

Sermon for Sunday, September 26, 2010

A Sermon delivered by The Rev. Judith Watt

The Third in a Four Part Series

Worship, Worthship, Work of the People: Vision, Confession, Renewal, Dedication

Renewal

Isaiah 40:31

Mark 1: 35-39

In a speech in Washington, D.C. Maya Angelou said, *“The old ones remind us that slavery’s chains have paid for our freedom again and again.”* She said these words at the Million Man March in 1995. She was speaking to a huge crowd of black men on the Mall in Washington, D.C. *“The old ones remind us that slavery’s chains have paid for our freedom again and again.”* The statement speaks to the long, long struggle against racism. During that speech, she reminded them of their difficult and painful history. And then, she invited them to focus their lives on joy, courtesy, gentleness and care. She said, *“The ancestors remind us, despite the history of pain, we are a going-on people who will rise again.”* Her words were powerful words. They were hopeful words. They were inspiring words. They were words which culminated in Angelou’s closing line, *“And still we rise.”*

And still we rise.

Renewal. Renewal is the third in this three-part sermon series. Vision, Confession, Renewal, Dedication. Angelou’s words, “And still we rise” speak to the concept of spiritual renewal.

Despite pain, despite doubt, despite despair, despite struggle -- And still we rise.

The words on the sign projected in front of you, the sign that can be found with others like it behind the small chapel on Garrett Evangelical Seminary's property, say this: *“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.”*

The words from Isaiah were originally spoken to people who had endured another long period of suffering and struggle. They were people in exile. People who had been yanked away from their homeland and all they knew. Jerusalem had fallen. The wealthiest, most creative, most influential Israelites had been deported to Babylon. They had been away from their homeland for years, living in a strange land. Their concept of the exile was that it was God's judgment on them. They had begun to doubt the strength of their God – Yahweh. In that day, world politics and religion were inseparable. And so, the fact that the Babylonians had destroyed Judah and Jerusalem could only mean one thing to the Israelites – that the Babylonian gods must be stronger than their God, Yahweh.

Things hadn't worked out for them.

And along comes the prophet. The opening verses of Isaiah Chapter 40, are words of comfort to these people who were suffering. You've heard them in Handel's famous work, *The Messiah*. “Comfort, oh comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem, but make it very clear that she has served her sentence – that her sin has been taken care of – forgiven.”

This was the prophet's call – his charge –his instructions – to comfort a people who needed comfort and to proclaim that their sin was forgiven.

An Assurance of Pardon for a people in exile. An assurance of forgiveness and a message of hope, when hope was hard to find.

You know what that's like, right? Times in your lives when hope seemed non-existent. Times in our world situation – like now – when it seems as though the course of the world's nations and the course of our nation is going from bad to worse. Isaiah's words are words of hope in the midst of despair.

The last words in the chapter, are the ones on the sign in front of you. They offer a promise of renewal to these same people who were at the end of their collective rope, who were in the midst of what St. John of the Cross called The Dark Night of the Soul. In the paraphrase from Eugene Peterson's The Message, the words sound like this. "But those who wait upon God get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles, they run and don't get tired, they walk and don't lag behind." They rise again. They find renewal.

In a sermon written by Paul Tillich, an internationally recognized theologian in the 50's, he writes, "Let us imagine that these words are being spoken to the exiles of our time, to those in prisons and concentration camps, separated from their husbands or wives, their children or parents, to those toiling in despair in foreign countries, to those in the hell of modern warfare. How would they respond to such words, and how should we, if they were spoken to us? Probably we should challenge, ironically or angrily, their seeming pretentiousness; and we should point to the immense gap between the ideal situation, dramatized by the prophet, and the catastrophic reality in which we live. We should dismiss him as an annoying optimist, not worthy of our attention. Perhaps we should become bitter and full of hatred toward him. That would be our natural response

to someone who desires to comfort us in a situation in which we do not see any possible comfort and desperately disbelieve any possible hope. . . . “

Tillich continues, “ (The prophet’s) words should be significant for us, the exiles of today. He (Isaiah) was not less (realistic than we are) , but rather more, realistic than we are. He knew that such a situation was not a matter of chance and bad luck, but that it is the human situation, which no man and no period can escape. The human situation is one of finiteness, flesh is grass and the grass withereth. It is one of sin - we receive double for all our sins. It is one of vanity and pride- we are brought to nothing and fall utterly. But in spite of his realistic knowledge of human nature and destiny the prophet gave comfort and consolation and hope to the exiled nation, to the exiles of all nations, to man, (and to woman) who, as human beings, are exiled in this world.”

