

Hidden Assets

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 4, 2018

“But 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.” – Isaiah 40:31

The text for this morning’s sermon comes from the fortieth chapter of the book of Isaiah, probably written during one of the lowest points in Israel’s history.

Scholars long ago recognized that the long book of Isaiah, stretching some sixty-six chapters, looks more like three books than one book when you examine it closely. Chapters one through thirty-nine seem to be the work of a court prophet during the reigns of Kings Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and possibly even Manasseh – a combined career of sixty-four years. Isaiah’s ministry spanned much of the eighth century BCE, when Israel was deeply engaged in the international politics of that age.

Chapters forty through fifty-five of the book, however, seem to come from a different time and a different hand. Israel seems to be in exile, and the institutions that gave structure and meaning to Israelite society in the Promised Land seem to be gone. These chapters were probably written during Israel’s exile in Babylon from 587-539 BCE. Scholars don’t know who wrote these chapters, so they simply refer to this anonymous author or editor or even committee of editors as Second Isaiah.

And then, beginning in chapter fifty-six, the book takes yet another turn, and it looks like Israel may be about to experience a re-start, and the anonymous author or authors tries to refocus the attention of ordinary Israelites on what is essential to their faith and what is not, whether they are in the Holy Land or whether they are in captivity, although the underlying assumption seems to be that this religion again involves the temple that had been destroyed. Scholars refer to these last chapters of the book as Third Isaiah.

There’s a lot in the book of Isaiah, and after the book of Psalms, Isaiah is quoted in the New Testament more than any other book from the First Testament, and it’s easy to see why. In those sixty-six chapters there’s something for almost every historical circumstance in which the people of God may find themselves, and that’s perhaps the main reason the book still has power to speak to faithful people even today.

When you’re playing power politics with the big dogs, as Hezekiah and Ahaz were, Isaiah warned of the dangers of hubris. When you’re discouraged and defeated, as Israel was in exile, Second Isaiah urged his fellow exiles not to give up. And when you have to start over, Third Isaiah advised a discerning mind and spirit to sort out what really matters when resources are few and hard to come by.

And that's what you need in the Bible – resources for all of life's vicissitudes. The psalms help us rejoice. The prophets keep us honest. Ecclesiastes and Job force us to reflect on life's mysteries and perplexities. The Bible is a library not simply because it's made up of books, but mainly because it's a treasure chest of resources.

And that's why I'm always urging you to read it, and not just read it for the sake of having read it, but, as the Anglican Prayer Book puts it, "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" its wisdom and beauty. Get into it, get after it, get on it – whatever language you use, the point is the same. Scripture is one of your most powerful tools for constructing a life that has meaning and richness and beauty and significance.

Our text, for instance, is tailor-made for those of us who are feeling worn out just now, frustrated, discouraged, and anxious about what the future may bring. We've been trying, most of us for decades, to bring better and lasting change to a world that keeps repeating the same old sorry mistakes. Some of us may be suffering from what sociologists call "compassion fatigue," because the need is so great and the resources seem so few.

Poverty, warfare, terrorism, natural disasters – there is no end of the sources of suffering for so many people, and it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

And we're the blessed ones! We're the privileged folks who live at ease in Zion, while millions around us are desperate to enjoy the comforts and security we take for granted.

Imagine how much harder it would have been not to give up when everything you knew and loved had been taken from you when you were marched off into captivity in Babylon as a Jew in the sixth century before Jesus. When everything's been stripped away, people are always forced to ask themselves, what's left?

For believers, the answer is faith. That doesn't sound like much in our cynical, secular age, but it's actually much more than folks realize. When everything you've counted on has let you down, faith will lift you up: "But 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."

Genuine faith, at the end of the day, for most ordinary believers like us, is not a set of propositions that begin, "I believe." Genuine faith is ultimate trust in the power of God – that is, the power of divine love – to bring goodness and life from the most painful and broken circumstances. If you will let it, faith is what allows you to face what seems insurmountable challenges with grace and courage and peace of mind. Faith provides you with resources you didn't know you had. Let me illustrate.

Those of you who read the Sun Messenger read in Thursday's paper of the death of Pam O'Toole of South Euclid, one of my neighbors and friends, and one of South Euclid's most devoted residents. When Pam was dying in the hospital, and I went to attend her and her family, I talked at length with her husband, Jim. Jim told me, among other things, that he had no idea that he and Pam had as many friends as were calling and visiting. And I got to remind Jim, as I often remind all of you in the prayers here on Sunday mornings, of that vast web of love in which we are constantly held, and which is so often invisible. Death, my old friends Peter Gomes used to say, is a teachable moment, and one of the lessons we can learn when death confronts us is that we have far more support and love than we ever imagined. The invisible web of love becomes visible just when you need it most.

Back in the Baptist church of my youth, we used to sing a hymn called, “Just When I Need Him Most”:

Just when I need him, Jesus is near,
Just when I falter, just when I fear;
Ready to help me, ready to cheer,
Just when I need him most.

We evangelical Baptists packaged everything in the language of Jesus, and sometimes we got a little carried away with that sort of talk, but the theological underpinnings of that hymn – that divine love incarnate is constantly there, a never-failing source of strength and courage for those who trust in it – that truth I’ll stand by, in this world or in any world to come.

To wait for the Lord, as Isaiah put it so many years ago, is to trust, as another hymn puts it, that God’s time is best, and we rarely know when that time will be. It may be when someone you love has died. It may be when you or your family is faced with a crisis that you can’t see your way through. It may have to do with your health or the declining health of someone you love. It may be that moment when all that’s left of the house or the relationship is ashes.

Then, in that moment, if you have been waiting for the Lord – that is, trusting in the God who brought you into this world, who keeps you in this world with every heartbeat, and who will keep you in any world to come – if trusting in that God has been your way of life, then you have nothing to fear.

The hidden assets, unneeded until that moment, will appear, seemingly out of nowhere, but actually from that treasury of mercy stored up, as Paul told the Romans, for those who love God and who have been called to God’s work. In other words, mercy is waiting for those who wait for the Lord. And in that mercy, you will find strength.