

Rise Up

Isaiah 40:28-31

July 30 2017

There is a small town in France, near the border of Spain,
called St. Jean Pied de Port.

It's not a tourist destination;

you won't find it on your list of must-see sights in the South of France,
but each day five trains come into town, and dozens of people climb off those trains, having
traveled from Paris and even farther away.

They're not tourists -- they're pilgrims.

St. Jean Pied de Port

is the starting-point for a journey of 500 miles,
a walk that will take them over the Pyrenees, and most all the way across Spain,
to the Cathedral of St. James in Santiago de Compostela.

The walk is called the Camino de Santiago,
and it has been walked by pilgrims for hundreds and hundreds of years.

You've heard me talk about it before,

because my parents, now 80, walked the last 100 miles of it just a couple years ago.

Six weeks ago, my daughter Brigitta flew to Spain in order to find her way to St. Jean Pied de
Port,

and make the pilgrimage herself.

She knew she wouldn't complete the whole 500 miles -- she had only a couple weeks that
she could be there.

But she wanted to get as far as she could.

So we bought a good backpack at REI in Norwalk,
it had a sleeve on the back to hold 2 liters of water,
and we got her new boots, and stuff for sunburn and bug bites.

And off she went.

She's not here this morning, or I would just have her come up and tell the stories, because
she'd tell them better than I will.

It was a journey of great beauty and powerful spirituality,

a journey on which she met an extraordinary collection of personalities, folks from Sweden and Japan and Brazil.

It was also a journey on which she came up against what turned out to be her Achilles heel. Actually, it was her Achilles heel.

You recall that a minute ago I talked about buying nice new boots for her at REI. They **were** really nice boots.

It was the NEW part that was the problem.

After six days of walking over the Pyrenees and through the hills of eastern Spain in boots that were not broken in,

Brigitta developed pretty bad Achilles tendonitis.

Her hope was to drag herself to the next big town, where she knew there'd be medical clinics. But she didn't quite make it.

She limped into a church in a little town in Viana, Spain, with her ankle swollen up like a football.

And that's where she met Pepe.

All along the Camino, there are churches that take in pilgrims; give them shelter and food in return for whatever donation they can leave.

And there are church volunteers who help.

And Pepe, this grandfatherly gentleman whom I have never met but will love forever, Pepe told my daughter she was not to walk **any** further.

Which was fine, because she really couldn't walk any further.

Pepe set Brigitta on a couch by a window,

wrapped her ankle and propped it up,

and for two days brought her garlic soup and peaches and, yes, Spanish wine.

Until the swelling was gone,

and Brigitta's strength was renewed, and she could journey on.

Pepe, I think you'd agree, was an angel.

The kind of angel God has a habit of sending

when you're at your lowest and need to be lifted,

when you've grown weary and need to be carried --

all of which, for Brigitta, was literally true.

The story that I shared with the kids in our children's message was about an angel much like Pepe.

I told the kids that it's one of my favorite angel stories, and it is.

The great and mighty prophet Elijah, beloved by his people, revered even by the King,

one day completely ran out of steam. He was just done with it all.

The burdens of his work were too overwhelming.

So he took himself off into the wilderness to be alone with his misery.

And the story unfolds as I told the kids --

he falls asleep and wakes up to find an angel has left him food to nourish him;

falls asleep again and wakes up to find an angel has left him a cup of wine.

[I went with water for the kids.]

Because this is what God does.

God comes to us

when we're weary, feeling small,

when tears are in our eyes --

okay, yes, those are the lyrics to 'Bridge Over Troubled Water,'

but they could be straight from the Bible.

Because time and again, in the life of God's people,

God comes to the one who is weary

and lifts them up.

That's what the passage I read from Isaiah tells us,

this beautiful passage of hope and encouragement that has lifted God's people over many generations.

Those that wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;

they shall mount up with wings, like eagles.

It always been one of my favorite passages,

most likely going all the way back to the movie that won the 1984 Oscar,

Chariots of Fire,

which tells the true story of Olympic runner Eric Liddell in 1920,
a man of powerful faith who went on to become a missionary in China.

[The movie's on iTunes -- you for sure should watch it]

Where does the strength come from, Liddell says to a crowd of adoring fans,
where does the strength come from to see the race to the end?

And then he quotes:

*They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings as eagles,
they shall run and not be weary.*

This scripture is the real deal --

it is scripture that sustains,

it is scripture that you whisper to yourself in the darkest night.

This is scripture for the hardest of times,

and the deepest of griefs,

and the longest of journeys.

