

On Eagle's Wings - Isaiah 40

Across the street from here, over behind the Morgan Youth building,
is where we've created our outdoor classroom for Covid times —
six pop-up tents, with strings of lights decorating them,
and propane patio heaters, exactly like you see at restaurants.

That's where all our youth groups meet,
and our Confirmation class.

And right now, if you walked over there, you would find the tents decorated with
colorful drawings, drawings the 8th grade confirmands created last Monday night.
The high schoolers who came in on Tuesday night
were a little mystified.

Alida, what are these pictures about? they asked.

Like, there's a drawing of a lightbulb over here,
and this one looks like someone drew a tent,
and there's a giant bird on this one.

It's the God collage, I explained.

The Confirmation class drew pictures of all the images of God in the Bible.

SO, the lightbulb, that's God is our light.

And the tent- God is our shelter.

Okay, they said, but what's with the bird.

Deuteronomy 32, I said. It says God is like a mother eagle,
carrying her baby birds on her wings and teaching them to fly.

That's a really cool image, they said.

It is. It is a cool image.

God, teaching us to fly.

God raising us up on eagle's wings.

Just a couple days earlier,
we'd heard that image evoked in another context.

Joe Biden, speaking hours after the news outlets called the election,
at the end of his speech had said this.

*In the last days of the campaign, he said,
I've been thinking about a hymn that means a lot to me and to my family, particularly
my deceased son Beau.*

It captures the faith that sustains me.

*I hope it can provide some comfort and solace to the families who have lost a loved
one this year.*

And then he quoted the hymn:

“And He will raise you up on eagle’s wings,
and bear you on the breath of dawn.”

And he will raise you up on eagle’s wings.

God raising us up, teaching us to fly.

Isaiah chapter 40, [one of the scriptures you just heard me read]

says this -

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,

they shall rise up with wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary,

they shall walk and not faint.

I've always loved this scripture.

In fact, you heard both David and me use it in last week's service.

This scripture is the real deal:
it is scripture that sustains ...
it is scripture that you whisper to yourself in the middle of the darkest night.
This is scripture for the hardest of times,
and the deepest of griefs,
and the longest of journeys.

The Prophet Isaiah wrote it in the hardest of times,
on the longest of journeys.

The people of Israel had been dragged out of their land,
carried into exile,
torn from the Promised Land and their temple,
their home.

If ever there was a time to lose hope,
to believe that the powers of darkness would win,
this was it.

No, said Isaiah, no:

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.

He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagle's.

And time after time after time,
century after century,

God's people have lived out the truth of those words,
known themselves lifted,

felt themselves strengthened,
run when they were weary,
flown. Flown on eagle's wings.

The hymn that Joe Biden quoted,
On Eagle's Wings,
was written more than 40 years ago by a young Catholic priest,
Michael Joncas.

Father Michael, all these years later, still ministers and teaches out in St. Paul,
Minnesota.

On Sunday, a news outlet reached out to him to ask him about his hymn
and why he'd written it.

And he explained that it was a song that had grown out of sorrow,
and out of his deep faith in a God who lifts us up.

He'd been with a dear friend in the moment that the phone had rung,
and his friend had learned of his father's death,
and was plunged into sudden grief.

And so Father Michael had stayed up all night writing, writing his faith into a song,
echoing the words of the Psalms and Isaiah.

He was driven by compassion for a friend in sorrow and looking for the words that
would give him strength.

"God will raise you upon eagle's wings", he wrote,

"bear you on the breath of dawn,
make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand."

He'd written to comfort his friend,
to promise strength, and light after darkness.

And decades later,
his song is sung everywhere.

I know you've heard it — I know you've sung it —
we've sung it here any number of times,
and let its words lift us through times of sorrow.

The last time *On Eagle's Wings* echoed through this Sanctuary
was at one of the last funerals that was held here pre-Covid,
when hundreds gathered to say goodbye to Hank Letsch,
a beloved firefighter.

Our own Lia Carter stood and sang those words of assurance
to a room full of grief:

he will raise you up, she sang, on eagle's wings.

And from up here I watched people close their eyes,
and listen, and mouth the words, and nod *yes, yes*.

In the moment that he spoke the words of this song,
Joe Biden was speaking to those who across this country are sorrowing.
He was sharing words that had lifted him in grief,
because this song was sung at the funeral of his own son.

But the words of this song,
and words of the prophet,
are words not only for times of grief, though they are that.

They are, as Biden also said, words that remind us of the faith that sustains us
in every moment of need, in every moment when we feel ourselves low.

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall rise up with wings like eagles.

Have you ever been weary?

Have you ever found it hard to put one foot in front of the other?

Have you ever just felt exhausted?

There is not a person listening to my words

who has not at some point known

that struggle,

who has not at some point wondered how to get through

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.

What gets us through?

What lifts us up?

Who makes us to fly?

The one who gives power to the faint

and strengthens the powerless.

Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,

they shall mount up with wings like eagles.

Whenever you have faltered,

God has been there.

Whatever now is overwhelming,

God is there.

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

God will raise you upon eagle's wings
bear you on the breath of dawn
...
and teach you once again to fly.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.