

IMAGINE THAT! – An Eagle in the Sky **Isaiah 40:27-31**

For three weeks in August I shall be preaching a sermon series titled **IMAGINE THAT!** based on Proverbs 30:18-19: *Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden.*

Of course one could certainly question the wisdom of anyone’s preaching on anything that is incomprehensible, to say nothing of **three** things that are too wonderful or three or four things that cannot be understood. But here in these two verses we find rich imagery that catches our imaginations — riveting images that can uncover salient truths about our spiritual lives. And so today: *IMAGINE THAT! – An Eagle in the Sky*, based on Isaiah 40:27-31.

Let us pray. Almighty God, Everlasting Lord, Creator of the ends of the earth, may this be the very day when you give us insight into the chains that bind us; may this be the very hour when you grant us the courage to throw off those chains of bondage!ⁱ Through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

I. Imagine That – An Eagle That Flies

This is no ordinary bird in flight, such as a swallow flitting toward the barn rafters to build its nest, nor the speedy hummingbird humming like a helicopter in midair, nor a wren making its way from flower to flower. No, this is the king of the sky, soaring to great heights, way above any pinnacle, seemingly without any effort riding the gusting air currents with the winds beneath its wings, and with an eagle’s eye surveying the earth below.

Imagine that! An eagle in the sky
Screaming the night away
With his great wing feathers
Swooping the darkness up;
I hear the Eagle bird
Pulling the blanket back
Off from the eastern sky.ⁱⁱ

Imagine that! The eagle in the sky, free as the winds, liberated from the cares of the world, disconnected from the dross of earth. At one time in its history, Israel had been as free as the eagle, its spirit soaring like this king of the skies . . . free and soaring to great heights in God’s providence with a covenant in its beak, a covenant with the very God who had liberated them from harsh bondage in Egypt. Then in their history there was the flight from Egypt, then the deliverance at the “Reed Sea,” then passing through the threatening waters on dry ground, then the march through the wilderness where they were sustained for forty years, where *God satisfied the thirsty and the hungry he filled with good things,ⁱⁱⁱ* then the triumphant journey toward the Promised Land, then winning all battles against the Canaanites, then victorious, established in the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey.

This very freedom—the same kind of freedom that the eagle knows in its soaring—came from the power of God, that is, the Lord who is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, a God *who was not aloof from the human skirmishes but rather who was active within the human struggle, guiding and shaping the course of human affairs according to his sovereign purpose. In Israel’s experience the conquest of Canaan did not happen by accident of circumstance or by*

assertion of superior human power. It occurred within the providence of God. Therefore, the land was not a possession to boast about, but a gift to be received with humility and gratitude.^{iv}

Imagine that! in that land of milk and honey, these people enjoyed a freedom beyond human comprehension....that is, until they turned away from the living God, the God of Israel, the God of Jacob, and began to worship the gods of the Canaanites, began to trust in their own possessions and basking in a blatant self-satisfaction. Then enters Isaiah stage left. *Isaiah sought to turn his people away from trust in false gods and foreign alliances for national security to absolute trust in God; from greed on the part of the wealthy to concern for the poor and oppressed; from lavish ritual—a hollow piety—relied on as a guarantee of God’s favor and protection, to righteous living and good deeds.*^v Refusing to turn, the free-flying people of Israel fell prey to incontrovertible disaster, when in 588 B.C Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylonia, laid siege to Jerusalem and carried the people off into exile.

By the time we come to Isaiah 40 in Israel’s history, Israel’s wings have been clipped in captivity and the scream of the fallen eagle is a cry of lamentation: *My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God.*^{vi} My God is absent! My God is indifferent! My God is blind! Heaven is deaf! And I am in exile!

No doubt you remember Aesop’s Fable titled *The Eagle and the Arrow*:

An Eagle was soaring through the air when suddenly it heard the whizz of an Arrow, and felt itself wounded to death. Slowly it fluttered down to the earth, with its life-blood pouring out of it. Looking down upon the Arrow with which it had been pierced, it found that the shaft of the Arrow had been feathered with one of its own plumes. “Alas!” it cried, as it died, “We often give our enemies the means for our own destruction.”

When their minds strayed from God, the people of Judah gave their enemies the perfect opportunity to invade Jerusalem and enslave them once again, carry them off into exile, even as the Egyptians had done years before. Chained to their own avarice and confined by their greed, Israel’s idolatry gave Babylon the means for Israel’s own destruction and captivity.

Laid low, languishing by the waters of Babylon, the boot of the oppressors on their necks, the people of Israel could have used the words of the poet for their lament:

*My spirit is too weak – mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep.
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die (lie captive)
Like a sick Eagle looking at the sky.*^{vii}

Imagine that! a wounded eagle on the ground, bleeding from the arrowed wound in its breast, chained to the regrets of its past, aching, longing, yearning for the freedom it had known.

