

Our Strength Isaiah 40:27-31

It needs to be said that built into the Christian calendar, right into the church year are seasons where we are supposed to wait. Waiting is the expressed intention of the time. Advent, of course, is the season of waiting for Jesus to be born—the run up to Christmas. Lent is the 40 days or so before Easter, waiting for the celebration the resurrection. The background for the Scripture lesson today is God’s people waiting for 70 years as slaves exiled in the city of Babylon about 1700 miles away from their home. When they finally got home, the Lord became silent and they waited another 500 years for God to speak. And now we, of course, are waiting for Jesus to come again just like He promised He would do, to unite heaven and earth and make all things new. And Christians have been waiting for that for nearly 2000 years.

So, there’s a lot of waiting involved in being a follower of Jesus.

And honestly this is not one of the features we talk about that much, especially when we are trying to share the Gospel and convince someone to give their life to Jesus.

“Become a Christian, you end up waiting for things to happen. A lot.”

No one likes to wait. Waiting is terrible.

Albert Einstein famously said that the relativity of time is brought on by how excruciating out wait is. Putting our hand on hot stove for a second seems like an hour. A stimulating conversation which goes on for an hour can seem like its over in a second.

I can remember as a kid going to the fabric store with my Mom as she searched for patterns and swatches and buttons to make clothes or curtains or potholders—whatever you sew. I would literally lay on the floor and watch strangers feet trudge past me as time crept by at glacial speed. I think I may have even entered an alternate universe brought on by extreme boredom because I once saw the hands of the clock move backwards. I learned a lot about waiting laying on the industrial carpet of fabric stores.

Do any of us adults remember what it was like to wait all morning to get up and open our presents on Christmas Day?

That was a very long wait...

And God’s people, Israel, were waiting. But they were waiting for Someone greater than they knew. The first thing Isaiah tells us they do not wait in vain. The God they are waiting on to act is worth waiting on. But here is how it begins, **Isaiah 40:27:**

**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?”**

What are you waiting for Jesus to do? What are waiting for the Lord to unfold in your life? Maybe you have been waiting for so long that have given up hope. Maybe there is some doubt beginning to creep in.

Maybe you can relate to King David who spent a long time hiding out from people who wanted to kill him. David was anointed to be the king of God’s people when he was a boy—just an unknown, skinny-armed, red-faced shepherd working out in the fields, the youngest of

eight brothers. He was an afterthought. But the Lord made him to rule and to lead and to be a man after God's own heart whose story would be told for at least 3,000 years and whose name would forever be associated with God's only Son, Jesus.

But David did not become king until he was in his 30's and for most of that time he was on the run from the man who king because that man wanted to kill him. So for at least a decade and maybe two, David lived in caves and hid out in the wilderness. He survived under desperate conditions, always fearing for his life—knowing that someday he would be king. He cried out to the Lord:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Psalms 13:1

Do you ever find yourself crying out, "How long, O Lord? How long? Have you forgotten about me God?" If so, it's a good thing because it means you haven't lost your trust in Jesus to act, to do something, to make things right.

This is why Isaiah corrected God's people. They forgot who they were dealing with. They forgot in whom they had placed their hopes. In their distress, in the pain and the toil and the torment of being exiled as slaves 1700 miles away from their home, some of them came to believe that God was done with them, that they had been forgotten, that God no longer even see them.

And to that the Lord responded through the prophet Isaiah to His hopeless people as he has throughout all of Isaiah Chapter 40: "You've heard this before. This is old news. You have forgotten who you are dealing with. As my children, as people called and claimed the Lord God as His very own, I am not telling anything that you should not already know."

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.

Isaiah 40:8

It is natural of followers of Jesus, for Christians, for the children of God to struggle—even doubt. By natural, I mean its okay because this is a tough world. It has been made rough by the power of sin. In fact, I worry about people who don't ask God difficult questions like "Why did 80 people die in tornados last weekend?" or "Why won't COVID just go away?" The Lord can take your questions and doubts. But the one thing we can do is never forget who we are talking to. We can never forget who is in charge.

Isaiah tells us three things we should know about God—three things that should be obvious.

