



Central Peninsula Church

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Isaiah 40:27–31
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On Wings Like Eagles

Last year I was flying back to San Francisco from Denver, Colorado. After taking off, we settled back and leveled off at about 33,000 feet. I was really enjoying the little snack—a plastic cup of coke and a handful of peanuts—when the plane was gripped by some of the most severe turbulence I’ve ever experienced. Now I’ve done my share of flying on 747’s and little twin engine “island jumpers.” But this was really scary. You could see it in people’s faces. My coke was hitting the side of the cup like breakers off of Maverick’s point. My peanuts were rolling around in every direction. The stewardesses were rushing around tending to people’s needs and making sure they were okay. You know, one starts imagining strange things in moments like this, even if you’re a seasoned traveler. You begin to wonder if the wings are going to snap off, or if the plane is going to break in half or spin out of control. You begin to question whether or not you’ll ever see your family again.

I remember watching an episode of *The Twilight Zone* as a kid that left a lasting impression whenever I fly. It was the story of a man who was on a flight. After the airplane took off, he glanced out his window and saw this creature on the wing of the plane attempting to sabotage one of the engines. Of course, when he pointed it out to the stewardess she saw nothing of the kind and glared back at him as if he had had one too many martinis. But whenever he peeked back through that window, sure enough, the little creature “that nobody else saw” was fast at work. And eventually, despite the man’s attempts to alert the “powers that be,” the plane went down. Now, you suspect that nothing like that would ever “really” happen; that these kinds of things are best reserved for late night TV or the movies. But when the turbulence is so sudden and severe, your thoughts tend to go in that direction. At least they did for me!

When the flight smoothed out and the turbulence was over, it became a metaphor of my own personal life over the last 14 months or so. It began in November of 2005 after a colleague and I returned from doing some training in Spain. Within a week I was hit by a series of pancreas attacks that were so debilitating that I spent most of that holiday season in a fetal position unavailable for either ministry or family. It was

tremendously frustrating dealing with the physical pain while battling my own tendencies to neglect physical limitations and get back up to speed too soon. There was more turbulence in June as my wife, Laura, developed chronic pain symptoms that no amount of pain relievers could treat. She was hospitalized for two weeks. And her recovery and readjustment process continues to this day. At the same time my car was stolen out of a movie theater parking lot and it took more than a month and a half to replace it. Then I was hit by another series of pancreas attacks; one in June and another in August. The last one, in September of 2006, came on the same week I was scheduled to teach a three day retreat in Occidental. Now I’m not telling you this to snivel or gain your sympathy. I don’t have a lot of tolerance for chronic whining, least of all my own. But when the bottom falls out of our worlds and we’re left alone to grapple with the confusion, does it ever occur to you that God may be disinterested in our circumstances? I mean, if He really cared wouldn’t He intervene? When the crosscurrents swirl in every direction and life is turned on end, do you ever wonder if God sees what’s going on or even hears our cries for help?

This morning we are going to look at a familiar passage from the Old Testament, one that speaks comfort to those who may be feeling this way. The words of the prophet Isaiah are addressed to those who are experiencing great turbulence in their lives. They’ve watched helplessly as their defenses have been crushed, their strongholds destroyed, their precious possessions carried off for bounty, their families, spouses and children scattered and transported to another part of the world. And now they are living as slaves in a foreign land and are looking to God for understanding. How confusing it would have been for these people to make sense of their circumstances after being so chosen by God. Yet the Scripture is clear that God had warned them beforehand that they would endure this, that they would turn away from Him and become a nation of idolaters. And as a consequence they would find themselves encircled by the winds of adversity.

