

Isaiah 40:28-31  
Mark 1:29-34

## POWER TO THE FAINT

A Sunday School teacher had about fifteen more minutes of class time before the bell rang so she allowed the children to draw on paper. One little girl was working very hard at a table; she was coloring with many different crayons in many bright colors. The teacher walked over, looked down at her paper, and said, "What a lovely picture. What are you drawing?" The little girl responded, "I am drawing a picture of God." The teacher responded, "No one knows what God looks like." The little girl replied, "Well, they'll know what God looks like when I'm done!"

Throughout scripture, there are many pictures of God – not literal pictures but images of who God is, what God is like, what God does. God is portrayed as a shepherd, a father or mother, a king or ruler, a protector or avenger, a guide, a light, and so on. Of course, the best picture of God is found in the person of Jesus, who is the very Son of God. If you want to know who God is, what God is like, and what God does, then look at Jesus and you will get your answer. When we read about Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law and many others, who were sick with various diseases and demons, then we know that God does not will evil or harm to any of God's children; rather, God acts to liberate and restore those who are stricken. When we hear Jesus teaching in parables, we get glimpses of the kingdom of heaven both beyond this life and here on earth. When we see Jesus dying on the cross, then we also see the depth of God's love for us all. When we peer into the empty tomb, and then encounter the risen Christ, we experience the tremendous power of God, the God who has power to conquer sin and vanquish death.

Speaking of the tremendous power of God, the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah paints for us a glowing picture of the Creator God, who gives power to the faint. At the time these words were first uttered, long before the Hebrew words were painted on the canvass of a manuscript, the children of God, the Israelites, were in exile in Babylon and Jerusalem was still in ruins. How could they begin to believe that God was king when evil seemed to be in control and they were far from home? Where was God when bad things were happening to God's very own people? The Israelites complained that God no longer seemed interested in their welfare or in seeing justice done on their behalf.

In so many words, Isaiah counters their complaint with the charge that their God is far too small. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth." This God, not their puny idea of god, does not faint or grow weary. Rather, Yahweh "gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless." The Lord God is not only strong, God also stands ready to share his great strength with them; when they are ready to throw in the towel and give up, God offers to shoulder their load, and God makes good that promise. God will do whatever it takes to strengthen them beyond their own human frailty.

All Israel has to do (and, in fact, all Israel can do) is to "wait upon the Lord," which means to have confidence or faith in God, to commit oneself to God in hopeful expectation. If Israel will do that, if we will do our part, then God shall renew their strength and our strength. Actually, the word exchange is a more accurate translation than renew. Those who wait upon the Lord do more than simply renew their strength; they exchange their faltering strength for God's unfailing strength. Our weakness is transformed by and replaced by the strength that comes from the everlasting God, the Creator of the universe, who never faints or grows weary. Once that holy transaction has been made, then it is possible – in the words of Isaiah - for us to mount up with wings like eagles, to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint. I have come here this morning to tell you that this is not a rose-colored painting of God, but rather an honest depiction of Who God is and what God does. As I reflect on these past three years of our son's battle with cancer, and particularly these past two-and-a-half weeks since his death (and, let me quickly add here, his resurrection!), there have been many times when I was near exhaustion and on the verge of collapse. But I am sent as a messenger to tell you that our faith really does work – why? – because God is faithful, because "the Lord, the everlasting God, does not faint or grow weary; he gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless." Many, many times over these last few years, I have waited upon the Lord, and the Lord God did not disappoint. God's strength became my strength and my weariness gave way to renewed energy – at least enough of God's power to accomplish what needed to be done.

As I enter into a new chapter of my life's story (one void of the sound and sight of our beloved Andrew), although at times I feel the weight of a great anvil upon my chest and sense that my knees will buckle and give way, or that I will begin to cry and be unable to stop, even then, I know that I won't. I know better. I know that our faith works because God is faithful and loving, and God's strength is near at hand, free for the taking. Here is what has sustained me the most, and will keep me strong until I too draw my last breath and move into the life to come. First of all, God has given us a very full life with Andrew, and we are filled with many wonderful memories. Granted, thirty-one years wasn't long enough, and memories are pretty one-dimensional compared to Andrew in the flesh - full of life, laughing, loving and being with us. But, memories are better than nothing. I am convinced that memories are God's gift to us to help us remember Andrew, rejoice at the life we shared with him, and yearn for more.

Then, just as memories deal with the past, I draw great strength from the Christian hope that is made possible through our risen Lord Jesus Christ. I take Jesus very seriously when he promises that his victory over death is our victory as well. I don't understand what the life to come will look like, but I know by faith, and by the grace of God, that I will see and be with Andrew again and forever. I may have to wait another thirty years or so before I see my son again. However, as I wait upon the Lord, I realize that in the larger sweep of eternity that is just a fraction of a moment. I would be devastated if I thought that this is all there is to life. However, with God, the Creator of the ends of the earth (and beyond), we always have a future. The Israelites had a future with God back in the Promised Land, and so do we as we are promised the heavenly life. I have always appreciated the person who said, "In Jesus Christ, death is no longer the period at the end of a life's sentence; for, in Christ, death has been transformed into a comma," which means that there is more to come.

We draw strength from the gift of memories rooted in the past and from the gift of our hope through Christ, which points us to the future. Let it also be said that God's power is given to the faint here in the present, and that holy power is quite often made available through the presence of others. There can be no doubt that my renewed strength is directly attributed to the love of our family, this church family, and many friends here in the community, the body of Christ, and beyond. We have been borne up by your strong arms and powerful love for us all. Those times when I was near and fearful of collapse, your prayers gave me strength to rise above my own weakness. Your love, support, and understanding provided me with the grace to be there with Andrew through four surgeries and numerous chemotherapies; you blessed me with the gift of shared time with our son in his time of need, and I can never repay you; I can only be profoundly grateful to you and for you. You have held us and cared for us in so many ways, which includes an all-out effort to find our lost dog and bring Toby home for good.

I have said before that even though the 23rd Psalm reads, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," the reality is that we walk through this experience called grief and help each other as best we can. From now on, whenever I read the words of the Apostle Paul found in Galatians 6:2 – "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (which is to love one another) – it will be your faces and your example which will come to mind! God has used you and so many others to give power to the faint. In your witness and your compassion, I see the face of God and it is the very expression of Love personified.

Let me bring this to a close by saying that the Stevens' are going to be okay. There will be times when we need to cry, and there will be times when we can laugh at some memory that comes to mind. But, I have no doubt that our strength will be renewed, and we will walk by

faith and not faint!

This story says it best: There was a woman who was well known in her area for her simple faith and her great calmness in the midst of trials. Another woman, living at a distance, hearing of her, said, "I must go and see that woman, and learn the secret of her strong and happy life." The seeker inquired of her, "Are you the woman with the great faith?" "No," the woman replied, "I am not the woman with the great faith; but I am the woman with the little faith in the great God!" How true, how true!

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator, who does not faint or grow weary. This God (and no other!) gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. In return, in grateful response, let us give to God all the love, praise, and devotion we are capable of giving – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens  
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA  
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