

Old Testament Lesson—Psalm 91:1-6

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust." For [God] will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; [God] will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

Old Testament Lesson—Psalm 103:1-5

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless [God's] holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all [God's] benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Old Testament Lesson—Isaiah 40:27-31

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. [God] does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. [God] gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those 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.

By now you've noticed that we've offered three different lessons from Scripture this morning and not one of them comes from the New Testament.

That's right. It's a bit strange (I know) but we're sticking with the Old Testament today—which, I think is helpful to do every so often.

Doing so reminds us that—by “old” testament we don't mean “outdated” testament or “not-as-important-as-the-New” testament or “we-don't-need-to-listen-to-this” testament.

No, we get to experience “the Bible” as those living two thousand years ago understood it—before the New Testament was written—Holy Scripture that meant everything to Jesus—to Paul—to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

And, finally, when we remain squarely in the Old Testament, we're reminded that there is just as much “gospel” (as in “good news”) in the Old as there is in the New.

And my friends—there is a whole *bunch* of good news in these three before us today—much needed good news for the living of these days.

We continue our September series on the favorite Bible stories and passages of our Cedar Heights staff. Our administrator, Kim Latch, was kind enough to share these encouraging words

from Isaiah which—as I began to think more about it—really became the central theme of today’s service...

...on eagle’s wings...God’s power to raise us up from the deepest and darkest depths with wings like eagles...

We see this imagery time and again throughout the Old Testament—the metaphor of the majestic eagle swooping down and soaring high with divine purpose.

Given how common these images are in the Bible, I wanted to show you a couple examples from the psalms that use the metaphor in that same spirit and with similar intent as Isaiah does.

These holy texts and our own lived experience both paint a similar picture of the eagle—one of grace and wonder. Its beauty and habit of inspiring awe is matched only by the precision and determination with which it acts and flies.

Now, I’m no ornithologist or even an amateur birdwatcher, but I trust Scripture; and I resonate with how it describes the eagle and pairs its movements with God’s actions.

There’s just something visceral about it—a feeling you get in your gut when you happen to spot an eagle nearby. Its flight is stunning—stopping us in our tracks.

They capture our attention with great ferocity. We can’t look elsewhere so long as they’re close by.

It’s no wonder, then, that the United States would come to adopt the bald eagle as its national bird in the year of our Lord 1782—a symbol of pride and strength and glory.

Yes, the eagle has become a beacon of hope and liberty for America going back hundreds of years. But it’s been a symbol of our Lord’s love and protection for God’s people, Israel, going back thousands of years.

You might even say that the authors of Scripture were “eagle-eyed” in the way they chose to characterize God’s power and might. Both the psalmist and Isaiah chose to represent their Creator’s vision of love with the same captivating image—and for good reason.

Eagles, of course, have exemplary vision (hence the term ‘eagle-eyed’). Bald eagles, for instance, are capable of seeing fish in the water from several hundred feet above while soaring through the air.

If you’ve ever come across one of those slow-motion videos of an eagle pinpointing its swimming prey and snatching it out of the water with its talons, then you’re familiar with the “wow-factor” that comes along with it.

We’re simply blown away by the microscopic precision with which it descends—paired with the overwhelming speed and force with which it grasps its target.

Now, even though we’ve intentionally stayed within the Old Testament this Sunday, I confess: As I’ve been pondering that striking image of the eagle plucking its chosen out of the water this week, I can’t help but recall that equally striking story of Jesus pulling his chosen disciple, Peter, from the water just in the nick of time.

I know the two images are exactly comparable, but I do believe our Lord moves in and among our world with equal grace and intentionality. I believe the Lord is “eagle-eyed” in God’s care and concern for us and our well-being.

Siblings in Christ, God *sees* us. God sees us wherever we are—whatever we’re going through—with infinitely more clarity and precision than the sharpest set of eyes ever created.

God sees *us*—sees who we are, who we’ve been, and who we could be.

The Holy One of Israel is forever and always laser-focused on revealing who God is to us—especially in those places and spaces that seem most emptied of hope—assuring and reassuring us that we’re never alone.

