

“Being Upheld”  
Isaiah 40:27-31 – June 19, 2016

INTRO: This part of the book of Isaiah is meant for people who are weary or feeling abandoned, or thinking God has forgotten them. It’s written about people like the people of Israel, who have been exiles in Babylon, longing to go home. In the midst of all their troubles as they question where God is, the prophet Isaiah addresses their doubts as he reminds them of the God who has created not just them, but the whole universe and cares for it deeply.

There is a book, which was on my bookshelves for well over two decades. I kept it for so long because every now and then I would go back and re-read parts of it. The book is *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving. Owen, one of the main characters, was born so small that not only did his feet not touch the floor when he sat in his chair, but his knees didn’t extend to the edge of the seat as they do for many of us. Which meant his legs stuck straight out in front of him, like the legs of a doll. Owen had a scratchy voice, like his vocal cords hadn’t been fully developed, and his best friend John, used to let Owen ride in a kind of side car that he hitched to his bicycle, so Owen could get to their baseball games faster than his short legs could carry him.

They attended Sunday School where their teacher, a poor soul who should have been invited to take some other job in the church, was unhappy and seemed to have little idea what to do with a room full of elementary children. She would read the class a passage from the Bible and then say: “Silently and seriously, that’s how I want you to think. I’m going to leave you alone with your thoughts now and I want you to think very hard. When I come back, we’ll talk about it.” She would walk out of the room leaving 12-15 boys and girls on their own—to think!

Yeah, sure. And how do you think that worked out? By the time she came back, the class had totally forgotten the Bible passage, because just as soon as she’d left the room the mischief began. Being alone with their thoughts was no fun, but picking up Owen Meany and passing him from one child to another—THAT was fun. Owen was so tiny the children absolutely couldn’t resist this game. The challenge was for one person to pick him up, and then pass him, back and forth, holding him over their heads, while seated in their chairs. This game was fun for everyone but poor Owen, who would cry: “Put me down! Cut it out! I don’t want to do this anymore!” When the teacher would walk back into the room, her response was always the same: “Owen Meany, you get back to your seat! You get DOWN from up there!” as if Owen somehow put himself up in the air.

Owen didn’t like to be up there in the air. It was demeaning. And in today’s understanding we might say the class bullied this small child, took advantage of him for their own enjoyment.

Contrary to Owen’s strange experience, I think there ARE times when we might wish somebody or something would hold us up. Times when we need support and need to know that God is there upholding us, sustaining us—bearing us up as though we are on eagle’s wings. That’s the image of God we find in today’s reading, and there’s an eagle statue and a painting that has been in my office, which are depictions of this image. We are reminded of God’s love and care and support, especially at those times when we may feel the weakest. We are empowered and strengthened by these powerful wings.

I once took a glider ride, maybe the closest I’ll ever come to what it might literally be like to ride on wings. After we had detached from the airplane which took us up, it was quiet while we soared and you could only hear the wind. And even without a motor, riding on those wind currents, it felt amazingly secure.

Security may have been exactly what the people of Israel were looking for, but not finding. They were feeling unloved and neglected. They had spent long years in exile, away from their homeland. They were exhausted both physically and emotionally. Their complaint was that God didn’t know their troubles or even care about them—God didn’t see what was going on in their lives.

The writer of Isaiah responds to their doubts by saying: “Don’t you know? Don’t you remember what you’ve already heard about God? How can you miss seeing this?” Look around and look at past history and see that the same God who created everything, still intimately cares for everything—even you. God has the capacity to give power and strength to those who are dead tired, and too depressed to think the next day will be any better than the previous one.

I think today of those persons whose life experiences may feel like they are in exile. Of the refugees and migrants who have left their homeland, hoping to find a new life someplace else,

hoping to find safety, only to experience that one day is no better than the next, and many places offer only closed doors.

