

To Soar like Eagles

Isaiah 40.21-31 (The Message)

Trinity Sunday

June 7, 2009

We often whittle God down to a size we can manage; we whittle until God is little more than an object of belief or just a name we don't take in vain. Somewhere in all this we forget that God is real, powerful, and present; yearning to transform our lives, and inviting us to soar on eagle's wings into a future far brighter than we can yet imagine.

- from *To Soar Like Eagles*

The Reading

Have you not been paying attention? Have you not been listening? Haven't you heard these stories all your life? Don't you understand the foundation of all things? God sits high above the round ball of earth. The people look like mere ants. He stretches out the skies like a canvas— yes, like a tent canvas to live under. He ignores what all the princes say and do. The rulers of the earth count for nothing. Princes and rulers don't amount to much. Like seeds barely rooted, just sprouted, they shrivel when God blows on them. Like flecks of chaff, they're gone with the wind. "So—who is like me? Who holds a candle to me?" says The Holy. Look at the night skies: Who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name —so magnificent! so powerful!— and never overlooks a single one? Why would you ever complain, O Jacob, or, whine, Israel, saying, "God has lost track of me. He doesn't care what happens to me"? Don't you know anything? Haven't you been listening? God doesn't come and go. God lasts. He's Creator of all you can see or imagine. He doesn't get tired out, doesn't pause to catch his breath. And he knows everything, inside and out. He energizes those who get tired, gives fresh strength to dropouts. For even young people tire and drop out, young folk in their prime stumble and fall. 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.

Then and Now

The passage from Isaiah 40 shared earlier has long stood out in my mind for its eloquence and dramatic impact. In the New Revised Standard Version the passage begins majestically, almost royally, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?" Quite an opening, don't you think? Parenthetically, if you ever have

*James R. "Bo" Crowe
Overland Park Christian Church*

an opportunity to hear the choral setting of these verses by Randal Thompson, don't pass it up. It is indeed beautiful and majestic.

Despite the majesty and eloquence of this passage, we read it this morning from the modern paraphrase, *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson. I chose this version because it brings home the practical nature of the text, and makes it intensely personal; as fresh and poignant today as it was in Isaiah's day. In its original setting, of course, it was addressed to an exiled Israel, a despondent people who had sat weeping by the waters of Babylon for a generation. A generation... that's a long time to remember God's love, God's promise of forgiveness and mercy. And Israel had, indeed, forgotten God's promise, and despaired of God's presence. They had forgotten that God is real, that God is powerful and, most importantly, that God was present and prepared to embrace them in love.

Isaiah was astonished at their loss of memory and faith. They needed a wake-up call, and he was just the prophet to place it. They needed a challenge to remember and embrace God's steadfast love. And Isaiah delivered in spades, "Have you not been paying attention?" he began. "Have you not been listening? Haven't you heard these stories all your life?"

Of course they had heard stories of the God who had created them as a people, who had delivered them time and again, who routinely raised up mighty men and women to lead them on the way of faith: Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David, Esther, and more. Over time, however, their experience eroded their memory, their faith, and their confidence in God's loving kindness. Over time they whittled away at their idea of God until God could be controlled or even ignored. Their God was certainly no more powerful than those of the Babylonians; perhaps less so. Or perhaps God didn't care for them any longer; or – heaven forbid – had abandoned them altogether. Over time their God became a god in name only, so despairing they sat by the waters of Babylon and wept.

Isaiah refused to acknowledge this whittled down version of God, and reminded the exiles in no uncertain terms of the God who created all things, the God who "stretches out the skies like a canvas," who "marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name." Most importantly, he reminded them of God's presence and love for them. They had forgotten that God is real, that God is powerful, and that God was present and still longed

to give them eagle's wings. God yearned to see them soar in faith above their circumstances, above their fears, above their whittled down version of God; God yearned to see them soar like eagles into a future that was far greater than they could imagine.