Now, it’s important to say that God wasn’t giving up on them. No way! He was just honoring their choices in the same way He honors ours. If I’ve learned anything about God He’s far from codependent. He allows us to

experience the consequences of the choices we make. But, what's significant is that while the Jews were taken captive God still ministered to them throughout the experience. You see, the Book of Isaiah was written a few hundred years *before* these people were enslaved so they would understand that God had seen it coming, that He hadn't abandoned them. Before they were even taken captive their source of comfort was already catalogued through the words of Isaiah. So this is a wonderful document that not only brought comfort to those caught in the turbulence of ancient days, but also to those of us who find ourselves in like circumstances today. Turn with me to Isaiah chapter 40 starting in verse 27.

This passage begins with the cry of the captives. They feel abandoned and unprotected. Isaiah writes, **"Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the LORD, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God?'"** Two statements are made here. First, these captives are saying that their "way is hidden from the LORD." This is like saying that God doesn't know about their situation. They can't imagine that God wouldn't intervene if He were aware of how they were struggling. Have you ever felt that way: that there is no way that God could possibly know what you're facing? You try and understand what's happening and why: Is it my fault? Did I do something wrong? And we stagger in our attempt to make sense of it all. Or maybe God just forgot to check His e-mails or something. That's what the Jews were thinking; that their situation was hidden from God. But they also felt unprotected. Their second statement in v.27 is **"and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God."** This is like saying they'd been victimized, received a "bum rap," and were not getting a fair shake. And I believe there are times when we feel like this as well, not only in the face of great tragedy, but when our cars won't start, when a favored football team loses the Super Bowl, or when it rains on our tailgate parties. We tend to approach things with the mindset that life ought to be fair, that God should somehow "do a better job" of running His world.

I have to say that over the course of these past months I experienced a progressive sense of discouragement in regards to all these sudden and violent interruptions. I began to question how long I could endure. I wondered if, perhaps, my ministry life might be over. I argued with God, accused Him of poor personal management. I complained that maybe He'd lost perspective on my needs and the needs of my family. What's that about? One would think I would know better. But even the culture we live in conditions us to experience these feelings. From childhood on we

are led to believe that if we don't blow it in some major fashion that we can expect to reap reward and fulfillment in life. This is the great American dream. And yet we have difficulty reconciling the dream from the reality of why we aren't living free from struggle. But you see, the problem is not really in our experience but with our expectations. We've been fooled into thinking that life owes us, that for some reason we deserve exemption from heartache and sudden interruptions to our schedules.

Now beyond those who struggle because they are not getting what they think they deserve, there are those who are in truly turbulent circumstances. It may be the suffering that comes as a result of chronic pain or the loss of a loved one. You may be walking through a season of depression. Or you may be under tremendous pressure keeping abreast of the cost of California living. Then there is the turbulence that is not necessarily directed *at us* but *around us*. We all experience the turbulence of escalating violence in our city streets, our school yards and the rising fear that results. Everywhere there is immorality, injustice and poverty. Our families have been invaded by incest, spousal abuse and fractured by divorce. We are confronted on a daily basis with the powerful "religions" of technology and commercial enterprise. Our city skylines are filled with their temples. We live in a time that is just as violent and frightening as those experienced by the exiles in Babylon. And just as they cried out, we too search the heavens for a word of hope and confidence—"God don't you see what I'm facing, how I'm struggling to make sense of it all?"

Well, vv.28-31 demonstrate how God brings comfort to those who are feeling this way. Isaiah begins by reminding them of the great truths concerning God's character. In v.28 he says, **"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable."** Two questions are asked of these people in order to call them back to God's truth. First he says, "Do you not know?" and then, "Have you not heard?" This is like saying, "How could you say such things about God when you know perfectly well who He is and what He's like? Do I need to refresh your memory?" Isaiah then proceeds to give them a history lesson. The first lesson is that God is great: "He's the Everlasting God," the One who existed from the beginning of time and is unchangeable. He's "the Creator of the ends of the earth," the One who breathed the universe into existence. No task is too great for Him. If He made the earth and all that's

