

SERMON
“Bringing Renewal”
Isaiah 40:21-31
Sunday, November 27, 2022

Many of us have come to love the Christmas carol O Holy Night; first written in 1843 by French poet Placide Cappeau [Pla-seed Cap-po]; the lyrics were translated into English a few years later by American pastor John Sullivan Dwight. The carol’s initial popularity is often traced to its third stanza cherished by abolitionists in the United States fighting for the freedom of African-American slaves.

Lines from that stanza read: *“Truly he taught us to love one another; His law is love and his gospel is peace; Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother; And in his name all oppression shall cease ...”*

These days the carol may be appreciated for still another reason: its recognition of a very weary world: *“Long lay the world in sin and error pining,”* reads the first verse; *“Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices, For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn ...”*

The carol envisions a world thrilled by the hope that in the birth of Christ the reign of sin and its trail of destructive weariness has come to an end. O Holy Night doesn’t stand alone in this recognition; Edmund Sears’ It Came Upon the Midnight Clear, written in 1849, describes the song of the Christmas angels floating over a world that also has become tired and weary: *“Still through the cloven skies they come with peaceful wings unfurled,”* that second verse sings; *“and still their heavenly music floats o’er all the weary world ...”*

So, with a cue from our carols, let me ask:

Are you weary?

Are you exhausted?

Are you fatigued?

Do you find yourself waiting for resolution or reconciliation or vindication or at least a change—but there seems to be none of it in sight?

In J. R. R. Tolkien’s, The Fellowship of the Ring, the hobbit Bilbo Baggins says to Gandalf: *“I am old, Gandalf. I don’t look it, but I am beginning to feel it in my heart of hearts. Well-preserved indeed! Why, I feel all thin, sort of stretched, if you know what I mean: like butter that has been scraped over too much bread.”*

Do you feel stretched thin? Are you winded or exhausted from a pace that has you spent physically and emotionally? Do you at all feel like a balloon; that not only has lost all its air; but you’re convinced there is an un-repairable breach that will always leave you gasping for breath as though were a fish outside of water? Have you just about given up hope that there is any hope at all?

I am reminded of the military chaplain who once told the story of a certain soldier he used to visit. Every time he ran across the man, whether in a foxhole or stretched out on a comfortable barracks bunk, the man’s answer to the question, “How’s it going, soldier?” was always the same: “It’s a pretty bad day.”

Finally, the chaplain — weary of the constant negativity — blurted out this advice: “You know, I met you yesterday and that was a pretty bad day. In fact, I met you two days ago and you told me that was a pretty bad day. If this continues, someday you’re going to stand before your Maker, who’s going to ask you, ‘How was your life?’ The only answer you’ll be able to give will be, ‘It was a pretty bad life.’”

Too much weariness not only blinds us to the needs of those around us and desensitizes us to the opportunities that are staring us in the face; it also leads us further and further down a dead-end street and further and further away from Christmas itself. I don’t know about you; but for me, there often times comes a point in my Christmas rush; usually somewhere between Housewares and Clothing that I begin to hear the angel’s song; calling me back; renewing me. At first, it’s barely audible; it may even begin to work into my unconscious thoughts and before I know it, I find myself humming along with their tune. But what surprises me; is that the song isn’t even found in the hymnal or a booklet of favorite Christmas Carols; it’s not even sung by an angel (unless you consider Angela Lansbury and angel) instead, it’s from a Broadway musical; and it goes something like this:

*“For we need a little Christmas,
Right this very minute,
Candles in the window,
Carols at the spinet.
Yes, we need a little Christmas,
Right this very minute,
Need a little Christmas now!”*

In each of us there is this struggle between weariness and being strong in the Lord. It is one aspect of the saint-and-sinner paradox in every Christian. American poet Carl Sandburg is credited with this introspective thought: *“There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud.”*

Our text from Isaiah is for the wallowing hippo in each of us. “Weary” is all over this text. Isaiah first uses the word to say that God does not faint or grow weary. The One running the universe, Isaiah says, does not tire. We would if we were God. And I would if I were God. Thank God we’re not God!

Isaiah reminds us that God never feels; how did Bilbo say it; “all thin, sort of stretched, like butter that has been scraped over too much bread.” In fact, God, says Isaiah, gives “power to the faint” and increases the strength of those with no strength left. In the long history of God and humanity, God has always been strength for the weary, a second and a third wind for those who are ready to fall.

Do you see what is happening here? Isaiah spoke words of comfort to people weary of the long wait for a Messiah. He spoke to a chosen people who were losing their sense of being chosen. Isaiah’s comfort speech was for those who forgot the chapter in their history titled “the Exodus” and those who would spend decades as exiles in a strange land. Today Isaiah’s comfort reaches any of us who want to follow Jesus but find ourselves weak and weary. He doesn’t bellow like some NFL line coach, “Brace up! Lean into it! Dig deep! Don’t go soft on me now!” Isaiah doesn’t even say, “Be strong!” or “Be courageous!”

What Isaiah does do, though, is bring to remembrance the God who has always been there for the weary. “Have you not known?” he asks. “Have you not heard?” To put it another way, “Don’t you remember? Have you forgotten?” Dean Nadasdy, writing for Creative Communications for the Parish says that Isaiah is a remembrancer. *“Historically,”* says Nadasdy, *“kings had remembrancers in their court to remind the king of significant past events or commitments, lest the kingdom suffer from forgetting.”* So, what we have in our scripture text for this morning is a remembrancer speech, a comfort speech, turning us from our weariness to remember a tireless, and all-wise and all-powerful God. Isaiah has us remember who God is and what God is like: *“The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.”*

But there is more, says Nadasdy; Isaiah in this season of Advent is turning us to God, who offers divine strength to replace our weariness. Isaiah puts it this way: *“young men shall fall exhausted; but they 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.”*

It isn’t a new image, this picture of an ascending eagle. When God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, God, in Exodus 19:4 said, *“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”* Isaiah, says Nadasdy, *“is no doubt doing some remembrancing here. Our God,”* adds Nadasdy, *“has a history of taking the weary and putting us into eagle-like flight.”*

For us, on this side of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has exchanged our long bouts with weariness for a thrilling hope that rejoices in the strength of Christ to overcome sin, death and a very weary world. This is the God we know, the God we trust. In one of his letters, the apostle Paul remembered how in his weakest moments, God’s strength came through: *“When I am weak,”* he wrote, *“then I am strong.”*

In 1807, the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen was destroyed by fire after being bombarded by The British Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars. By the 1820’s the famous sculptor, Bertel Thorvaldsen, had been commissioned to sculp and create what he called the “Christus” the life-sized Christ whose hands were scarred

by crucifixion nails. It was his hope that as future generations stood in front of this newly built cathedral with his statue of the Christ in the forefront; people would hear the echo of Jesus' invitation from Matthew 11:28, *"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."*

In this season of Advent, as we sing the carols of our faith and prepare to celebrate the birth of the Christ-Child once again; may we hear the promise of hope through the prophet Isaiah once more: *"There is rest for the weary. Strength for the weak."* May our songs join with those of the angels: *"A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn ..."*