

“When Everything Seems Lost”
Sermon from Isaiah 40:28-31
Given Sunday, August 2, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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Do you not know? Have you not heard? Yahweh is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. This God does not faint or grow weary, with a depth of understanding that is unsearchable. God gives strength to the weary and empowers the powerless. The young may grow tired and weary, they may stumble and fall, but those who wait for Yahweh find a renewed power: they soar on eagle’s wings - they run and don’t get weary; they walk and never tire.

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Have you ever noticed that the closer you get to what you want, the harder it is to get there? Like a marathon runner hitting the wall at mile 22? Like a poet who’s got all but the last stanza when writer’s block takes over?

Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth century nun who’s been our guide this summer, on this tour of our souls – she’s imagined the soul as a home, a castle, really, with seven dwelling places. And each has its own beauty and its own struggles, but in this one that we come to today, the sixth dwelling place, there is so much that is so hard. The seventh dwelling place is the one in the center of the castle, it’s where God dwells, it’s where we’ve been winding our way to this whole time, searching for union with God, so our souls can

experience that oneness – but first, we must pass through the sixth dwelling place, and that will be no easy feat. Here we encounter all kinds of trials. Or, at least, Teresa did. And she tells us about them.

She wasn't going to tell us about them. That's what she says at the beginning of the chapters on the sixth dwelling place. She was going to tell us that here, our yearning for God continues. Here, our desire to be alone increases, so that we might enter more easily and more fully into communion with the sacred. She was going to leave out the trials altogether, she writes, until she realized that she's not the only one who suffers in this way, and that it might do the rest of us some good – it might be a great consolation, she writes – for us to know that we're not the only ones.

When we are suffering, she admits, it can seem as though everything is lost, and it can appear easy, or wise, to step off the path of the soul's journey entirely. No one needs the pain that accompanies this pursuit. But she's hopeful that her words might remind us that even in these sufferings, we are not alone, so she details them for us.

Like, people might say terrible things about us. They did about her. She described her mystical experiences, her sense of union with the sacred; she described the spiritual life as being like a fountain whose

source is in the ground, so it's always springing up from within, she doesn't have to keep refilling it. She used metaphors like this, that implied her own union with God, and the first two men she gave her manuscript to told her her visions were not from God but from the devil.

And that might not seem like a big deal to us, today, it might seem like an accusation that doesn't carry much weight, or like we could say they just didn't understand her. But Teresa of Avila is writing and teaching in a changing Spain. For a long time, that country had been home to Jews and Muslims and Christians alike, mystics and scholars from those three traditions and more – but not now.

Teresa of Avila is born 40 years into the 350-year Spanish Inquisition, the effort to consolidate power at the Catholic monarchy and to rid the country of its religious diversity. Anyone who's not Catholic is at risk, and anyone deemed a heretic is a target. For those who read Teresa's work to say she's been overtaken by the devil instead of inspired by God isn't just a spiritual accusation, it's a political move, and a dangerous one, at that.

But she's not only worried about those who speak ill of her. Just as troubling, she writes, are those who speak well of her. You can't

trust either, can't let your own movement or work be determined by either those who condemn you or those who praise you. Neither is really telling the truth about you, she says. Both have their own interest, their own motivation – both praise and condemnation can make a person forget about the Spirit of God alive and at work in her; both run the risk of making us think what we do, and say, and are, is ours alone.

There's also pain, she writes. There's the pain of our bodies suffer, just from years of living in the world. The pains of our bodies can feel sometimes like they're piercing our souls. There are severe pains of injury and illness, there are the pains that seem to accompany us always, the pains that aren't sharp but enduring, the ones that make even small movements a struggle. And yes, they might teach us patience; and true, they might deepen our empathy; but that doesn't negate the just plain hurt of them.

And then, on top of the condemnation, and the praise, and the pain, there come the trials from inside of us: the doubt we face about God's presence with us, and doubt we face about our own ability to rise to the occasion, or even just to make it through the day.

I mean, she's tired, right? She's leading a revolution among her sisters. She's advocating for a new way for her order to be – she doesn't want them dependent on endowments, but only surviving on public alms. It's a new way of doing religious life – or an old way, really – but she convinces her convent to do it, to not be dependent on the deep pockets that might fund them but also have other motivations – and then she travels the country trying to convince the rest of her order that that's the way to do it.