We are exiled because we are always away from the fullness of what is true home – the Home that is God. We are part of a human condition – that is finite, that is imperfect, that includes free will, free will used sometimes for great things and sometimes for horrible things. And Tillich says, the prophet Isaiah was more realistic than we are about such things. Because Isaiah knew the reality of the human condition and Isaiah knew the magnitude of God, the magnitude of God beyond what we can possibly know. J.B. Phillips’ great refrain was “Your God is too small.” Your God is too small. J.B. Phillips was a Bible translator and clergy man. Sometimes it goes down better when you know what someone more like us says about something. So let me tell you what Irv Kupcinec said, for those of you who remember him. Irv Kupcinec said, “What can you say about a society that says that God is dead and Elvis is alive?”

Our God is too small. We try to explain what we see going on around us with limited vision. We despair and we struggle through all sorts of challenges in our lives, all sorts of exiles, and our God becomes even smaller sometimes because in the midst of struggle and despair, we start to think it's all up to us. And God becomes even smaller.

For the exiles, and for us, what brings renewal is being lifted up into the magnitude of who God is. The God we can't explain. The God we know is beyond our imagining. Sometimes, in order to be reminded of that God again – in order to know that God – sometimes we have to intentionally put ourselves in places of greatest potential for gaining a glimpse of who that God is again. Go somewhere by yourself and watch a sunrise. Go somewhere by yourself and watch a sunset. Make yourself be alone for a moment in prayer. Tell your family members what you are doing and then go off somewhere to sit in silence – just to sit – by yourself, in silence. Your mind will be racing. That's okay. You'll be thinking of what you have to do during the day. That's okay. But imagine thinking through all those things with God sitting right across from you. And then, perhaps, you'll get a glimpse of how big God is. Ask for that, in your prayer. God, show me who you are. Help me to understand. I am beaten down. Please, God, help me to hope. Help me to wait on you, to trust in you, to live in you.

Isaiah's words say it better than I can about who this God of ours is.

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 grow weary; his understanding is beyond our understanding. He gives power to the faint, to the tired, and strengthens the powerless.

There's an African story, a fable, handed down over generations, stemming back to West Africa, passed on across the ocean to a people who lived in the Carolinas. Cotton-pickers in the deep south. Otis Moss III, the pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, told the story when he appeared on Thirty Good Minutes, a Sunday evening program on our Channel 11. One day, one of the women picking cotton in the heat of the midday sun, suddenly fell dead, leaving her young son standing by her side – full of panic and grief. An old man came along, an old man they called prophet and preacher, but who the slave drivers called the devil. The old man bent down and whispered “Coolebah” in the woman’s ear and when he did, she rose up like a regal queen and stood tall. She looked at her young son, next to her, and grabbed his hand and looked toward heaven and all of a sudden they began to fly – lifted up. The slave drivers were confused and perplexed and while they stood there confused the old man, ran around and whispered “Coolebah” to the others- the other slaves, exhausted from picking cotton every day and exhausted from the demands of the slave drivers. “Coolebah”, he said to them. “Coolebah.” . When they heard the word, they all began to fly.

When Moss finished the story, he said, “Can you imagine? The dispossessed flying? Can you imagine the disempowered flying? Three fifths of a person flying? The diseased flying? The dislocated flying? They are all taking flight!

And at that moment the slave drivers grab the old man and say, “Bring them back!” They beat the old man, and with blood coming down his cheek, he just smiles at them. They say to him, “Please bring them back!”

And he says, “I can’t.”

They say, “Why not?”

He said, “Because the word is already in them and since the word is already in them, it cannot be taken from them.”

The old man had a word from West Africa, *Cooleebah*, a word that means God. It had been placed into the heart of these displaced Africans and now they had dignity and they were flying.

Isaiah says it: “They that wait upon the Lord, that trust in the Lord, that serve the Lord, that intentionally find ways to sit in the presence of the Lord, shall renew their strength. They mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not get weary. They shall walk and not faint.”

Yes, when the word of God is in us, we can fly. And so, it’s true and will always be true - And still, we rise.