within it, He certainly wouldn't be overwhelmed by our circumstance. Then, He is described as One who "does not become weary or tired." In other words, God never becomes fatigued. He formed and sustains the universe and yet His power and strength is never even taxed. This helps us understand that God doesn't need a breather just because our struggles seem so weighty. Our stuff is not too big for Him. We are not too much for Him to handle. Then Isaiah says, "(God's) understanding is inscrutable," which means that no one can fathom the depth of His wisdom or His ways. This speaks to the confusion we feel when we can't figure out what God is doing. When it seems to us that God is allowing loss and failure to the perversion of everything good, we need to acknowledge that no one can truly grasp the mystery of how God works. His way is perfect. His way is beautiful. He causes all things to work together for the good. But because God's ways are also so different from ours, we should expect that He will often do things that make absolutely no sense at all.

When I look back at my life from the vantage point of where I am today it makes perfect sense. God used all those seemingly wasted years of addiction and incarceration, turbulence and turmoil, to chisel His name into my soul. And though these lessons were fraught with much suffering, as they are today, they nonetheless gave shape to my heart. I've often wondered how God's love could have laid hold of me if not for the endless winters that had frozen me? How could I have experienced the joy of being set free without first knowing what it meant to be imprisoned? And if you had told me that God had a plan for me in church ministry, or that my work would be a clear expression of my heart, I would have asked for some of what you were smoking. His understanding is inscrutable. And we can't unscrew the inscrutable; it's beyond anything we can comprehend for ourselves.

Now in v.29 we see God's compassion demonstrated to His people: Isaiah writes, "**(God) gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power.**" God is compassionate. He helps those who have been fractured, those who are powerless to affect change in and of their own strength. This is the God who stands in the midst of the turbulence we are experiencing. Oftentimes, we believe we need to be strong in order to be loved and accepted by Him. We are ashamed of our weaknesses. And yet the Scripture is clear that God is not only compassionate towards those who are weak, but that He also opposes those who are strong. This is precisely why we need to immerse ourselves in the great truths about God's character when we are being turned every which way by life's storms. We forget what He's really like; our view of Him becomes distorted. The problem is not with God, but rather in our understanding

of Him. When all we can see is how our circumstances are driving us to our knees, we tend to project our inadequacy onto His character as well. God hasn't changed, but our view of Him has. And here is where our expectations get us in trouble. If we allow the world's standard to form our expectations, then we will remain deeply confused. But, if we understand what the Scriptures teach, then we will expect periods of turbulence throughout our lives. Life is tough for everyone! But because our expectations aren't accurate, when life doesn't measure up we become doubters and scoffers rather than children of faith. Because we feel overwhelmed we conclude that either God doesn't know about our circumstances or that He doesn't care to do anything about them. We've allowed our circumstances to shrink our view of the Creator. He's become much too small. So we may need to reacquaint ourselves with the great truths concerning His character: consider His limitless power, call to mind His compassion, and within this context find the strength to endure by placing our hope where it belongs.

This is what vv.30-31 call us to do—to find our hope in God alone. Isaiah writes, "**Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.**" Notice the utter futility of looking for hope in our personal strength. This is a lesson I've had to learn and relearn time and time again. There are times that my adolescent mentality overwhelms my 56-year-old body. It tends to writes checks my body can't cash. Some would call that denial. Verse 30 tells us that even "**youths grow tired and weary and vigorous young men stumble badly.**" This is saying that although there are some truly unique people, none are exempt from the turbulence life offers. There are situations no one can handle. It's too much for us! And in the midst of our weakness we tend to focus on how we can gain strength—pull ourselves up by the bootstraps—rather than accept the limitations that God has placed before us. And this is why the solution comes in trusting the strength that God supplies and placing our hope only in Him. Our knowledge, our wisdom, and our abilities are never enough. Sorry! I realize that's probably earth-shattering news for some.

