

A Christian's Strength
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Isaiah 40:21-31

“He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.”

Movement 1 – Isolation Part I: Despair and Exhaustion

Are you tired? Do you feeling worn down, exhausted, and beaten? Do you feel like you are stuck in a kind of rut that goes around and around with no end or change in sight? Like the old horse pushing the mill, stepping in the same steps again and again. Or the do you feel like the man in the car commercial who is in so much of a rut that he leaves the same path in the lawn, the same kiss mark on his wife's cheek and repeats the cycle again and again. Are you stuck in a rut, routine in which the repetition leads to boredom, and the boredom leads to exhaustion? Are you feeling tired?

I sometimes think about the poem by Emma Lazarus on the bronze plaque at the Statue of Liberty inviting “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...” I imagine that many of those immigrants, my ancestors included, came over tired, went to the slums and ghettos of cities tired, and many are still feeling like they are tired, huddled, and yearning to breath free. You can imagine the factory workers walking in and walking out, in lines of hopeless drudgery. Karl Marx wrote that in unfulfilling work, the worker begins to feel alienated from himself, from his fellow workers and from his work – and that is the feeling tired. It isn't a kind of exhaustion that comes from performing great tasks, climbing mountains, or running a 4-minute mile. It is the kind of exhaustion that comes from the deadly routine that has no hope of end or change. It is the exhaustion you find in the beginning and the end of Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. The play begins with the two characters, Estragon and Vladimir waiting for Godot to come with hope and change. But the play ends with the two of them still waiting and there is a sense of exhaustion with the waiting.

This is a kind of exhaustion that the Israelites may have been experiencing. They were in exile in Babylon, and tried to maintain the normalcy they remembered in Jerusalem. They tried to worship. In the foreign land, in the strange land, they tried again and again to read scripture with some understanding of hope. They tried again and again to pray to God with the idea that God was actually listening. They tried again and again to end each Passover by saying, “next year in Jerusalem.” But it didn't seem right to praise God outside of the temple walls. It didn't seem right to pray to God when they were surrounded by so many other

idols of other gods. They were still in exile. They were still oppressed. They still did not see God acting in their lives, and in the waiting and the despair, they began to get tired.

Are you tired? Are you tired because you feel stuck, in a rut, and waiting for things to change? Are you tired of waiting for a change, a hope, and a glimmer of light but find nothing on the horizon? Like the fisherman's wife waiting for her husband to return. Like a wife tolerating the despair of a marriage, hoping that things will someday change. Like the tour guide that has to again and again say the same thing for what seems to be the same people. You are so stuck, and so exhausted that you no longer look to connect with your friends, with yourself, and with that which you may be doing. You've been at this place of exhaustion before. You are at this place of exhaustion now. Are you tired?

Movement 2 – Isolation Part II: Denial and Exile

Maybe you feel like God has forgotten you. Perhaps that is a thought that you don't often entertain, but if you are stuck in a rut, doing the same thing again and again, maybe you think that God has forgotten you. It doesn't feel right to suggest such a thought. It doesn't seem right to even think that God might have forgotten any of us. Maybe we just need to keep our head down and look more closely at our shoes, maybe we need to work harder at thinking happy thoughts, and maybe we just need to bury that question and that thought.

But the thoughts persist. More often than not, when I am working with those who are going through pain and suffering in their lives, I hear the question, "Where is God?" The individual is looking for the hope that God has claimed to offer. The individual is looking for the compassion that God has claimed to have. The individual looks around and perhaps only sees a battle with cancer, a lost spouse, or a family falling apart and asks, "Where is God in all of this?" We can live in a kind of denial, like all the people in the *Matrix* who haven't been clued into the fact that they are living a lie. We can live that way and act happy, and maybe from time to time be happy. We could pretend our loved one didn't die. We could pretend that everything is going well. We could pretend that our child is ok and live in this kind of denial. Or we could ask the difficult question of God's presence. We could take stock

of the routine, the aching exhaustion and despair and ask, where is God in all this, because it is difficult to sense God's presence.