*They that wait upon the Lord
shall rise up on eagle's wings.*

The prophet Isaiah *wrote* this scripture in the hardest of times,
on the longest of journeys.

The people of Israel had been dragged out of their land,
carried into exile.

If ever there was a time to lose hope, this was it.

No, said Isaiah, no, don't give up:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,

the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He gives power to the faint,

and strengthens the powerless.

*You shall rise up with wings, like eagles.
You shall rise up.*

The song that Katherine just sang for us was written just recently by a young woman of tremendous faith,
a gift R 'n' B singer named Andra Day
who is unafraid to *sing* her faith,
and courageous enough to share her failures and her mistakes in the lyrics she writes.
"My courage", she says, "comes from my faith in God.
The faith that I'm here for a purpose, relying on his strength and not my own.
I'm doing this because I'm trying to be a vessel."

And the song that Katherine sang for us, *Rise up*,
was written at a low point in Andra Day's life,
when she had lost a relationship because of her unfaithfulness,
and was overwhelmed by her own guilt and shame.
I prayed to God, she said,
to give me words to sing that were the words I most needed to hear.
And maybe they'd be the words that others needed to hear, too.

And so she sang:

*I'll rise up,
I'll rise like the day,
I'll rise up,
I'll rise unafraid.
All we need is hope,
and we will rise.
We'll rise up
in spite of the ache
We'll rise up
And we'll do it a thousand times again.*

They that wait upon the Lord, Isaiah said,

will mount up with wings like eagles.

They shall run and not be weary,

walk and not faint.

When have you been weary?

When have you been weighed down by something

that has made it hard to put one foot in front of the other?

There is not a person within these walls

who has not at some point known that struggle,

who has not at some point wondered how to get through

how to on

how to get past the next day, the next week.

And maybe for you that day is today,

that struggle is this week.

So then this passage today is for you,

this reminder:

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

Today this scripture is for you,

as it was for Isaiah's people,

as it was a century ago for Eric Liddell,

as it was last year for Andra Day, as she wrote 'Rise Up'.

Each year at our high school youth group, SPF,

there's an evening when we are joined by men from Pivot Ministries in Bridgeport,

men who have traveled the hard road of addiction and abuse,

have spent time in prison, often,

have lost families, often.

Always, their visits to us are powerful.

But one in particular I really remember, from 7 years ago now.

Because there were four men that came that night,

and one of them I already knew.

That one was a young man named Chris, whose grandparents were beloved members of this church,

whose little cousin, in fact, we baptized just last month.
Chris and the three men with him had been to hell and back;
they had all journeyed the hard road of addiction,
a road that had left them exhausted and weary.
But in the faith they learned at Pivot Ministries, they had found new strength;
through faith they had become clean and sober.
And on that night with us,
what they wanted more than anything was to share that faith with our teens;
what they wanted to do that night was to express their thanks to the God who had found
them, and held them, and loved them.
And to let all the kids in the room know that
whatever they were going through,
the God of love was there for them, too.
And the way they expressed their thanks, their praise --
this was why the night was so memorable --
the way they expressed it was by rapping it,
at a decibel level that was probably heard by every household on Old Academy Road.

The four guys had formed themselves into a rap group they called MOGz -- the Men of God.
*Lord Jesus is in the house, they said to our kids,
and we are here to have a Holy Ghost Party.
Can I get a Halleluia?*

It took them a few tries to **get** a decent Halleluia out of my startled youth group --
but they finally got us up to an acceptable volume level.
And then they sang, they rapped their faith to us,
"I've been welcomed home," they sang,
"I'm free, Lord, you have made me well", they sang,
"I fell so many times, but you lifted me up.
You lifted me up."

It was a remarkable evening.
It was a reminder of what this faith can do, this faith of ours,
a testimony to the power that is here,
the life-changing hope-giving soul-strengthening power that is here.

And by the end of the evening the Halleluias were loud and heartfelt.

*They that wait upon the Lord
shall mount up with wings like eagles.
They shall rise up.*

From the scriptures of the past to the songs of today,
all the voices sing the same truth:

*Those who wait upon the Lord
shall renew their strength,
they shall rise up with wings like eagles.*

Because this the truth,

God's honest truth:

Wherever you have faltered, God has been there.

Whatever now seems overwhelming, God is with you in it.

Wherever you may walk in days to come, God will be there.

And by God's grace and strength,

you'll rise up,

rise like the day,

rise up, rise unafraid.

Rise up ...

on wings, like eagles. Amen.