Isaiah's message of challenge and hope is as fresh, relevant, and vital today as it was in his day. This is true because, like an Israel in exile, we too tend to whittle away at God. We want a manageable God, a God we can control, a predictable God, even a God we can ignore. Thus, over time God becomes a god in name only, a name we don't take in vain. Over time we forget that God is real and powerful, and that God is present, yearning to reach out to each of us in love. God yearns to provide us with eagle's wings on which to soar into an as yet undreamt of future.

Does that sound good? Well, let me tell you it gets even better ...because it's true. God is not "out there" somewhere wandering around, lost and alone in some distant corner of the universe. God is present. God embraces the universe – the entire universe – in love; and God offers us, as a faith community, eagle's wings on which to soar. We don't have to walk, we don't have to stumble, we don't have to worry about getting tired or finding our way. We can soar on the wings of faith. Wow! What a faith community that would be; a faith community that soars on eagle's wings. What do you think this community would look like?

Freedom in Community

I have a few ideas on this subject. I can readily identify certain traits that would characterize such a faith community in my estimation, and I would like to share them with you over the next few weeks. These traits aren't exhaustive, mind you, but I am convinced they can be found in any faith community that claims to soar on eagle's wings. *Freedom in community*, for example, is an indispensable trait that we will discuss today. Next week, while I'm in Costa Rica, Peggy will discuss the *compassionate lifestyle* to which we are called. Then, in subsequent weeks, we will discuss *integrity with passion*, and *tradition with flexibility*.

Freedom in community is an important trait to recognize and develop, and it is important to note that freedom and community are equally important, that one falls apart without the other. First, let's consider freedom. The main-line Protestant tradition, which we

represent, has long cherished the notion of freedom of conscience. This fancy phrase translates into the conviction that no one stands between you and God. You are free to approach God in repentance, fellowship, and praise. You are free to seek and receive God's forgiveness and grace. You don't need an intermediary to stand between you and God to smooth the way.

Nor do you depend on any external authority to dictate how you read scripture, or "work out" your salvation as Paul would say. You are free to work out your understanding of faith – the doctrines you deem important and their meaning - and to read the scriptures in the manner you discern as appropriate.

The most difficult thing about freedom in faith is offering it to others. It's easy to claim freedom for myself, but not so easy to extend it to others, especially those who don't believe and act the way I do. Goodness gracious! Why shouldn't they believe the way I do? I've studied for years on end, I've prayed, I'm humble ...ergo, I know the truth; and if it's good enough for me it's good enough for anybody.

In our tradition faith doesn't work that way. You have the same freedom I do, you have your unique experience of faith, and you decide how you will read, interpret, and live your faith. And yet, we are community. We are community because there's something more important than a method of reading the bible or the doctrines that are affirmed that binds us together. We share a unique confession of faith in Jesus as God's Christ, our Redeemer. That's the source of our unity, and that's the source of our power as a community. Because of our shared confession we can grant each other freedom in faith.

The community has another extremely important role to play in this type of faith. Faith like ours, which grants freedom to the individual, needs community to remain healthy. I am free to make my own decisions about faith, but it's possible for me to get caught up in fads or new fangled theological crazes; it's possible to find myself careening headlong over a cliff. In short, it's possible to be "way wrong" in my reading of faith; and while no one's going to stand up and say, "Man, you're crazy," our community will keep me sane. That is to say, as we study together, pray together, worship together, and discuss the life of faith; the dynamic we establish will keep me balanced and safely within healthy parameters.

Otherwise stated, we have accountability one to the other, not to point fingers and make accusations, but simply to be with and for each other within the faith community. This community of faith keeps us healthy, keeps us honest, and keeps us strong. A healthy and thriving faith is not characterized simply by freedom, or simply by community, but by freedom in community. I am absolutely convinced that when we live our faith in this way, granting each other freedom of conscience and yet coming together to pray, study, fellowship, and serve, we will find ourselves soaring on eagle's wings toward a future beyond our wildest imaginings. Amen.