

B SERMON 2021 02 07
GOOD NEWS FOR ALL

Henry Darby is a principal at North Charleston High School in South Carolina who just shines in his community. He is a beloved principal – he greets his students as they get off the bus, gives out hugs, walks the halls keeping an eye on the student body. After school and on weekends he will go to a student's home to see how they are doing. He knows what students sleep under a bridge, or sleep in a car. He has students where no curtains hang at the windows, and there is only a mattress on the floor. He is deeply committed to his students, regards them as grandchildren.

With tears in his eyes he laments that covid-19 has put a damper on the personal relationship side of things. 90% of the student body come from families living below the poverty line. And the pandemic has hit that community especially hard.

He commented that people his age (over 50) don't like to ask for money, they just do what needs to be done. So, he took on a second job – from 10:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. he works at Walmart, walking miles, stocking shelves. And every cent from that paycheque goes to help his students. At first his Walmart supervisor didn't even know that he was a principal by day.

One student said that Mr. Darby was ready to help anybody; another said that he had impacted the community in a very special way; another said that he was there when you least expect it and yet needed it the most. His only request was to "pay it forward"; that it was quite simple really, "learn to help others." One person might not change the world, but one person might change the world for one other person. And asked when he slept, he replied that he slept a couple of hours before going in for his night shift, and on weekends.

At a news event he was interviewed and then given a cheque from Walmart for \$50,000 for the high school, to continue to help his students. The interviewer commented that Mr. Darby was "doing God's work". Certainly, Mr. Darby is good news for his community. He lives out good news for all his students. *(Story from Norval United Church's Daily Minute, February 1, 2021.)*

When I was reading through the lectionary passages for February 7, I was particularly struck by the number of good news verses that seemed to leap off the page. I have always loved the last verse of Isaiah 40, and no doubt, it is familiar to you as well. It was a verse I clung to during that first year of having moved to Elliot Lake – *“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.”* When we’re tired, exhausted, strung out; when there is more asked of us than what we think we have energy for; when we reach the end of our rope, when we wait upon God’s timing, we will be renewed in strength.

If we jump forward to the gospel passage, there is a verse that points the way to good news to the weary, worn out soul. Jesus had just had some very long days, calling disciples, healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching his disciples and the crowds, and so was weary, and so what does he do? Verse 35: *“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, there he prayed.”*

These days if you listen or watch the news, you hear the phrase “covid fatigue”; and you see the tired faces of the chief medical officers of health for province and country. The faces of Dr. Teresa Tam and Dr. Bonnie Henry, in particular, show the impact of dealing with the pandemic on a provincial and national scale. People in general are tired of having to pay attention to hygiene protocols, and tired of staying home and are yearning to see eyeball to eyeball, in the flesh, their loved ones.

Verse 35 speaks of self-care. For those of you who continue to work outside the home or from home office, there is greater stress than pre-covid times. And as the steward(ess) will tell you on an overseas flight, it is imperative to put on your own oxygen mask first, before attempting to help others. So how do we practise self-care, so that we can then care for others? What is your deserted place? What does solitude look like for you? A chaplain writes: “Whenever I feel a twinge of guilt for taking time to do yoga, to sit in silence, or to spend time in prayer during my day, I think about the example of Jesus in this text ([The Upper Room Disciplines, 2021, p. 50](#)).

And for those who during this pandemic continue to stay within their own four walls, a relatively isolated and deserted place, in some respects, still there is the

need to set aside time in the day to draw near to God and pray, to enjoy a time of silence or meditation, and so have one's spirit renewed – and then be able to pick up the phone and talk or send a text, or send an email to someone – thereby expressing a word of love or encouragement. And maybe, just maybe you might have come across those beautiful words from Isaiah, “those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.”