She angers religious and political authorities on the way, as she tries to divorce them from each other, tries to say that the only authentic religious life is the one lived simply, the one free from influence and manipulation, the one ordinary people support out of their respect and goodwill, not the one financed by people in high places, running the risk of becoming complicit in corrupt power. She's praised by some for that stance, but maligned by others. And all of this work gives her a headache, and those people in high places say she's a mouthpiece for the devil, and all of that is just. So. tiring.

Are you tired? Do you feel that low-level anxiety that runs underneath the other activity of these days, the one that says don't let your guard down, don't stand too close to another person, don't neglect your loved ones, don't ignore the stranger who might not

have any loved ones left, don't turn your eyes from the disparity these days have multiplied, don't forget we're living through a global pandemic, don't get too eager for it to end anytime soon? Does that make you tired? Does the weight of your personal struggle combined with the tension of our own political context make you wonder what life will look like on the other side? Does it make you wonder if there is another side, or maybe just another day – if maybe we don't flip a switch, or turn a page, but just keep walking into the future together, unsure of what it holds but committed to keeping going?

Long before us, long before Teresa of Avila, the people of Israel had been taken into exile, and our scripture today is commonly thought to be written for them as they're returning. It's a poem of great beauty and comfort, promising that what they lack, what they need, God has in abundance and delights to share with them. They feel weak, and powerless – I mean, they're literally walking home from an extended period of captivity, probably a time of forced labor, a time of being asked to deny themselves, their land, their history, their God – and the home they're arriving at here is not what they remember leaving. It is in ruins. The elders weep and the young ones – the ones born in captivity – don't understand why it's worth

returning to. They are tired to their bones. This is a sixth dwelling place kind of trial.

And the prophet speaks with a promise from God, that a fresh energy will come to them. That a new strength will fill them. Listen, here's where I find hope in this passage, in the commentary about it, actually. The rule of Hebrew poetry, where we find triplets, is that the focus, the emphasis, is on the third thing. The images build until they reach the one we're really meant to center on.

So here, even though mounting up on wings like eagles sounds magnificent, those moments of soaring are not what matters most. And even though running, and not growing weary, might sound like what we need to make it through some days when we're pulled in ten different directions and feel like we can't keep up with ourselves, that kind of energy, too, isn't what's essential here.

It's the last thing. It's the walking. It's the step-by-step, day-by-day, moment-by-moment power to continue that is the height of God's promise here. God's mercy doesn't consist in magical flashes but in ordinary making it. For Teresa, not in flights of ecstasy and union with God, but in each day's reminder that whatever trial she faces, whatever tiredness threatens to overtake her, there is a strength

both within and beyond her that promises to see her through. And if the people of Israel, and if Teresa of Avila, then surely us, too.

The only thing for it, she tells us, is to reach out in love to other people, to extend the kind of mercy God extends to us. The only thing for our tiredness and our despair and our feelings of powerlessness is to trust that the well of God's mercy never runs dry, and that even as we draw from it, even as we pour it out, it is refilled.

The good news of these days, when we are tired, the good news of any day when we feel like we cannot make it on our own, is that we don't have to. The good news of days when we cannot understand the decisions of our leaders, when we lay to rest the best among us and worry that the moral courage rising up today will be beaten down before it reaches that same ripe old age, the good news of days when we cannot see a way forward is that all we have to do is take a step, and maybe to remind the person next to us that that's all they have to do, too.

Maybe there will be moments where we rise up like eagles, and maybe they will be glorious ones. Maybe there will be days when we will run and not grow weary, and maybe we can relish and rejoice in

those. But we're getting somewhere even if we're just walking. We are moving, like those returning from exile, closer to the center – to a land that is both home and strange, to a place where we will meet both struggle and wonder, to the center of our very selves, where God takes up residence, too.

I'd invite you for a few moments now to think about that persistent, gracious energy as God's mercy, to think about the ways you have been renewed and restored when you thought you didn't have the strength to continue. And with your pen and paper, write or sketch or somehow make notes about a time when you were shown mercy. What did that look like, sound like, feel like? Name a situation you're facing now where you could show mercy, to yourself or to someone else. What would that be like?