

"Soar" Isaiah 40:21-31 Jubilate Deo 2024

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

You've probably heard the saying, "It's hard to soar like an eagle when you're surrounded by turkeys". It's a phrase sometimes thrown around when people want to justify why they have not been able to reach their full potential – not been able to soar like an eagle. The easy answer is that others around me, the turkeys, who prevented me from achieving my best. The contrast between an eagle and a turkey is huge: an eagle - graceful, powerful and majestic; and a turkey – a heavy, awkward and usually flightless bird. It's often easy to use the so-called turkeys in our lives to excuse our under-performance ... the people who let us down or make our lives more difficult than they need to be ... or to blame the circumstances that have hindered me from achieving what I know I am capable of achieving.

Have I not known? Have I not heard? Have I not been told before? That God is greater than my circumstances; that God can strengthen my weaknesses, able to do incredible things in and through me despite my failings, despite my circumstances. I have no excuse – the simple answer is yes. I have known, I have heard, I have been told – but God knows and understands that sometimes I forget ... and Israel forgot as well!

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Israel had forgotten. They had forgotten who their God was. Like me - and I suspect like you as well – sometimes the circumstances of our life and the events of the world happening around us, conspire together to help us to forget. We get lost in the struggle or sometimes carried away in our sense of success and slowly but surely we begin to forget just who our God is.

Israel had been taken into captivity. First, the Northern Kingdom had fallen to the Assyrians, and then a while later the Assyrians were defeated by the Babylonians and it was the Southern Kingdom's time to be conquered. Forty, fifty, sixty years and more – children and grandchildren were being born as captives of a foreign nation. Generation after generation was born under the influence of foreign gods, and slowly but surely many of the people forgot. They forgot who their God was.

They too, were without excuse. They had heard it all before, at least the older ones had. There were still those alive who had worshipped in the temple in Jerusalem. There were still those who knew the scriptures, those who could teach the coming generations, who could tell the stories of God's goodness and faithfulness to the people of old. But slowly and surely they forgot. Life as an exile had its struggles but it was by no means unbearable. Life went on -

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people worked and made a life for themselves; people got married and had children; others died and were buried – the natural rhythms of life continued. But there were new gods now, and new worship. The people inter-married and cultures became combined and the people of Israel forgot.

But God had not forgotten them; the voice of God rang out again through the prophet Isaiah. It was a wake-up call for the nation. It was an invitation to lift up their eyes and remember what kind of God they had. Their God was not impressed by the might of conquering nations – because their God was the one who stretched out the heavens. Their God is the one who watches the rise and fall of kings and nations as though he were watching a plant grow and then wither. Their God is the one who says: “To whom will you compare me - who is my equal?” There were no other gods who could hope to compare with Israel’s God. The people had been tricked into forgetting, tricked into worshipping gods made by human hands, tricked into worshipping pieces of stone and wood.

But Israel felt they had a legitimate complaint against God - they had a self-justification for turning away from their God to follow these false gods. Their excuse was that God seemed to have dropped the ball. God was the one who was letting them down, God

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was the one who was powerless to stop their defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. So God asks the question – “O Jacob, how can you say the Lord does not see your troubles? O Israel, how can you say God ignores your rights? It was not God who had turned his back on them, rather God was using this time of exile to renew his relationship with the people of Israel.

There are all sorts of excuses that we make up to justify our forgetting. There are all sorts of circumstances in our lives that can draw us away from our God. Maybe it is sickness, or grief, or depression. Maybe we have experienced an injustice in our lives, or we’ve just missed out on all of the lucky breaks. We come to church and we look around at the same familiar faces, we remember what it used to be like, back in the heyday - and we begin to wonder, we begin to doubt, we begin to lose hope and we begin to forget.

It begs the question - Who is the God of this church? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord of this church is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. The Lord of this church does not faint nor grow weary. The Lord of this church gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. I think we all feel like that sometimes - powerless? Powerless to change the circumstances of our lives, powerless to bring life and hope back

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into the church, powerless to meet the budget, powerless to fill all the committee positions ... powerless.

Maybe like Israel, the times we live in are less than ideal. Maybe there are logical reasons for things being the way they are. Maybe we are justified to look to the future with a certain amount of fear and uncertainty. Maybe ... but then Isaiah encourages us to remember. Haven't you heard? Don't you understand? Remember all that you have known of your God. Remember all that has been promised. Remember all that has already been given.

- In this place grace, faith and life are given at the baptismal font.
- In this place sins are confessed and forgiven by the blood of Jesus.
- In this place Jesus comes, time and time again, and gives himself to us in the bread and the wine of Holy Communion.
- In this place the Word of life is proclaimed.
- In this place the blessing of God is given and received.

And from this place, the ripples and echoes of God's grace are carried out into the community by you - healing, encouraging, and restoring lives.

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As we stand here in this time – as we look back at what has been and as we look forward into the uncertainty of tomorrow - let us remember who we are, and who our God is. And let us remember with hope and confidence because our God promises us that: “those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint”. That is the promise of our God - God will never grow weary, God will never lose hope, and God will never stop blessing you in this community. So let’s face tomorrow with confidence, trusting in his word so that we can soar like eagles. Amen.