

The book of the prophet Isaiah as we have it in its current form was, by the account of most scholars composed by up to three different Isaiahs,

Who we might call Proto-Isaiah, that takes up chapters 1-39 written in the 8th-century BCE

Deutero-Isaiah, chapters 40-55 wrote in 6th-century BCE, notably during the Babylonian Exile

And Trito-Isaiah (chapters 56–66), composed after the return from Exile

Our passage Isaiah 40:21-31, and it comes from Deutero-Isaiah in the wake of the Babylonian exile, perhaps around the end of the exile, in the 530s BCE...

A people who were taken from their home land, and who now are trying to figure out what is next.

As Old Testament professor Kristin J. Wendland, writes “The chapters following Isaiah 40 address a tired and weary people who likely had some trouble imagining a new future.”

So let us imagine that future with them.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain
and spreads them like a tent to live in,
who brings princes to naught
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom, then, will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
God who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and assert, 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.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

He 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.

Creator God, who sits above the circle of the earth, stretches the heavens, and brings princes to naught... May the word of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, o Holy One, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

The image of the eagle, or eagles, is widespread, be it the name of a band that sings about corners in Winslow Arizona, a football team hailing from Philadelphia, or carrying Frodo and Sam from the crumbling Mount Doom.

The eagle can be found as the patron animal of Zeus, plays a large role in Sumnerian mythology, We find the bald eagle as a national symbol in the United States,

There are 68 different species of eagle, and as birds they all have large wingspans, sharp claws and keen eyesight.

The bald eagle wingspan is typically anywhere from roughly 6 to 7.5 feet. I tried to figure out what is the world's largest eagle, and it depends who you ask, and how you ask, is it wingspan, body mass, or length, or total wing surface area, are all ways that you can think about what would be called the "biggest" eagle, and if you are on the internet you could hypothetically spend about the same amount of time looking up the sizes of eagles than writing your sermon for the next day. Hypothetically, of course.

The Gospel according to John is sometimes symbolized and represented by an eagle as well, a connection drawn from the belief that eagles can stare and look directly at the sun as the so-called fourth gospel looks so deeply at Jesus' divine identity.

God's liberative activity in the exodus is described as bringing the people out of Egypt on eagles wings.

You can ask my wife, I have a fascination with raptors, or birds of prey, that include eagles. Falcons are one of my favorites; in part due to my undergraduate degree being earned at Bowling Green State University, whose mascot is the falcons because they are small yet mighty.

Eagles are bigger than falcons, but in my opinion they are both pretty cool animals. And to this day, if there is a raptor section at the zoo, I always want to check it out.

I become transfixed on these magnificent creatures that the

*“The Lord who is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth”*

created, called good, and that soar on the wing.

For a time, Essie, and I, and Lucy lived in a little town in Maryland called North East, it held several small marinas on a wide river, named North East River, up in the North East corner of Maryland, and that served to help sailboats get out on the Chesapeake bay. And you can see out into where the river meets the bay from Turkey Point, a short hike in the state park down the road from main street.

Living that close to the Chesapeake, we were living next to the highest concentration of Bald Eagles within the 48 contiguous states, and there was a pair that for a time nested in our neighborhood.

It was awesome to see them flying on our walks, or runs, or even just getting to the car before heading to work.

They flew so effortlessly, and gracefully, and powerfully and the winged silhouette of an eagle is a sight to behold on the sky, and the beauty that God created gliding through the sky for some reason offered me hope.

While those taken into exile by the Babylonians would not have seen a bald eagle, they may have seen an Imperial eagle, or a white-tailed eagle, and perhaps it offered them hope as well.

Maybe seeing an eagle overhead reminded them of being born on eagles wings out of Egypt, and so Isaiah used that imagery here to remind the people of who God is, and what God does.

God who transcends our world, who created the earth, and before whom the princes of the world come to naught.

The Holy one who bends the arc of the world towards justice, and good.

And yet, how can a people exiled from their homelands, taken captive by the Babylonians, trust in who God is.

It is an existential question, at the heart of this passage, and perhaps it is in our own hearts.

Why is there so much that seems out of place with the vision of a Kingdom of God, a reign of peace,

It reminds my of a line from the hymn, this is my fathers world:

*That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.*

And that is the heart of what I believe Isaiah is saying to those in exile, preparing to return home,

God is the ruler yet...

In the face of oppression and destruction, God is above the fray, where humans are like grasshoppers, and the powers that seem to dominate this world will only do so for a time and will fade away and withers.

Because have you not known? Have you not heard?

God is great.

And Isaiah is pointing the people to something more powerful and like the power of eagles wings, God will help you fly back home.

Yet, that reality is hard to grasp

Steed Davidson Professor of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, notes that

“Attention to the entirety of this lection reveals forceful theological claims aimed at convincing the wavering, the skeptic, and perhaps the apostate of the ability of God to make a difference in the current circumstances”

He goes on

“In the midst of history, particularly one marked by turmoil, change, and emerging events, Second Isaiah advocates waiting, not as a neutral activity but waiting with hope for optimistic results because God acts in history.”

Our faith tells us that God acts in history, sometimes through us, and sometimes in spite of us;

God works, and as Martin Luther King Jr would remind us “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice”

The people in exile feel like people who have had justice delayed and denied, who are forced to wait. In the height of the pandemic, I had several parishioners tell me they felt as though they had been exiled from their church and they had to wait; churches in transition, in-between installed pastors, often wonder how long we will wait until an new settled pastor arrives

(if you want to learn a bit about that, come to adult CE today following fellowship time)

All of these situations, to varying degrees, can make one weary, or tired.

Kristin J. Wendland notes that

“Those trusting in the incomparable LORD, however, will have the energy to move forward into the new creation that the LORD has in store.”

Executive Director for Faith and Learning at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota Michael J. Chan wrote

“For Isaiah 40, there is a power at work in faithful waiting. In waiting, one can attain a strength that exceeds the vigor of youth and allows one to take flight into hope.”

As we wait for, and with God, our strength, our power, our hope will be renewed in the identity of who God is... the one who liberated the people from bondage in egypt, who was born in bethlehem, healed the sick and cast out demons, was crucified on Calvary, and rose from the grave. Who creates and renews, and provides us with nourishment in meals both common, and the sacred one we will share this day.

We will be strengthened and united by this sacrament of bread and juice, to work for justice, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and visit the prisoner, because that is the calling issued when we examine the identity the creator of the heavens who laid the foundations of the earth.

Charles L. Aaron, Jr. a professor at Perkins School of Theology
Wrote that

“In one sense, the prophet offers encouragement to go back. The scattered exiles can go back to Jerusalem from the far-flung regions of Babylon. In reality, though, they do not go back. They go forward. They accept a new adventure. The thesis sentence of this part of Isaiah comes in 43:19, that God does a “new thing.” The people will go back, but in reality, everything has changed. They cannot go back, they can only move into God’s new future.

This powerful, creative God moves with the church as it goes forward into this uncertain and dangerous world.”

We are moving into God’s new future, it won’t look exactly like the past, and we move with the hope born on majestic eagles wings, with the strength that is renewed by the creative force that stretched the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth.

We are moving into the future together with hope, rooted, and held in our creative God.

Amen.

