yourself if the power you rely on is really divine power. Mark Galli in his terrific little book, *Jesus Mean and Wild* says it this way:

A more subtle approach to the problem of divine power is to manipulate it...it looks like we very much believe in God's power when, paradoxically, it turns out we don't. I'm mostly thinking of the so-called prosperity gospel, in which people are taught formulas and attitudes that are said to more or less guarantee God's favor. Name it and claim it. Expect a blessing. Believe! And so on and so forth. If you have enough faith, say the right prayer, and remain stubbornly persistent, God's power and blessing will become available to you.

Desperate people, of course, will use desperate means and so I do not fault the common prosperity believer as much as their preachers and teachers, who should know better.<sup>5</sup>

That may be what is sold to us as “popular religion.” That may be what is sold to us by the 700 Club as it runs donors and how much they gave along the bottom of your TV screen. But that is not what Isaiah says. What he says is: “but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength.” It is not those who wait on the next big thing, or the next great preacher, or the

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<sup>4</sup> <http://scriptureandlife.blogspot.com/2006/06/isaiah-4031-they-that-wait-upon-lord..html>

<sup>5</sup> Mark Galli, *Jesus Mean and Wild* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2006), 114-115.

next American idol. The truth is not outside of you; the truth is inside of you. When we examine the meaning of the original Hebrew of the text we learn that the prophet talks about a way of thinking, and seeing, and living. It means that:

“...waiting with steadfast endurance is a great expression of faith. It means enduring patiently in confident hope that God will decisively act for the salvation of his people...Waiting involves the very essence of a person’s being, his soul...Those who wait in true faith are renewed in strength so that they can continue to serve the Lord while looking for his saving work....There will come a time when all that God has promised will be realized and fulfilled...In the meantime the believer survives by means of his integrity and uprightness as he trusts God’s power and grace.”<sup>6</sup>

“An attitude which can wait for the God of the ages and his plan will gain strength to rise above the moment, not tire and not faint...”<sup>7</sup> That is what is so hard for us to understand as we want to jump on the eagle and tie reins around his neck. What does that mean? As you sit in the sterile room in ICU and watch the monitors beep and the IV drip, you will ascend. As you hear the words: “your job is no more”, you will be strong up. As you hear some very frightening economic news you will be held up. As you face the illness of someone you dearly love you will be lifted up. As you face your own aging you will be lifted up. As you face whatever it is that knocks you down you will be lifted up. The point is this: if you are focused on the Lord—in the words of the prophet if you “wait for the LORD”—you will rise above the moment. It is an interior reality; it is not an exterior reality.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://scriptureandlife.blogspot.com/2006/06/isaiah-4031-they-that-wait-upon-lord.html>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The image of being raised up on the wing's of an eagle is a startling image of up when everything is down, rising when everything is falling, new life when the old one is dying. Feeling so lifted up is not based on what is actually going on. It is not based on something that you are doing or not doing. It is not based on the reality of that moment. It is not based on headlines or any words on FOX, NPR, ABC or CNN. It is not based on whether Caesar or Queen Elizabeth or Lincoln or Putin are on the throne. All of those things influence us greatly, and often painfully, but NOT ULTIMATELY. Rather, our rising, our transcending, is based on faith, on hope, on trust, on belief, on patience, on a willingness to wait. It is based on being, very, very clear about who God is and who God is not. The biggest word in the verse “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...” is but! **But** those who wait on the Lord. **But** those who wait on the Lord.

And so I watch the birds in Amy's yard. And I reflect. I meditate. I imagine. I pray. I worship. I wait. And I realize; I smile as I realize. It is not just the birds. It is also the wind. It is not just the birds. It is also the wind. They cannot lift off and lift up alone. More formally said: “The soaring eagle is borne aloft not by his powerful wings, but by the wind's currents lifting his rigid pinions. Those waiting are those prepared to be lifted up and carried aloft by the spirit of God in his time and his way.” Again. “The soaring eagle is borne aloft not by his powerful wings, but by the wind's currents lifting his rigid pinions. Those waiting are those prepared to be lifted up and carried aloft by the spirit of God in his time and his way.” If you “get” that, if you believe that, if you leave here and live that, you will, in your own way, soar. Amen. Rev. Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. February 16, 2020.