Here we realize that Israel’s story is our story. Chances are that each of us has enjoyed the winds of life that have lifted our spirits to great heights, that have caused us to savor the joys of success, the flights of love, ambitions realized, aspirations fulfilled. But then, as the human spirit is subject to vicissitudes, as no one is exempt from the ups and downs of serious living, the feathered arrow sooner or later finds its way to our heart. We are brought low, made captive to an unwanted condition, and *deep in our breast lies the silent wound.*^{viii}

What is the silent wound in your breast? What is the silent wound in my breast? What chains us to the earth, prevents us from soaring, commanding the skies the way you used to do? Wavering uncertainty? Diminished self-confidence, or no confidence at all? The melancholy of declining years? Illicit drugs, a proclivity to too much alcohol, gripping concupiscence, searing doubt, uncontrollable anger, fierce impatience, crippling fear, loss of passion, lack of fulfillment?

What idols do we worship instead of the living God? What keeps us from fulfilled aspirations? from transcending our worst and aspiring to our best? Like the eagle brought low, wounded and lying looking at the sky? What is the silent wound in our breast? . . . How well each of us knows our own secrets!

II. Imagine This – a God Who Liberates

The prophet has a transforming word for us:

*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;
His understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. . . .*^{ix}

You and I know that:

Frustrations age us. Whether young or old in years, these Jewish captives and we twenty-first century men and women, caught and imprisoned by barriers to our hopes which we seem incapable of surmounting, need the aspects of the everlasting God.^x

*Those who **wait for the Lord** shall renew their strength.
They shall mount up with wings like eagles . . . AGAIN.*

Here it is! Imagine this! A God who liberates, who holds out hope that we shall soar high once more, that we shall taste the joys of freedom and fulfilled aspirations once again!

For the Jews, the long grim years of the captivity had been exhausting physically, perpetually inducing high anxiety and low expectations. There was a spiritual fatigue which was a most serious obstacle to venturing upon their new exodus, their homeward march. The prophet does not exhort his people to rouse themselves from their defeatism (to improve their attitude, to shake off their depression, to change their state). . . . Rather, he proclaims a freshening gospel of their untiring and resourceful God, whose boundless energies the whole cosmos witnesses.^{xi}

*Those who **wait for the Lord** – the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth – shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. **Wait for the Lord**, listen for the Lord, be attentive to the Lord, be expectant of the Lord!*

*Perhaps you are one such winged spirit, or perhaps you know such winged spirits—who like this prophet in his day **wait for the Lord**—who soar above the obstacles which impede others, obstacles that take the heart out of those around them. With minds stayed on God, these winged spirits advance in full flight.*^{xii}

Oh, to be such a one as that! Imagine this! Waiting for the God who liberates, who renews our strength, who causes us again to mount up with wings like eagles.

The Apostle Paul told the Church at Corinth, “Our sufficiency is from God;”^{xiii} and to the Church at Philippi he declared, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”^{xiv} It is indeed the living God—through the crucified Christ—who gives power to the faint, who strengthens the powerless. Were we to gaze on the cross that occupies the center of our worship, we would soon recall Christ’s suffering and death; what comes to mind immediately are those silent wounds in his breast, in his hands, in his feet, in his side on the cross at Golgotha. That cross on which our Savior was pierced, wounded for our transgressions, that cross in reality rises from deep in the earth way up into the heavens, uniting us—reconciled—to the Lord, the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. By that cross, by our Savior’s wounds on that cross we are strengthened and mount up with wings like eagles.

Conclusion
Wait for the Lord

Regarding that silent wound deep in our breast, there is a challenge for us this week, and I ask you to join me in that challenge. Everyday this coming week I ask you to wait with me for the Lord, to sit with your Bible open to this passage—Isaiah 40:28-31—to read it, and wait, listen, be attentive, be expectant; then lean into your pain, progress though your pain, move beyond your pain.

As we wait, let this be our prayer:

O Lord, I am wounded but not slain; I will lay me down to bleed awhile and then rise up to soar again, for indeed those who **wait for the Lord** shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Amen.

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9 August 2009

Notes

ⁱ Adapted from a prayer by Henri Nouwen, *A Cry for Mercy*, cited in Charles Ringma, *Dare to Journey with Henri Nouwen*, Reflection 140

ⁱⁱ *Invitation Song (Iroquois)*

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 107:9

^{iv} Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, pp. 100-101

^v Edward P. Blair, ed., *Abingdon Bible Handbook*, p. 150

^{vi} Isaiah 40:27

^{vii} John Keats, “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats*, edited by Richard Monckton Milnes (1848); this poem first appeared in *The Examiner*, February 23, 1817, four years before Keats’ death.

^{viii} Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book 1, line 69. The actual quotation is *Deep in her breast lies the silent wound*.

^{ix} Isaiah 40:28-29

^x William Sloane Coffin, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Exposition, p. 445

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- ^{xi} Ibid, adapted
^{xii} Ibid, p. 446, adapted
^{xiii} II Corinthians 3:5
^{xiv} Philippians 4:13