Friends, my sincere hope shared (I know) by the Biblical writers is that we (God’s people, the Church) might move and act in such a way that bears witness to Christ alive and active throughout this world even in the most difficult of circumstances—that we might walk hand in hand—taking every step with an “eagle-eyed” focus on justice and building up the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

After all...shouldn’t we, using the spectacles of Scripture—viewing all that is through the lens of the cross—have the clarity of vision to notice and acknowledge and celebrate those called to serve Christ making a difference in the world?

Shouldn’t we, God’s people, have the eyes to see the light piercing the darkness?

As Fred Rogers might ask: Shouldn’t we, the Church, strive to pick out and emulate those many, many helpers that spring up amid natural catastrophes?

Shouldn’t we, Christ’s hands and feet, become a beacon of hope in the chaos—something Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has demonstrated for decades?

Because, like the eagle, our God doesn’t only see us *up close*—as individuals in need of rescue from rising waters...persons lifted up by the One who descends and swoops down with urgency to meet us where we are. No, our Eternal Lord, soaring high above, also sees for the forest for the trees.

God sees the bigger picture—sees us as a community and global village and calls us to work together for the good of all—all people and all of Creation.

And when we inevitably fail to love our neighbor and act only in service to ourselves, God loves us with such ferocity that the hand of God’s only Son immediately extends to pull us up from the selfish waters in which we sink.

Even in our worst moments, my friends, God loves us enough to raise us up on eagle’s wings and bring us to the heavens to nest in that divine embrace.

Unlike the eagle, however, our Lord doesn’t just stop at the water’s surface—God will go down as far as is required to rescue us from sin and darkness. The Spirit of God will dive into the deepest depths of the abyss to find us and deliver us into the arms of Christ and his peace.

For the psalmist and the prophet Isaiah, then, the eagle comes to have a twofold meaning. It is symbolic of God descending down with urgency to help us in our time of need, yes. But think also of how quickly the eagle ascends to the skies. It’s a symbol of resurrection, too. These texts are a promise of resurrection.

But if you or someone you know isn’t quite ready to rise to the surface where it might seem too bright and overwhelming, that’s okay. If you need to remain below the surface a while longer, that’s okay too. Knowing many who live with severe depression and anxiety, I don’t ever want to make life seem easier than it is or make light of someone’s personal struggles. Life isn’t cut and dry and it isn’t black and white.

So if you’re not ready to take Christ’s hand reaching down, God understands. And it’s not your fault. God is patient and God is kind because God is Love and that Love is unconditional.

For those who are struggling, know this also: God will never leave you nor forsake you. God’s Spirit will gladly dive down into the watery chaos over and over again and bring you up as many times as it takes.

Christ himself will wait with you until the light feels less intimidating—until rising to meet the challenges of the day doesn't seem so scary.

As the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and remained on Christ at his baptism in the River Jordan, so too will God's presence remain with us in the whelming flood.

Speaking of waiting, I want to wrap up my remarks this morning by preaching what Isaiah actually preached. If we read closely, it doesn't say that everyone automatically will be renewed and mount up with wings like eagles. What does it say, then?

*Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; **but those 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.***

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength and mount up with wings like eagles. Sounds easier said than done, right? What does that mean, exactly, to wait faithfully for the Lord?

The same answer may not satisfy everyone so I'll offer a few. To wait for the Lord means trusting that God *is* moving and intervening even when we don't perceive that to be the case—trusting that we've been equipped to reflect God's love into this weary world.

To wait for the Lord means recognizing those tiny moments of grace and amplifying them for all to notice.

To wait for the Lord means disarming ourselves of prejudice and magnifying the image of God in each and every person in our orbit.

It means holding on to empathy. It means believing in change and repentance—both personally and structurally.

It means putting God's will above our own—setting aside vengeance and retribution while pursuing justice.

Siblings in Christ: Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? **Have you not seen?** The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

We are being raised to new heights by the One who descended from heaven and put on human flesh—by he who was raised high on a cross to die for us—who was raised from the clutches of death and ascended to the right hand of the Father—by he who is risen and present with us this very moment—right now, lifting us up on eagle's wings...

...right now, bearing us on the breath of dawn.

...making us to shine like the sun.

...and holding us in the palm of his hand.

Thanks be to God. Amen.