

I want to speak this morning about the first reading we heard, the Old Testament reading from the Hebrew scriptures from the book of the prophet, Isaiah. In fact, I want to just concentrate on one word from that reading. It's a word that comes three times in just a few verses. Let's see if you can spot it. "God 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 feel 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."

Did you hear it, the word that comes three times? Weary. I think there are at least two different kinds of weariness. The first is the weariness you feel after a long hike, and that's cured by a bath and a hot cup of tea and an early night. That's a nice kind of weariness. Then there's another kind which isn't so pleasant. It's the weariness that comes after being ground down, worn down by years of difficulty, tired out by events that have dragged on.

I heard this week that the Hebrew word that's used in this passage comes from the Hebrew verb to grasp, as in to grasp something so tightly to hold onto something for so long that it becomes exhausting. We might call this white knuckling, trying to keep everything together when life gets complicated by grasping tight to things, by holding on tight. I once went for a cold winter walk in the north of England in a famous part of the country, a beautiful park called the Lake District. There's a very famous high ridge there called Striding Edge, which is very narrow. When I did it, there was absolutely no striding involved because I'm not really comfortable with heights. So, I shuffled along Striding Edge, holding very tight to the rocks. I was bent over holding the rock as I went along, and I got to the end and I thought, "Oh, my fingers are very cold."

And I looked at the gloves that I'd been wearing and I'd been holding on so tightly that there were no fingers... all my fingertips were exposed. I'd ruined a brand-new pair of gloves just by holding on so tightly to the rocks. And that's exhausting, that kind of clinging on. We can only white-knuckle it for so long. It soon makes us very weary. If we go through life

holding tightly to things, we very soon get exhausted. Isaiah was writing to the people of Israel when they were similarly worn down, exhausted and weary. They'd been in exile in Babylon, which we now call Iraq. For decades, they'd been taken to a strange land and there seemed to be no way back. They were ground down, weary by clinging on tightly to the hope that they'd soon be returning.

Isaiah was a prophet sent to comfort them in their distress. And in this passage, he enters into a kind of dialogue, although it's not exactly clear who he's dialoguing with, but he begins the passage, he begins the dialogue by saying, "Have you not seen? Have you not heard?" It's not clear who the you is. It could be the exiles, could be a particular person, could be one of us who's feeling weary and ground down by the circumstances that we are facing. Whoever the you is, I think it's good to pay attention to the words of the prophet here and see what they have to say to us. He begins with this rhetorical question, "Have you not seen? Have you not known? Have you not heard?"

He asked this knowing full well that the hearer has heard of God, does know of his activities, his involvement in history, the beauty and wonder of his creation. Prophets like Isaiah were sent to persuade people to believe in God. It wasn't their job to make a case to present evidence for belief in God. Rather, they were there to remind people of God, to remind people that they're his creation, that he made the world and that he's involved in our history, and he goes to remind people because people forget. We forget. We forget what God has done for us, that God is the creator of us and our world.

The psalmist said, "Bless the Lord, oh my soul and forget not all his benefits." The Deuteronomist says, "So be careful not to forget the covenant, the Lord your God made with you." Isaiah reminds his conversation partner about all that God has done. He says, "Remember that our God sits above the heavens. Remember he created the ends of the earth. Remember that His understanding is unsearchable." We need to be constantly reminded of God's goodness, God's power, and that all that he has done for us because we like the people of Israel, forget.

The you in the passage, interrupts the prophet and says, "My way is hidden from the Lord and my right is regarded by my God." And the prophet says, "Well, that might be how you feel, but that's not actually what the situation is." The people need to remember that God is still in heaven, and that whilst we may forget his goodness and bounty to us, he never forgets us. So, we hear these magnificent words just a few chapters later in the Book of Isaiah where the prophet says this, "The people say the Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me. But God says, can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hand."

The prophet Isaiah reminds the weary people that God has not changed, God, the creator God, is still Lord of the universe and has not forgotten them. So, he encourages the people to lift up your eyes and see. Lift up your eyes. Don't look down and be discouraged. Lift up your eyes to God and praise.

I'm going to share another hiking story with you now, and if you think I'm including all these stories, just a curry favor with the scouts, you'd be exactly right.

There was a time I did a lot of backpacking and my favorite trip, and I recommend this to the scouts, I had two weeks in the Dolomites. It was absolutely magnificent. And I went with two friends called Chris and Hugh, and on the first day we were going up this mountain and we came to a stream. It was a stream. I'm not going to say it was a river, it was a stream, but it was very, very fast flowing. And me and Chris saw some rocks there and hopped over and carried on. Well, we went quite a long way before we realized that Hugh wasn't with us. So, we turned around and looked down the mountain and Hugh was there looking into this stream. He got so fixated by how fast it was flowing that he couldn't bring himself to hop across. He didn't look to the other side and think, "Well, if I go there, there and I'm across," he just got caught up with how fast it was flowing.

He needed to lift up his eyes and look at the other bank and he would've realized that it wasn't too hard to cross. When we're weary, let's lift up our eyes and see. And in so doing, we might remember all that God has done for us. We might look again at the beauty of

his creation and see what's revealed in the beauty around us. We might see what he's doing in our midst, in our own lives. So Isaiah encourages us to remember, and he also offers us a promise. He says, "God 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."

Note that the promise isn't you'll be given all the energy you need to flap your wings and fly wherever you want to. It's not about getting our life back in control. The promise Isaiah makes is that we'll mount up with wings like eagles. And eagles have amazing wings, and you don't see them flapping. They're not like the beautiful hummingbirds that we see in our gardens working so hard to stay still. The eagle rises and floats on the high of the thermal winds and doesn't move their wings at all. They soar just by picking up with the thermal currents, which allows them to soar so gracefully and seemingly effortlessly.

And that's a powerful image of the gliding eagle, of how we can rely on God's power and resources. We wait for God to renew our strength. When the wind of God's spirit blows on us, let's be ready to rise up and soar just like the eagle senses when the conditions are right, when the thermal currents are going. Let's look to God and expect God's spirit to come and help us to launch out.

And I want to close by reading a well-known verse from the Gospel of St. Matthew, where God comes in the person of Jesus. He reiterates the promise that God made to the people of Israel, and he makes it personal. Jesus says this, "Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I'm gentle and humble in heart, and you'll find need for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." So may all of us who feel weary, find the rest that Jesus offers. Amen.