Our hope is found in the LORD. Period. Nothing else can do what He can do, for He is the only one who knows exactly what we need, the one who empowers us in the midst of the battles we face. And we see this in v.31, "**Yet those who wait for the**

LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings as eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary." What this tells us is that God responds to the extent of our need. There are times that He strengthens us to fly, bringing immediate deliverance. He may intervene with radical healing or allow us to rise above our circumstances with "wings as eagles." Here is a picture of the majestic wings of an eagle lifting our spirits above the turbulence that surrounds us. And because eagle's wings are long and broad, they make for effective and graceful soaring. In fact, in order to reduce turbulence, eagle's wings are tapered. When fully extended they measure anywhere from six to eight feet. As they soar eagles take advantage of the rising currents of warm air and updrafts generated by the rocky terrain and valleys below. As one poet put it: "With spreading wings, untired and strong, that dares a soaring far and long, that mounts aloft, nor looks below and will not quail, though tempests blow." Gliding effortlessly an eagle can fly upwards to 10,000 feet. Can you imagine? To the ancient Jew, eagles were viewed as a symbol of restoration. According to one myth when an eagle grows old its wings become too heavy to fly effectively. So it goes in search of a fountain. And having found one, it flies up to the height of heaven and into the circle of the sun where its wings become singed. Then taking a headlong plunge into the fountain, the eagle dips itself three times, and is instantly arrayed with fresh plumage and renewed strength. What a great image for us!

At other times, God encourages us to run into the battle-like David against Goliath—meeting the turbulence head on while trusting that He will both empower and sustain us. Unfortunately, life offers more than one encounter with our Goliaths. It's not a sprint or fifty yard dash, but a marathon. And for most people marathons require long distance running. Or so I'm told. Now, I suppose "power walking" with an iPod might count. But at my age, the only thing I'm running after is the channel changer! That's about as far as I'm going to get! But a marathon is always 26.2 miles. Always. And to my knowledge there's only been one exception to that rule. On Memorial Day weekend of 2005 there was a marathon held in the city of Chicago called the Lakeshore Marathon. On that day the 529 runners who finished actually ran 27.2 miles, one mile more than they were supposed to. But nobody told them so at the time. The organizers simply miscalculated where the finish line should be. The entire race was a disaster from the start, with missing mile markers and confusing directions. One woman who had been leading early on got completely turned around. "I was so confused," she said, "I wanted to cry." The organizer later issued an apology. "[Last-minute changes] caused us to miscalculate," he flatly stated, "and

we foolishly added an extra mile."

Maybe life has been like that for some of you lately. It's tough enough to get through a week, and then someone throws you a curve ball or adds an extra mile. An impossible deadline. Another sick child. An overdue notice on a bill. A letter from the IRS. When you feel like you've been forced to run further than anyone should have to, it helps to remember that God's strength is sufficient and that "those who wait for the LORD will renew their strength, they will run and not get tired."

But most often, I believe, God strengthens us to walk one day, one step at a time, and promises that we "will not grow weary." He calls us into a daily, at times, moment to moment, encounter with life on life's terms. It's in these instances where we advance with a slow but steady pace. Encountering steep hills and deep valleys. Long straight-aways and curves. And though we can't control what the road brings, still, we can advance with steady progress, always one step, one day at a time. This is what God does for us. He gives us what we need, and not necessarily what we want, in times of despair and utter futility. As I have walked out these past 14 months God has spoken to me most profoundly in my weakness. There has been no other place for me to go. As a result, my own anxieties have quieted somewhat and I've had a sense that my inadequacies are being exchanged for the incomparable power of my God. There is good news in regards to my own circumstances. The turbulence in my life has calmed considerably. And though there's not been remarkable progress in regards to my physical health, my spiritual and emotional strength is being renewed daily. Isn't it funny how external circumstances seem to shift for the better once our internal responses are rightly related with the Lord?

