

February 4, 2018
Isaiah 40:25-31
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“Higher”

Good morning! Somebody -- not even somebody from Creekside -- asked me this week how I get ideas for a different sermon every week. It's a fair question, even though I think that I, like many preachers, share a variation on the same sermon every week, rather than something different every week. I can only hope that what is meaningful to me is meaningful to you, too, because if it isn't important to me, it isn't worth telling you about. What I told my friend is that I use the lectionary: the three-year cycle of biblical texts which challenges me to read from lots of places in the Bible, and challenges me to find what God has put there that is relevant to our lives today.

Our text this morning is from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is one of the major prophets of the Old Testament, and is the first book of prophetic material in the Hebrew Bible. It was not until I went to seminary that I encountered the idea -- so widely accepted by biblical scholars that it's presented as fact -- that the book of Isaiah is not the work of one author, but of several: at least two, and probably three. Chapters 1-39 are written by First Isaiah, or Isaiah of Jerusalem, who celebrated God as the King of heaven and earth who chose Jerusalem as his earthly dwelling. But that God will not live in a city which is morally corrupt: judgement is coming before the city can be saved. Second Isaiah begins in chapter 40. He's writing later, toward the end of the 70 years of exile in Babylon, and his message is comfort and the anticipation of restoration. That's where we find ourselves today.

Isaiah chapter 40 is fairly long, and at least for me, is a chapter of Greatest Hits of the Prophets. This is in part because Handel set a couple of these texts to music in the oratorio *Messiah* and we have hymns with others. Here are some familiar verses you may have heard spoken or sung in Advent: “Comfort, comfort, my people, says

your God.” “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (John the Baptist quotes this passage in the gospels of Luke, Matthew, and Mark) “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms.” Just in case 18th Century oratorio is not your thing, here are some other verses that may be familiar, “All people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” And finally, the verse which is part of our text today which has inspired lots of music, including a song we’ve already sung this morning: “those who wait upon 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.”

Pastor David Bibbee used to include those lines in his benediction each Sunday. They are words which were intended to support and encourage the Jewish exiles in Babylon who had been separated from their country for a life time: after 60 years or so, most of the Jews who went into exile from Jerusalem had passed away. These words from Isaiah would have been words of hope to people who had never known their homeland or freedom. They were being given a chance to go back to a place which they had never been.

I want to offer encouragement and support to everyone at Creekside, but especially to our newest members. We want to welcome you home; a home where you have been for months, but not the place where any of you grew up or spent most of your lives. We are grateful for the families and relationships and communities of faith which have shaped you on your journey so far. You have all come as believers and followers of Christ, and we hope that Creekside will encourage you to grow in your faith, just as each of us is continuing to grow in our faith.

Let me give you a word of caution: and this is not just for our new members, it’s a good reminder for all of us. We are not perfect. Individually and collectively, we made mistakes in the past and we still do. In my experience -- and I’ve been part of this group for more than twenty years -- these mistakes are rarely intentional or mean-spirited. But sometimes we say things to people’s faces, or especially behind their backs, that are probably not what we intended. Not the best we’d want to represent ourselves. This can happen even

when we're trying to do the right thing. Let me give you an example of encouragement gone wrong. This actually happened to me, but not here it Creekside.

My senior year of high school was not really a good year for me. My best friends had graduated the year before, and my closest friend was in college out of state. In case you can't remember as far back as the 1980's, it was a time when you had to pay to make a long-distance phone call. I had broken up with the guy I had dated for two years -- his name was not Tim -- that was later. I was working hard at school, like I always had, but somehow this year, more of the people I hung out with were not working hard. The harder I worked, the less they wanted to be around me. The more affirmation I got from my teachers, the more isolated I was from my peers. By the time May rolled around, I just wanted to be done. We got our yearbooks the last week of school, and had an afternoon to pass them around and have people sign them. There was a freshman in the band who wrote a message in my yearbook that I have remembered for 35 years. Here's what it said: "Rosanna: I don't care what everybody else says, I think you're terrific."

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry -- I think I did both. I know Rick wrote that with the best of intentions, like we all have when we try to encourage on another. We want everyone to feel like they belong to this church. But here's what I'd like you to remember this morning: you belong to this church, but this church does not belong to you. It certainly doesn't belong to me. We all have a role to play in the ministry of Creekside Church -- all of us. But this is our home because God has called us here in the name of Jesus Christ. People mess up -- frequently -- but God is faithful -- always. The vows which our new members affirmed should remind each one of us that we have made a commitment and we are called to live as followers of Jesus and to support the church with our earnest prayers, regular attendance, loyal service, and faithful stewardship. The only way any of us can do this is with God's help. If we want things to look different, we need to look higher. The church is greater than any individual's imperfect effort; the church is greater than the best effort of the whole group. We need to look higher than ourselves and other people. Isaiah says "Have you not known? Have you not heard? 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. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.” (Isaiah 40:28)

God is not only our source of strength, God is our source of identity. We are, all of us, children of God. That means God thinks we’re terrific, no matter what everyone else says. If we’re going to soar like eagles, we have to ignore the turkeys. We have to believe that God believes in us. We have to believe that if we commit to do something with God’s help, God will give us the strength to accomplish that purpose. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

Brothers and sisters, we are so blessed to have been welcomed into God’s family, and it is our privilege to welcome others in Christ’s name. My prayer is that we would be a community of faith that looks to Jesus to take us higher: above who we are to become whom God has called us to be. With the steadfast love of God, the strength of Jesus Christ, and the wind of the Holy Spirit, we can soar like eagles. Amen.