

Sermon

13 March 2016

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Text: Isaiah 40:9-14 & 28-31

If you are sitting there thinking that the reader made a mistake this morning, because that was last Sunday's Scripture reading, I would now like to make use of the opportunity to point out that you are right – it was the same reading as last week! But it's not a mistake... There is so much to say about the passage we read, that I decided to dedicate two services to it; the message is just too precious to not explore in detail...

To recap the background quickly: In Isaiah chapters 1-39 we read how God repeatedly asked the Israelites to turn their lives around, to forget about all the idols and be faithful to Him alone. Why? Because none of the false gods they worshipped so eagerly would be able to keep them safe if they were attacked by a strong enemy.

But did they listen? No.

So when the Babylonians came, they found it easy to trample all over the Israelites in battle, and take them away from the land they loved so much, to live as captives in Babylon – where now all of a sudden, ironically, they were desperate to worship God, but were not allowed to do so.

It was too late. They had their chance and they blew it... Or at least, that is how it must have felt to them. But – another lesson they would soon learn – it is *never* too late for God!

Isaiah 40-66 recounts the history of God's people in exile. Through his prophet, God encouraged them to stay strong, not to lose hope, because even there in gentile territory, where they didn't only feel far away from God *spiritually*, because they disappointed Him; but also *physically*, because the temple was far beyond their reach now, not only in another land, but broken down into the ground by the Babylonians; God was still there with them.

Can you imagine how these people must have felt? Everybody who was still alive after the battle, had to *walk* all the way from Jerusalem to modern day Iraq, in the heat; broken hearted, bereaved, as prisoners, with absolutely nothing to motivate them...

But now God says that even if the journey is tough – *and this still applies to our journeys through life today as well* – even if our journeys are worse than we ever thought it could be – He will be there. Isaiah says that “those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength... They will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

“Weary” or “faint” was probably exactly how every single person on that journey to Babylon felt, but now God reassures them that these feelings don't need to be a part of their lives, because He “gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak”.

Because even though they *felt* far away from God, and probably *deserved* to be deserted by Him, God promised never to let go; to be their anchor in the storm.

And that promise God kept. So much so, that many years later he sent his Son to walk a similar journey, not *out of* Jerusalem but *into* it, with the sole purpose to suffer and die, so that those who believe in him could be spared that same agony.

I think there are so many lessons to be learnt here. God will never desert us, ever. And because we know that, we should live life fully, praising Him and trusting in him – alone. We shouldn't put our faith or trust in other people or things, and then later, when it's too late, regret that we didn't do things differently, like the Israelites did...

And why should we do this? Because our lives are always safe in God's hands. I just absolutely LOVE the way Isaiah describes God as the one who made the earth and cares for it every day. Listen to these words again (verse 12):

“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?
Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,
or weighed the mountains on the scales
and the hills in a balance?”

That's God. Our God. He literally holds the world, and all of us in it, in his hands.

But he does more than that. He gives us, mere humans, wings. Isaiah says that those who hope in the Lord will soar like eagles.

And this metaphor says so much. If you travel by foot there are so many obstacles in your way – rocks, thorns, rivers, mountains... But an eagle is able to fly high above all these things. An eagle won't be set off course if something gets in its way – it just flies over it. And most amazingly of all, an eagle can see the whole landscape, the “bigger picture”, so to speak.

That's what it means to believe in God. To be given metaphorical wings. To be given the ability to get through or over any obstacle life puts in your way, to be able to understand that even though your vision might be restricted by what you can see at any given point in time, there *is* a bigger picture – and if you were to look at the bigger picture, you'll be able to see *where* you fit in and *why* your journey is taking the course it is taking...

So Isaiah reminds us that God gives us wings. But this time of Lent we now find ourselves in, also reminds us that God gives us roots. Through what Jesus did for us, he anchored us safely into himself, and no storm will ever be able to rip us apart.

People who have never experienced the love of God, will most probably not understand how a Christian can have both roots and wings at the same time; that actually *because* we are rooted in the love of God, we can fly!

But this is true, because for God absolutely anything is possible. He can even make seemingly opposing or contrasting things true at the same time.

That's the beauty of believing in God – it doesn't always make sense, but then, it makes sense that it doesn't make sense, because God is bigger than we will ever be able to understand.

So let's believe in Him, trust in Him, hope in him, praise him, listen to Him, follow him... And while all these things will help us to be safely rooted in Him, he will make us fly...

AMEN