Think of the Israelites in Babylon. Maybe some of them still put together a worship believing that everything is different. Maybe some of them tried to live as if they were still in Israel and not taken from their homes. The dream and the imaginary are much easier to face than the reality. The reality suggests that the God of Jacob, Isaac and Abraham are not as powerful as the god of Babylon and that is why the people are in exile. The reality suggests that the God of Israel has left the

people and they are now alone. If the dreamers would just open their eyes and see how badly off they are, if the dreamers would just take the time to accept the reality that God has left them, and there is no longer any hope. Deny it or not, the reality is that they are still in exile.

Movement 3 – The Poetic Vision in Creation

But the prophet reminds us of God's actions in creation. The prophet comes to people lamenting in Babylon how God has left them, and begins to get disgusted. *Look around, at all which God has created. Look around at all that God has made, and realize how powerful God is.* But the prophet doesn't stop there; he continues telling the people that God is still an active participant in creation. When a leader is appointed over a nation, God can still bring that leader down, even the leaders that overthrew Israel and took them to Babylon. The stars in the sky, the wind at your face, the ground beneath are all a part of creation because of God's work. The prophet is calling the people to remember Psalm 8, when the people are called to look to the heavens, the work of God's fingers, the moon and the stars that have been established. All of creation is a part of God's glorious work and speaks to God's awesome nature.

Some commentators have suggested that the beginning of this passage is akin to the questions God asks of Job. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ... Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, so that it might take hold of the earth? Are we to consider that God cannot act, or that God has left? Who are we to think that the lures of other gods and promises can compare with our God? This is what the prophet is saying to the people who are stuck in the rut, who are looking for some kind of hope, and who feel as if God has abandoned them. The prophet is calling the people, and he is calling us to look around at all creation and realized the nature and power of God.

So we are called to think, and look and remember as well. We are called to remember the amazing moments when we knew God was in control. Remember the description of a genie in the Disney movie *Aladdin*? Cosmic power in an itty-bitty living space. That is God, but take out the itty-bitty living space. We are called by the prophet to share and remember that hope.

We are called to remember the stories told of God's actions, which show God's power. These are the stories of the Israelites walking across the Red Sea. These are the stories of Christians growing and flourishing despite Roman persecution. These are stories of 19 people gathering together, trusting God and starting a church that has been going strong for almost 200 years. These are stories of Christ dying on the Cross-and still within God's reach. Do you not know? Have you not heard? Don't you remember that God is the creator of all things, the liberator of all people, and the author of the cosmos? Remember the sacrifice of

Christ, the control of Christ and the hope of Christ. Remember that God is the author of creation and is above and beyond any and all limitations.

Movement 4 – The Poetic ‘Dope Slap’

If God is the author of the cosmos, and the creator, how could God forget us? How could God let us be swallowed into a bog of constant despair and exile? Why would we fall into a place believing that all hope is lost? Can all hope be lost in the arms of the creator and redeemer? Can all hope be lost in the arms of the very one who stretches the sky over the earth? These are the questions that the prophet is asking the Israelites who feel lost and stuck and are thinking about the allure of the gods of Babylon. Don't you remember how God is the creator of everything? Don't you remember how God does not grow faint or weary? We don't know the ways of God, but we do know that God's strength never ebbs. We can whine and cry that we are in despair and that God has left us because life is difficult, but the prophet stands and speaks that God has not left us.

The prophet guides us through the wonders and signs of nature, reminds us of God's glory, and then with a kind but firm dope slap on the back of the head, criticizes our own doubts and fears. "Why do you say that you are hidden from the Lord? The Lord is the creator of the ends of the earth." Why do you say that God is no longer with you? Why do you feel that God has left you? Your health may be failing, your family may be falling apart, your job may be holding your spirit down, your friends may have left you, but God knows where you are and is with you. The prophet is offering what the Biblical scholar Water Brueggemann calls a prophetic hope. It is a dream based on a belief that God would not leave the people. It is a dream that comes from memories of a liberating God, it is a dream that refuses to stay in the harsh nihilistic reality of here and now, and that always looks to the hope that God can create. This is the hope and the dream that the prophet is calling the Israelites and us to look to.

