

Epiphany 5B, Isaiah 40:2-31, Mark 1:29-39, February 4, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

A sign from God. That's how many, sitting in church this Sunday, at least those not sitting in church in New England, interpret what the prophet Isaiah speaks to us today. From chapter 40 verse 31: "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." Mere coincidence that this passage, which has been read on the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany in year 2 of our three year lectionary, just happens to fall on the Sunday the Philadelphia Eagles are playing in the Super Bowl? I will let those Eagles fans among us decide how they want to read these words. No doubt some will see them as a direct word from the Lord both urging them on and predicting victory. It's too bad the Eagles aren't playing Baltimore in the Super Bowl, then we would have competing verses today. From our psalm this morning, "He provides food for flocks and herds, and for the young ravens when they cry."

There has been another cute internet meme going around showing church sign boards with a saying, "The number of times mentioned in the Bible Eagles 33, Patriots 0." That one may be pushing it a bit. Especially since the Hebrew word most often translated as "eagle" can just as legitimately be translated as "vulture." We hear the word eagle and we immediately picture that majestic American Bald Eagle, soaring to great heights in solitary splendor. But the Israelites looked at any bird of prey with long sharp beaks and called them "nesher." It could mean an eagle, but it could also mean a vulture, the only difference being that vultures live in flocks and eagles are usually solitary.

Still, the image Isaiah puts forward, about renewing strength like a soaring eagle flying high in the sky, is meant to be a comforting one spoken to a people who has long lost any hope. The prophet speaks to the whole people of Israel. Their nation lay in ruins, their leaders carried off in Babylonian exile, their beloved Temple shattered and burned to the ground. You can hear the depths of their sorrow in Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." All hope dashed to the ground, a people without a home, lamenting in a foreign land.

It would be like forty years of losing seasons for the Eagles. Do you remember 1998? The Eagles were 3 and 13 that year. A team total of 161 points for 16 games, the lowest in the NFL that year. Three quarterbacks that season threw only 7 touchdowns combined. Imagine a generation of those kinds of seasons. Always on the bottom.

That's the nation of Israel. Kicked to the bottom. For a generation or more languishing in exile. It's to these people the prophet Isaiah speaks a word of hope and renewal. His poetic words remind them that everything on earth was created by God. Even those rulers of nations who seem so strong and unstoppable will be carried off like the stubble of wheat when God blows upon them. A Patriot dynasty? Even they shall be brought low. Israel feels as though God doesn't hear their cries of lament. But Isaiah reminds them, "The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth...He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless." Those who wait for the Lord, who look to him and call upon him in prayer, "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.” He is speaking of return. Returning home to their beloved Jerusalem, flying home like an eagle, running without getting tired, walking steadily and sure-footed.

To each of us comes times or seasons when we feel like we are 3 and 13 for the year. The opposing side scoring more points against us than we against them. Seasons of loss of health, or loss of loved ones. A fall or injury, an unwelcome diagnosis from the doctor. The death of a spouse even though it was years ago still feels like it was only yesterday. Maybe just the sense that time itself is slipping away, and the dreams of youth fading into shadows. Or maybe these words come to us as a people, as the church. Do we feel like we’ve been carried off into exile? The church we once knew and grew up in, respected in the community, looked to for guidance and direction, now seen as increasingly irrelevant, or worse yet, a hindrance to progress? Parents who once believed the church was vital to their children’s formation as they grew up, now transferring that formation to sports teams and other activities. Do we mourn the loss of who we once were, feeling like we are in exile in a foreign land? Does the prophet still speak? Can we hear these words as words of hope spoken to us?

The prophet speaks of going home. But the home to which they return will not be the home they left. We never move back towards the past. We can only move forward into the future God has in store for us. Yes, we need to be reminded, like Israel, that God is the creator of all things. The rulers of the earth, the mighty and proud; they too shall be brought low and turned to dust. We need to be reminded of the proclamation which creates the church and sustains us. That Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and died, is now risen from the dead. Because Jesus lives we will live. We will live into the future God has in store for us. We will not be left to languish by Babylonian waters, but shall rise up like eagles, with renewed strength.

It’s important to remember what is promised and what is not. We are not promised that the future will always be bright and rosey. We are not promised that next year will always bring a winning season. As much as we would like to believe, Isaiah is not promising the Eagles are going to win the Super Bowl this evening. But what is promised to the people of God is God’s abiding strength and promise to meet whatever the future brings us. You are promised, as an individual, to receive from the Lord what you need to see you through the next day, the next year, whatever that season may bring you. We are promised, as the church, to receive the strength and energy to proclaim the Good News of Jesus no matter what the future may hold. It doesn’t mean our church will look like the church of the past. We can never go back. We can only go forward into that future where God is going to meet us, depending on the renewing strength and energy God promises us.

So lay hold of this promise. Claim it as your own. When you grow faint or weary, wait upon the Lord. And he will renew your strength, flying high like an eagle. Amen.