First, He is eternal.

In 1966 Time Magazine ran a cover story with the question "Is God Dead?" And what they meant by that cover story question was to ask, "Is God still relevant? Does God still matter?" And its really sort of a funny question to ask because the answer is absolutely "Yes." We may vainly imagine that He isn't relevant but that simply does not square with reality because God

is eternal. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. God is the great “I AM” meaning He never changes. And this is good news because of what Isaiah tells us next.

Second, He created everything so He rules everything.

There is nothing you see, nothing you will experience, nothing you will ever know that did not have its origins in the mind of God. And the way this has been understood by theologians or thousands of years is that nothing created by God can be greater than God. The theological name for this principle is “Providence.” And one of the ways you can tell this was an important idea to people is that there are 22 cities named Providence in America—from Rhode Island to Alabama and Maryland to Washington. As a people, even outside the Church, we used to believe that God was in charge—even if people sometimes disagreed on who that god may be. But we found that idea preferable than the thought that this world was in our hands. We tend not to think that any more but I don’t think that experiment is working so well. We are finding out that being responsible to no one and believing that my fate is ultimately up to me is bad for the soul.

The 19th century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge described providence like this:

Providence teaches that an infinitely wise, good, and powerful God is everywhere present, controlling all events great and small, necessary and free, in a way perfectly consistent with the nature of his creatures and with his own infinite excellence, so that everything is ordered by his will and is made to subserve his wise and benevolent designs.

Not only does God rule over everything, not only does He bend all things to His will, but He wrings good from it. He makes everything—even our sin and faults and failures and shortcomings and even tremendous evil—serve His purposes.

This is a staggering promise—truly life altering—but we can trust it because of what we are told next about God’s character.

Third, God is all-knowing and all-powerful.

It is a frightening thing to meet our limits and find that we fall short. This so something endemic to the human experience, that we sometimes project this on to God.

I experienced my shocking limits last Friday morning. Friday is my sabbath, my day of rest. And I was out serving a couple of my healthy habits, namely landscaping. I was driving home on an otherwise uneventful morning and all the sudden I noticed that the car in front of me was stopped. And I had that terrible split-second feeling realization that I was not going to be able to stop my car. I hit the back of their car squarely. My airbags went off and I as disoriented not knowing for a second or two quite what had happened.

That kind of thing has never happened to me before and as I tell the story I still can’t believe it happened now. But I came face to face with not knowing everything (for example the fact that a car had stopped in front of me) and not being able to do everything (like react in time to stop my car.) And we all know what this is like. We all know what it is like to realize our limits

But God does not. Never does He not know. Never is He powerless to act. Like Isaiah tells us never does God faint or grow weary and He knows and understands everything. With Jesus there are no accidents. And even though I was surprised by my accident Friday, Jesus

was not. As I was walking around in a daze from the shock and the airbag and everything else, I heard a familiar voice and I looked around and there was Pastor Todd. He had pulled up right behind me and when he saw my car, he pulled over, and helped me manage the next few minutes and made sure I got home. As a former policeman, he even told me what he thought the policeman who do. Of all the people who could have been present that moment, I can think of no one better than Todd. And I thought “I was shocked and surprised today—but Jesus was not.”

God does not faint or grow weary and His understanding is unsearchable.

**He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;**

Isaiah 40:29-30

God does not grow faint, but if we do, He is ready to replenish us from His eternal, unlimited vaults of power and strength. The two words here translated as power and strength refer specifically to power and strength that is given by God. The same words are used to describe the Old Testament judge Samson, who was a one-many army terrorizing Israel’s enemies the Philistines—including slaying 1,000 of their soldiers with the jawbone of a donkey. His strength and his power came from God.

Ultimately, this is where all real power and strength come from—from the storehouses of heaven. And Samson’s strength came directly from God. There is a phrase you hear in Samson’s story several times and always before one his amazing feats of power and strength, “...and the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon Him.” Here’s how the Bible dramatically describes Samson’s victory over 1,000 Philistines:

When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand and took it, and with it he struck 1,000 men.