Think of pastors who fall into burnout. They come to a church that is struggling and decide that they themselves will save the church. The pastor visits all the people, goes door to door, attends seminars, listens to the members of the congregation, goes to every meeting, and all the time is carrying the cup of responsibility that he or she must save that church. Then the time will come when the pastor runs out of energy, when the numbers stay stagnant, when the money is gone and the pastor will cry out, "why have you left us, Lord?" Oh but the God who created the hosts, calling them by name, who causes princes and presidents to rise and fall has not left the pastor or the church. In the exile and the despair it is easy to seem that we are alone, but God is like that shepherd concerned for each and every sheep, from one to one hundred. The greatest and the least are all in God's mind and heart. God is the creator of the cosmos, so God cannot and will not forget us.

Movement 5 – The Joy of Doing Nothing

Not only does God know of our struggles, but also God offers strength. This could be the greatest hope of this passage. God does not grow faint or weary. God's strength has no end, and God offers that strength to us. *God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.... 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, and they shall walk and not faint.* We can stay in the same rut and try to change it ourselves, but eventually we will get exhausted. We can live in a false hope and denial, but eventually we will wear out. Even with ten cups of coffee we will still grow weary. Even with a full night's rest we will still grow weak. We can't live into the hope that God promises alone. Pastors will burn out, parents will fall into an exhausted despair, friends will lose hope, and individuals will stumble and fall without the strength of the Lord.

But when you follow and trust in the Lord, then your strength is eternal, because it isn't yours; it is the Lord's. Even in difficulty and trouble, your walk will continue because the Lord is guiding your feet. You will be able to run for miles because it is God who carries you. This is a Christian's strength, that the Lord, the one who cares for Israel, for the oppressed, for the downtrodden, cares for you and carries you. A Christian's strength is not his or her own, but God's strength. There will be moments in your life when the pile of hardships will be too much. These are those moments when your fear will grow, when your despair will grow, when your anxiety will grow. Rest in the Lord, don't try to go alone, but let God give you strength.

Think of that pastor who tried to "save" the church. The pastor burnt out because he or she did not rest in the Lord, trust in the Lord, or remember that God gives us strength. Oh so often, in our arrogance, we try to do things on our own and neglect God. So often we try to accomplish things on our own and forget about God. So often we just don't want to take that leap of faith, stop trying, and let the winds of the Holy Spirit carry us through.

"But what if my husband leaves me? What if my child gets worse? What if my family falls apart? What if the church folds?" These are good and honest questions, because the prophet is not promising results, just strength. Oh, do you not know? Have you not heard? The very God who created the heavens and the earth knows your path and your concerns and will give power to the faint and the weary. We are tempted to turn to other things for help and comfort. We are tempted to put our hands on something tangible and real, something that we think can promise a new hope. But our hope comes from the Lord, and only in the Lord will we find true and full salvation. God knows our struggles and God offers strength.

Movement 6 – Trusting

We have to trust. We have to follow Jesus, only Jesus, and trust that God will

give us strength. When we are tired, we look for shortcuts and easy outs. When we are tired we look elsewhere for hope. Don't you think that Christ was tired on the cross? Don't you think that the weight was too much, the pain was too much, and the rejection was too much? But Christ had the strength of the divine, strength that carried through the suffering and transcended even death. That is our hope and example of God's strength and a Christian's strength.

We are called up to our own cross daily. There may be moments when we are too tired to mount the cross. Trust in God, and follow Jesus. We may find moments when we can't see the end of the tunnel. Trust in God, and walk with Jesus. We may find moments when we are surrounded by so much despair that we can't even breathe. Trust in God and walk with Jesus. A closer walk. A more focused walk. A walk that only looks to the next footstep is all we need do, and trust that God will give us the strength, God will lift us up, and we will soar.

AMEN