

***Those who hope in the Lord will
renew their strength, soar on wings like eagles, run and not grow weary, walk and not be faint***

The Old Testament reading for Sunday Feb 4, the 5th Sunday after the Epiphany, is Isaiah 40:21-31. The final verse of this passage is one of the most oft quoted scripture in the Old Testament. *“but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”* (v. 31) They are words of comfort and encouragement; they *uplift and heal*. The Lord is the creator and kingmaker, and he shares his inexhaustible power with *anyone* who waits on him. Isaiah 40 speaks to God’s transcendence as well as His immanence. The transcendence of God means that God is outside of humanity’s full experience, perception or grasp. The immanence of God means that he is knowable, perceivable or graspable. The words allow us to understand the significance of God’s incomparable power for us, as the prophet Isaiah is telling the people of God’s incomparable power for his people in exile. The Lord “does not faint or grow weary,” and “he gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.”

It is widely recognized that Isaiah 40 and following speaks to a different historical situation than the first chapters of the book. It comes in the wake of the Babylonian exile, perhaps around the end of the exile, in the 530s BCE. The homecoming and restoration in Judah would have been a very difficult matter, however. The land had been devastated and not rebuilt. Thus, although the return from exile is often imagined as joyous it was also difficult. One might perceive in the comforts of the final verses a special message for those for whom the long journey home would be hardest: the elderly. They were the only Judeans who would remember Judah by the end of the exile. The writer contrasts between those who rely on the Lord — who will “run and not be weary ... walk and not faint” — with boys and men in their youthful prime, who will “faint” and “fall exhausted.” The memories of the elderly were not merely nostalgia; they would have been useful to the returnees. The cadence of the passages— *they shall renew, they shall rise, they shall run, they shall walk* — seems meant to carry them along.

The closing metaphor, “they shall rise up with wings like eagles” is the poetic pinnacle of the passage and evokes the Exodus again. “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exodus 19:4). This powerful, caring God will provide the energy the people need for their journey back to their homeland. When life has worn us down, when the spiritual battle seems too fearsome, when we feel as though we cannot go on, the prophet Isaiah offers us spiritual energy from the powerful, creative God.

In one sense, the prophet offers encouragement to go back. The scattered exiles can go back to Jerusalem from the far-flung regions of Babylon. In reality, though, they do not go back. They go forward. They accept a new adventure. The people will go back, but in reality, everything has changed. They cannot go back, they can only move into God’s new future.

The contemporary church cannot go “back” to anything. The church can only move forward into an uncertain world. Where would we start with the problems the church faces? Declining numbers and influence. A divided society that cannot seem to communicate. Threats both international and homegrown. What does the church need moving into that future? This passage offers a call to harken back to the faith that formed the church. That faith includes God’s power and creativity as well as the affirmation that God sees and knows us. God cares for us. God can give the church the energy it needs to move into an uncertain future. No one can promise that the problems of the world will go away. But drawing on these words of Isaiah we have the promise that a strong, creative God can give energy for whatever the church faces and for whatever we face. God moves with us as we go forward into this uncertain and dangerous world.