

Reflection on the Word: February 4, 2018
Isaiah 40:21-31, Psalm 147:1-11, Mark 1:29-39

The story is told of a little boy and his father who were walking along a road when they came across a large boulder. The boy looked at the boulder and thought about it a little. Then he asked his father, "Do you think, if I use all my strength, I can move that rock?"

The father thought for a moment and said, "I think that if you use all your strength, you can do it."

That was all the encouragement the little boy needed. He ran over to the boulder and began to push on it. He pushed and he pushed, so hard, that little beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. But the rock didn't move — not an inch, not half an inch.

After a while, the boy sat down on the ground ... His face fallen, his body in a slump. "You were wrong," he told his dad. "I can't do it."

His father walked over to him, knelt beside him, and put his arm around the boy's shoulder. "You can do it," he said. "You just didn't use all your strength. You didn't ask me to help."

The world in which we live tells us that it is all up to us. It tells us that we have to be strong and independent. It tells us we can't and shouldn't count on anyone or anything else. And yet, what faith tells us and what generations of people before us have known, is that we have a ready resource in God, strength for those who ask.

Think of today's Hebrew Bible text. The poet/prophet Isaiah sings out:

*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.*

Our writer was of course speaking to a people in exile, who'd spent a lot of years away from home. They were tired. Tired of the distance, the longing, the not knowing if they would ever get back; tired of feeling powerless. Isaiah speaks to us, too. We get tired. Exhausted, even. Lonely. Faint.

Even Jesus got tired. The twenty-four hours depicted in today's gospel reading are a sketch in miniature of the entire ministry of Jesus. Upon leaving worship in the synagogue at Capernaum, he enters a private home and heals Simon's mother-in-law. Once the Sabbath is over on Saturday at sundown, the whole

city appears at the door of Simon's house; and Jesus heals in public. The next morning, before dawn, Jesus retreats to the wilderness for prayer; but Simon and the others pursue him. In response to their entreaties, Jesus says, "Let us go on to the next towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

The stories contained in the gospel passage invite us to eavesdrop on Jesus' spirituality... to learn more about how he lived and the faith he practiced among the demands of an overwhelming world.

They are stories which invite us all to reflect on the tension between "the external and the internal" or the choice between an action-oriented faith versus a contemplative one.

All of our lives call for balance. Action without contemplation, without prayer, is a ship without ballast; it's a set-up for sinking from disappointment. On the other hand, contemplation without action is inert; it needs interaction with the outer world to be fed and to feed. This balance is important...especially when it feels like life is coming at us at a high rate.

Jesus is a good example for us. In the midst of the busyness and demands of life, he went off to a deserted place to pray. And that's because, by tending his prayer life, he found perspective for the rest of life ... as well as a sense of identity which found its source and sustenance in God.

As Henri Nouwen has stated: "... the secret of Jesus' ministry is hidden in that lonely place where he went to pray ... In the lonely place Jesus finds the courage to follow God's will and not his own; to speak God's words and not his own; to do God's work and not his own." Even Jesus turned to God for strength.

The story is told of a little five-year-old girl whose mother was startled to find her going through a new Bible storybook and circling the word "God" wherever it appeared on the page. Stifling her first reaction to reprimand the child for defacing a book, she quietly asked, "Why are you doing that?" The child's matter-of-fact answer was, "So that I will know where to find God when I want Him."

Wouldn't it be nice to have her confidence that all we had to do was open a book and find God waiting for us? The truth is, we have such a book. The Biblical witness is that from age to age, God hears the cries of his people and empowers them -- in exhaustion, in oppression, and in other moments of greatest need.

Going back to the Isaiah passage, those who study biblical languages, could tell us that triplets (three-line sequences) in Hebrew poetry, like the one at the end of the scripture we heard earlier, tend to grow in emphasis from the first to the third. In other words, the last line is more important to the author than the middle, and the

middle is more important than the first. But in this case, that seems counterintuitive.

If the writer were thinking the way I would, Isaiah would have said, "They shall walk and not faint, they shall run and not be weary, they shall mount up with wings like eagles." But his order is just the opposite of what I'd expect. You would think that flying like an eagle should be the pinnacle moment of this poem, not walking without falling down.

But here's what I have grown to love in this poem: Sometimes, no matter how much we long to soar like an eagle, all we can do is barely manage to put one foot in front of the other, over and over and over again. Maybe that *is* the pinnacle. That the very best thing is simply to be able to walk, in faith and with strength, because God accompanies us.

Given all that is going on in our world, or at times in our personal lives, it is easy to lose hope. Even when you feel the urge to make a difference, it's often hard to know where to begin. It is easy to feel overwhelmed, lost, disconnected, unsure, or doubtful. And sometimes we come to mistrust our own power, the difference one person, one gesture, or one prayer can make. Yet, in the very midst of such hopelessness, God speaks.

Just when you may want to throw in the towel and mourn the state of your life or the state of the world today, Isaiah says: "Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created these? He who brings out the starry host and numbers them, calling them all by name. Because of God's great strength and mighty power, not one is missing."

The Psalmist, too, writes that God counts the stars by number, giving each one a name, and goes on to say the Lord heals the broken-hearted, raises the lowly, and gives food to the animals. That's the beauty of our understanding of God and how we relate to God. God, the almighty Creator, is still a God who summons each one of us by name...a God who cares for us, watches over us, and who knows each and every one of us.

So ... as you sit attached to the dialysis machine or the chemo drip, God is there. In the tears and pain of grief, God is there. As you use your gifts to visit the elderly or to mentor a young student, God is there. Where people give up a few hours of their time to feed the hungry or to welcome the refugee, God is there. In the support of a homeless shelter, in advocacy for those with mental health issues, in the exercising of the right to vote, God is there. In the carefully worded 'thinking of you' card, in the smile or the helping hand, God is there. And whenever you or I feel small or powerless, may we hear the prophet reminding us once again, that God loves us and calls us by name. Even in our uncertainty and darkest moments, God is there.

This section in the first chapter of what is called Second Isaiah, exalts in the power of God our creator and sustainer. Even when we may feel insignificant in the vast array of God's creation, we are not lost in our frustrations, our worries, our sadness. When we feel powerless in the grand scheme of things, we are known and connected to God. Remember, the prophet speaks to a people in the midst of the Babylonian exile, a people who had experienced significant doubts, despair, and frustrations. In this state of physical and spiritual isolation, they are reminded of the power and magnificence of their God.

And it is remarkable for any one of us to fathom, that "not one (of us) is missing in the eyes of God." Isaiah speaks a word of survival and sustenance, no matter what our captivity! That is the Good News to which we cling even in our darkest moments.

Because it is precisely into such darkness that Isaiah speaks a word we long to hear. "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." Have you ever experienced being met in your weakness with a strength that takes you by the hand and lifts you up, setting you back on course with life, to love and serve others? God will not allow us to languish in despair. There is always hope as long as we trust in God.