Judges 15:14-15

Now wait, you say, there is plenty of strength that seems anything but heavenly. And you would be right. And if you say, you have seen that kind of power and strength do terrible damage and cause great harm, you would also be right. Every single one us here has been on the brunt end of someone using power in anything but an un-Godly way. It doesn’t matter if someone has used the authority they have been given to abuse us or knock us down. It doesn’t matter if we have victimized by someone else’s bad actions or evil intentions. We’ve all experienced this. I can remember asking someone one time why they insisted on harassing me and doing everything they could to make my life miserable and they simply replied, “Its easy. I don’t like you.” I know, I know...you are shocked that anyone would dislike me...but it’s a true story. Not like some other stories I tell!

There is an implicit promise here—heavenly power and heavenly strength is greater. And if we are faint, if we have no might, no strength and we are exhausted—especially because someone has worn us out, especially because someone has used their power against us, we can know this—God’s power is greater. The power and strength that Jesus will give to us from the heavenly storehouses is far superior. God’s power and strength is undefeated and He simply gives it to you and me. And because God’s power and strength is greater, this tells us something very important—we do not ever need to be a victim.

What is a victim? A victim is not someone who has been victimized by someone else. A victim is someone who allows what someone else has done to them, set their agenda. A victim is someone who allows the evil someone has done to them continue to oppress them long after the original act. If we are a victim, its because we are choosing victimhood because we have not allowed God to make us victorious. Someone who chooses to live as a victim implicitly underestimates Jesus.

That doesn't mean people have not done terrible things to us. They likely have, even unspeakable things.

But Jesus is greater.

That doesn't mean we won't struggle with emotions, with depression and anxiety and wrath and despair.

But Jesus is greater.

That doesn't mean there is no evil in the world and that evil targets the children of light because it hates us.

But Jesus is greater.

That doesn't mean we sometimes don't feel shattered and defeated, finished, drained and depleted. Even young men, the Word promises, will be faint and weary and exhausted. We need to expect it.

But Jesus is greater.

Samson was eventually caught by the Philistines when the Lord's strength left him. The Lord's strength left him because Samson shut God out. They put him in iron shackles and gouged out his eyes. And then they put him in the middle of a temple built to honor one of their Gods and chained his wrists to its pillars.

But Samson prayed:

O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God.

Judges 15:28

And the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him and Samson leaned on those two pillars with the power and strength of heaven coursing through his muscles and he brought the temple down.

We may be beaten, battered, bruised and broken. But It is our choice to remain a victim because Jesus is greater and the Holy Spirit, if we ask Him, will fill us with the unmatched might and strength of heaven.

Isaiah tells us, we just need to do one thing to access that unmatched, undefeated, unassailable heavenly strength. It is that one thing we hate to do.

But they 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.

Isaiah 40:30-31

We must wait upon the Lord to fill us.

In the week before Christmas about ten years ago I visited a member of the church I served who was in Federal Prison about 500 miles away from our home. He was in the first year of a three-year sentence. Our visit lasted several hours and we talked a long time about just how difficult it is to be in prison and how the days were very long and filled with tedium broken up only by moments of sheer terror. He said he did everything he could to avoid trouble, keep a low profile, and try his best to not be seen by anyone. He literally had a countdown of the exact number of days until his parole—at that point it was about 760.

And I said, “What a long wait for you.”

And he nodded. But he said, “There is only one thing worse than waiting. Having nothing to wait for.” He went on to say that the most shocking thing in prison was seeing people who had no hope, no expectation. They were either in prison for life or they had nothing to live for beyond the walls. And they simply had nothing to live for, so the days, the times, the hours, even down to the seconds had no meaning, no purpose, no direction. Life was pointless because it pointed to nothing. And my friend said, “Those are the guys I really worry about.”

And we are all just like those prisoners—either we are waiting on something and we have hope or we are not and we are hopeless.

But I need to ask you a very important question today.

What are you waiting on? Who are you waiting on?

Why do we wait? We wait because our present reality does not match with our expectations. We wait because we believe that something is coming that is worth waiting for. We wait because we expect something to happen. We hope. We believe God will do something.

We don't wait for things we don't hope will happen. In fact, the greater the hope the longer the wait.