This week, I read about families on the U.S-Mexican border, where one parent and the children are US citizens and live in California, but the other parent who is a Mexican citizen has been deported and had to leave their children behind. One of these, a mother of three US citizen children and the wife of a US Marine Corp veteran, was barred from the US for ten years starting in 2006, when she and her husband were processing her visa paperwork. She sees the wall every day in Tijuana, which is a reminder that her family is just over there—so close that she can almost touch her kids. Parents peer through the cracks in the border fence to see their children and grand-children living in California. And it must feel like a form of exile to these families. (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 6-13-16)

And I think about the people whose lives were lost in the club in Orlando last weekend. These mostly young adult people who were at a club where they were accepted, and probably felt relatively safe, now know they weren't safe. Their experience of life, as much as we would wish it weren't so, is still in places, a life in exile—living in the shadows, not being able to be honest about their sexual identity for fear that someone around them will harm them. And even in death, there are those spouting what they believe to be their crucial biblical passages, to inflict hatred and hurt on the families who gather for these funerals, families who have already lost so much. That is not my understanding of Christianity folks. Those who impose their harsh judgement are somehow “fearing the Other more than fearing the God who commands us to ‘Love one another.’” (William Willimon)

For many of us, our form of exile may not be that we are separated from our families in another country, or separated from our own understanding of ourselves as sexual beings, but there may just be times when we feel God has forgotten or neglected us. Illness, depression, relationship struggles, loss of a job, death of a loved one—any of these could be times when we wonder whether God is really watching and truly cares. We may want to know if there is anything or anyone beyond the mess we call our lives, on whom we can rely. These words from Isaiah tell us to put our trust in God. We may not always have the answers to all of our “whys” and God may not change our situation, but God can give us the power to deal with it, if we will just turn to God.

Too often though, we may be like those people of Israel, who assumed that because their life was tough, God wasn't there. Perhaps they were standing between God and their problems, with their back to God, focusing on their problems. And by doing so, they lost sight of God.

There was a young man who made a pilgrimage on foot across the country to earn money for a particular charity. When he reached the west coast he was asked what was the greatest problem during the long walk. Was it the mountains? The storms? What it the hot sun? “None of these,” he replied. “It was the sand that kept getting in my shoes.”

It wasn't the big things—it was the day to day, nagging of the sand in his shoes that took his attention, his focus. It may be that way for us also—the day to day stuff which takes our attention away from the God who could provide support if we could move beyond those little things.

This past January, I began the search for a house. Having never purchased a house before, and looking at a 30 year mortgage for somebody heading toward 65, seemed like a daunting task and a little bit of a nutty choice. In my usual way, I thought through the pieces—some of my friends might say, I thought through them to death. I had a list of what I was looking for in a house, I created a “home search” survey document. I had areas in metro Milwaukee, that seemed like possibilities. I looked at a number of houses on-line. I wanted to make sure I understood everything. I wanted to do my best and not make a foolhardy decision.

Well, for a period of about 8 weeks, upon finding a house, making an offer, getting the house inspected, the financing finalized, I kept wondering if I was making the right decision—second guessing myself. Maybe I'd just find me a little RV and travel around the country and avoid all these big decisions and not by property at all. Yet having once had a little RV, I know only too well that you are just taking your house and all its maintenance issues with you on the road—it doesn't really solve anything.

But the thing was, this house in Cudahy, consistently felt like the place where I was supposed to live. I saw it one day, I made an offer two days later, and all the pieces fell into place, relatively easily from what others tell me. And somewhere in that two month period, I found myself saying,

“OK—you’ve spent your life preaching about trusting in God. Just maybe you’d better listen to yourself, let go of this indecision and believe that God could be at work in this process.” So, as much as possible, I did.

I do believe God is committed to being there with us—in all life’s situations. Giving us strength, supporting us on wings that are strong as eagles, giving us energy and courage to walk and run without wearing out.

“If our future depended on our ability to hold onto God, then we would be in deep trouble. But it is not our hold on God that matters as much as God’s hold on us. And ours is a God who will not let us go.” (Ronald Smith)

--Sue Burwell