What was going on in the people's lives that they so needed to hear these words? Well, some scholars place the writing of Second Isaiah at the time of exile, following the Babylonian conquest, after the temple and Jerusalem had been destroyed. The people are tired, discouraged, weary, worn. And they have forgotten something; they have forgotten who God is and what God has done. And so they need a reminder, and the prophet Isaiah calls out to them, to engage their thoughts and memory.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?... Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calls them all by name;... Isaiah the prophet reminds the weary people who it was that created the heavens and the earth, and who placed the stars in the heaven, and calls them each by name. And if God creates and calls each of the stars by name, will not God also remember them and call them by name? The prophet reminds the people that God is everlasting, the creator of the earth, and God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable. God will continue to care for and enable the people to go forward.

“The crisis of the Babylonian exile has caused the people to forget their own story, the story of God's attentiveness and dependability, the story of God's love for Israel. [And] because they have forgotten, they are questioning the presence and power of this God (Richard A. Puckett, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, p. 319).” If the people can be reminded of His-story, then they can avail themselves of the strength that God can give. And they can exist in hope.

There are generations growing up who do not remember the biblical story, or perhaps even have never heard the biblical story, of a God who loves them, who has been actively at work in creation and their lives. A year into the pandemic it has become apparent that the mental health of youth has been significantly

impacted by the necessary isolation to curb the spread of covid. Eating disorders are on the rise among young people. *“Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted,”* writes Isaiah.

Can we tell the story, can we remind them of the story, can they see themselves in the story? That indeed, *“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.”*

Recently in a telephone conversation with a dear friend who is waiting for a date for surgery to remove an aggressive cancer, we talked about faith and trust in God and God’s word. Sometimes we ourselves cannot seem to muster up the faith for the darkness is so enveloping, however that is when the rest of us around, can keep the faith for those whose faith is faltering. That is when the rest of us bring to memory those wonderful words of hope and promise, and hold the other up.

Words of hope and promise were not unique to Isaiah; the Psalmist, too, in a psalm of praise, speaks words of encouragement: *“He gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds...The Lord lifts up the downtrodden... (Psalm 147: 2, 3, 6).”*

Dr. Jonathan Wong is a palliative care physician, currently on leave, and is also the music director at St. Mary’s Road United Church in Winnipeg. The pandemic opened up opportunities to provide music in new ways; his own connective tissue disease prompted him to learn to play the cello, because his bow hand didn’t require the use of his two curled in fingers. And long story short, he was able to put together an album called “connectivity.” The album was about him connecting with his community, and the church connecting with the community.

The pandemic revealed many harsh realities in the lives of those around him – job loss, food insecurity, difficulty navigating in a society with new and developing rules. Dr. Wong says, “How on earth can we expect you to stay healthy when you can’t eat?” Sales of his album raised more than \$13,000 for his church’s foodbank. The results of Dr. Wong’s personal journey with illness and through the pandemic resulted in good news for the community.

As covid numbers rise around us, may we remember the story of God at work in creation, healing, strengthening, comforting, encouraging. May we keep faith for those whose faith falters. May we share good news through word and deed. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord of all creation, how grateful we are that we live in your world, and that we are not alone. We are grateful for this past week of mild temperatures and sunny blue skies; we are grateful for walks with dogs and friends, for music that lifts us up, for the sound of birds chattering, and for fresh fallen snow where dogs and children can frolic.

We thank you for the good news that helping hands communicate – we thank you for the healing touch from doctors' hands and nurses' hands, for the caring hands of PSWs and physios, for the helping hands that deliver food and other essentials. We thank you for artists and musicians, for chaplains and clergy, for writers and poets, whose images and words inspire and encourage.

We pray for those who wait for broken bones to heal, we pray for the grieving, we pray for those who wait to gain strength and mobility, we pray for those waiting for life-giving surgeries. Hear our prayers, O God, and in your love answer.

We pray for wisdom for leaders in various levels of government, and for business people, that decisions are made that will lead to life sustained.

We pray for the weak that they may regain strength, we pray for the weary that they may once again run, and we pray for those tired that they may walk and not faint.

Jesus' hands were kind hands, doing good to all. May we do good with our hands. In Jesus' Name, we pray. Amen.