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The Strength of God – Isaiah 40:26-31

Note on the lesson: There's an old Pennsylvania Dutch saying, "We get too soon old and too late smart." Isn't that just the truth? Valerie and I watched the most recent James Bond movie, "Skyfall", yesterday afternoon, and there was running through it the same theme that we hear today – and which we well may have spoken ourselves "back in the day" – get the old stuff out of the way, so we can get things done.

Well, James Bond wasn't done, of course – and though that was only a movie, we're not done yet, either. What may be a little surprising is that even this idea of conflict between old and new, wisdom and cleverness, experience and fresh ideas, is as ancient as humanity. As the somewhat more modern saying goes – I've heard it used about tennis and golf, but it applies in lots of other places, too: "Experience and cunning will always trump strength and enthusiasm."

And that's reflected in Scripture as well – in a very familiar spot for most of us, Isaiah, chapter forty.

This is one of those passages that just gets some people's juices flowing: Isaiah's writing in his most magnificent style, full of the Spirit, his words flowing like a mighty river, carrying us along with them.

It can take a moment to recall it's thousands of years old, because it still inspires even without being interpreted. "Though youths grow weary and tired, and the young and vigorous stumble badly..." We know this, personally; most of us put up with physical issues every day that would have knocked us down – or at least put us on the sofa – when we were younger. It was certainly true back in my infantry days that the older troops were able to march farther and faster than the younger, supposedly stronger young guys... how many times I saw thirty year olds (yes, I know, still kids) nearly carrying some nineteen-year-old back into base. There was the frustration of hearing that men's voices don't really mature until they're in their thirties – hard to hear at nineteen!

Still, Isaiah's words have a context – the beginning of this chapter marks a great shift in Isaiah's prophecy. There are several ways of dividing up this long book, but a simple way to look at it is that in the first part, he's scolding the people, trying to pull them back to the faith and God they have left (that "old stuff"); then there's a narrative passage that is the same as a section of the second book of Kings a sort of interlude – and then, after Israel's defeat, then comes the glorious change in Isaiah's tone, with the opening of chapter 40: "Comfort,

comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and tell her her warfare has ended...”

It’s not, “in every day in every way, we’re getting better and better, but a dose of realism for the defeated people, especially those who feel they’ve been faithful but not seen that dedication rewarded: “All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades...surely the people are grass. But (and it’s a big “but”) the word of our God stands forever.”

Then starts today’s passage, with its weary youth. Unlike John Dunham – or many of you – I was not much of an athlete in my youth. Being in the military changed that, of course. Here’s the certificate of Outstanding Physical Readiness I received the month I left the Navy, which included my fastest mile and a half run ever – I actually finished the run first that day. Within six months, I had knee surgery, and haven’t run more than a short distance since. It happens.

So, young people are not indestructible, invincible, or immortal. That’s nothing new to us, is it? Though it is something that more than a few of us had to learn the hard way. Isaiah isn’t saying what we don’t already know: even the strongest, healthiest will run out of gas eventually. People get injured. There are limits to the human body, and limits to endurance. We can only push ourselves so far. And many of us have found out just how far we can push: in some ways more than we

once were able to – we can tolerate more aches, pains, and general icky-ness than we once could – but in far too many ways, we can't push ourselves anywhere near what we once did day after day. In fact, some of us can no longer even walk without a great deal of concentrated effort, if at all.

So it's the next part of this passage that's really important: "Those that wait on the Lord will soar like eagles, run and not grow tired, walk and not grow weary." Beautiful words – but what on earth can Isaiah be talking about? Surely not us?

Yes, indeed, us. Because what Isaiah is telling his people and you and me is that it is not our strength that matters, but God's strength in us.

The end verses of our lesson today were the foundation of the motto for this past summer's General Assembly, our denomination's biennial gathering, and every worship service was built around them. I had the wonderful privilege of hearing great preachers draw out the beauty and power of Isaiah's words from God. But in the motto, the phrases were reversed: it read, "Walking, Running, and Soaring in Hope."

Now, *that* does make sense, doesn't it? I mean, we learned to walk before we ran, and soaring – well, soaring is something most of us only dream about. But doing those things in hope, well, that's possible; and our pew Bibles even say "Those who hope in the Lord" instead of "wait

for.” But the Hebrew really does say, quite plainly, “wait”, not “hope.” We could argue the point, and say that hope is a form of waiting – after all, one definition of hope is that it’s a reality you haven’t yet experienced – but waiting is what we’ve all been doing, some of us for longer than others.

Still, the truth is that as fallen human beings, we’re just backward ourselves – it’s Isaiah that’s got it right. When we had the physical strength, we didn’t know what to do with it; now we know, but don’t have the strength anymore. How many of you have said, “If I knew then what I know now…” But we didn’t, and no one does. But in the Lord, with the strength of God in our faith, then we do soar; we do run; and, even if we can’t do it literally, in faith, in Christ, we can walk forever.

This time of Lent, when we recall Jesus forty days of fasting and temptation, preparation and self-perception, is a time of waiting as well as self-assessment. We’re waiting to celebrate Easter, the day of celebrating our salvation, when God reconciled us to himself, and the whole world changed forever.

But many, if not most, of us have been waiting like the defeated people Isaiah spoke to – waiting for that God-reality to become our lives, for God to take our frail, unreliable human bodies and turn them into the reality of endless day, of unimaginable bliss, of freedom from pain, worry, and want, of glad heavenly reunion.

That's why Isaiah has got it exactly right. In God's strength, in God's time, we have indeed soared, we have run, and we have walked. We have progressed down the broad highway of faith – even if we ourselves cannot physically move, it's the strength of faith that gives us the power and the ability to be who and what we are, despite the decline of our physical bodies.

It's God's strength and power that make it possible for us to do anything; if we rely on our own power and our own abilities, we will always tire, we will always fall short, we will always stumble and fall. But in God, with the strength of faith, we can only move forward into the loving arms of a loving God, who not only waits patiently for us, but gives us the ability to get to him, through Jesus Christ.

So soar if you can, run if you can – but let's at least walk together into the future that God has prepared for Valley, for us, and for you.