So how does He do this? How does the LORD strengthen us? Well, the critical phrase is the first one in v.31, "**Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength.**" To wait means "to hope in;" to eagerly expect that God will make due His promises. In fact, one of the images associated with this word is a picture of one straining his neck in anticipation of God's deliverance. "To wait," means to reject any steps to run away from the process, that God has the right to all we are. It means accepting the fact that we are not entitled to life as we like it. It means being willing to stand in whatever circumstances God chooses, whatever pain or struggles may come our way. It means to hold our rights loosely and let go of our need to control the outcome. It means continuing to believe in God even though life is turning out so

differently than we expected. It means holding on to our faith and His promises even when it looks like the enemy is winning. "Waiting" on God means refusing to move ahead without Him, not relying on our schemes to strengthen us. And in an era of instant gratification this is perhaps the most aggressive thing we can do. So what happens when we wait on the LORD?

In v.1 of this chapter God comes speaking comfort to His people in the midst of turbulent times: Isaiah writes, "**Comfort, O Comfort My people, says your God.**" At one point, on that rugged flight out of Denver, a voice came over the PA system. It said, "This is your captain speaking. We're experiencing some turbulence. Don't be alarmed. We're currently climbing above the rough air. Please stay in your seats. And we will do our best to make things as comfortable as possible." That was the voice of the captain, the one at the controls. It was a voice of calm reassurance, a message of comfort delivered with a quiet but confident authority. And just as the hearts of the passengers on that airliner were calmed by the captain's word of comfort, our hearts can be quieted as well. The Hebrew word for comfort means, "to console." The image is one of God gently speaking heart to heart with His people, like the intimate communion between a husband and wife, causing us to breathe again, drop our shoulders and gain a second wind. This is the way God speaks to those who wait upon Him. He comes quietly and tenderly and gives us His breath. He comes intimately and blows away the weariness and sorrow. He comes and brings whatever we need in the battle—if we lack might, He increases power; if we are weary, He brings comfort. Those who wait upon Him never stumble because it's His integrity that's at stake. He's the Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth. Nothing is too big for Him!

As I've studied and reflected on this passage for my own sake, let me just share three guidelines that have been helpful for me. When the gale winds are blowing from every direction, the first thing we need to do is "look in." Let the Lord search out and examine our hearts. Much, but not all, of the turbulence we experience is a result of our own choices. This was certainly true in regards to the nation Israel whom Isaiah's words were directed. And whether we're aware of it or not there are chains of conditioning on us as real as any captivity the Jews endured. So identify and confess any sin that stands between you and the Lord. Then repent of it quickly before the Cross of Christ and receive the provision that God alone can bring. This doesn't mean all the storm clouds will magically disappear but at least we'll be reconnected to the One who ultimately is in control. That's the first thing.

Secondly, we need to "look up." In Psalm 8 we see David sitting on a hillside gazing up at the moon and stars, his heart filled with the wonder of it all and saying, "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have ordained; what is man, that You take thought of him?" Far above the clouds and cross currents our God reigns. And yet, in spite of the incredible chasm that separates us from Him, God is still mindful of us. He alone has the will and gifting to incredibly bless our lives. Out of sight is not out of God's mind as far as we're concerned. So when we are overwhelmed, feeling isolated, deserted and alone, God's presence is near. We must remember that, in times of great turbulence, He is but a prayer away—calling us home to His heart.

And finally, in the face of whatever turbulence God allows, we are to surround ourselves with fellow travelers, loving truth-tellers who can support, challenge and walk beside us in our weakness. In other words, "look out" for the support we need. In Isaiah's day, as it is today, there was a remnant that remained faithful through it all. How we need the counsel of seasoned veterans like Isaiah to help gain perspective and encourage us to keep placing our hope where it belongs. This has been critical for me. And though the Spirit of Christ provides our primary source of support, God's comfort is most often channeled through the practical hands, arms and prayers of His body; that is the church. So regardless of our circumstances, with the comfort of our Lord and His community our spirits *can* gain new strength; we *can* mount up with wings like eagles, run and not get tired, walk and not become weary. That's God's promise to you this morning!

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