

**To Walk and Not Faint**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
February 23, 2020-PM Service  
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Isaiah 40:27-31

In a moment, I will read one of the most familiar texts in the Bible, certainly one of the most familiar texts in Isaiah. You hear it all the time. It's read at church services and graduations and funerals. It's a text that appears on inspirational posters and encouragement cards. People see it as a text of hope and empowerment. And that's right. That's what it is.

But recently I read a book by a minister named John Claypool that caused me to look at the text in a new way. The name of the book is *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*. It's a book John wrote in response to the sickness and death of his 8-year-old daughter Laura Lue. Laura Lue was a radiant child. She played the violin, she did ballet and she laughed a lot. But one day in third grade, she was diagnosed with acute leukemia. Her strength suddenly evaporated and she was bed-ridden. At the doctor's recommendation, the Claypools started Laura Lue on a chemo regimen, and she responded well. After a few treatments, the doctors told her that her leukemia was in remission, and soon she was back at school, back dancing, back playing her violin.

For 9 months everything seemed fine. The Claypools began to hope that the strife was over, the battle won. But, one March morning, she woke up with pain. And the cancer was back. This time she did not respond so well. This time she was back and forth from home to hospital. This time she spent hours in bed with her fists clenched in pain. And then, a couple of weeks after Christmas, Laura Lue died.

*Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* consists of writings from various stages in Laura Lue's illness. There's a sermon from when she was first diagnosed, there's a sermon from when the cancer returned, and there's a searing sermon preached a couple of months after she died. The sermon on Isaiah 40 is the middle sermon, the one preached when the cancer returned and the family entered into their long hard fight-and their long defeat. So that's the context in which John Claypool was reading and hearing Isaiah 40, which wasn't so different from the context of the original hearers. Most scholars agree that this passage is aimed at people who are in exile in Babylon. They're weary. They wonder if God has forgotten them. Here is what Isaiah says to the disappointment and fear of John Claypool and the people of Israel.

Do you know the distinguishing feature of Hebrew poetry? Hebrew poetry has one feature that sets it apart from other poetry. That feature is parallelism. In Hebrew poetry, ideas are paired. You see it in our passage. Isaiah the poet expresses a poetic idea in one line, and then he repeats that poetic idea in a second line. "Do you not know?" he says, and then in parallel, "Have you not heard?" Or listen to this parallel in verse 29: "He gives strength to the weary...and increases the power of the weak." Verse 30: "Even youths grow tired and weary...and young men stumble and fall." Can you see how it works?

Sometimes these repeats are just saying the same thing in a new way. But other times the repetition adds something. Sometimes the second line adds meaning and nuance. Sometimes the parallels build on each other. The end of Isaiah 40 is an interesting example of this. Everything I read tonight comes in pairs of two except for verse 31. In verses 27-30 the poetic lines come in parallel, two by two. Nice and orderly like the animals onto the ark. "Do you not know, have you not heard. The Lord is an everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth." So it's all couplets until verse 31, when the passage ends in a triplet: three lines in parallel. "They will soar

on wings like eagles,” “They will run and not grow weary,” “they will walk and not faint.” It’s a triplet.

The triplet accomplishes a couple of things: First, they signal that this is the end of the passage—kind of like a musical ritardando. Duh-da, duh-da, du-dah, duh-da, dah dah dah. Second, this triplet teaches us something. This is one of those parallels where the lines build on each other. Each line adds meaning. Specifically, these three lines don’t just tell us that God will help us, each line shows a different mode of help. The three lines promise help for those who hope in the Lord, but each individual line describes a different form of that help. Following Claypool, I want to look at each line separately to see the kind of help it suggests.

First, those who hope in the Lord will soar on wings like eagles. Sometimes God lifts us up into a mountaintop experience where we soar above the worries of the world. In Claypool’s words, “*we soar away in an atmosphere of sheer exuberance.*” We rise up on eagle’s wings and we can see above the forest of our fears all the way to the new Jerusalem. These mountaintop moments are not common, but they can sustain a person for a long time. Sometimes one mountaintop moment can sustain a person for a lifetime.

Some of you have heard the story of Blaise Pascal. I’m sure it’s been told from this pulpit before. Pascal was a brilliant French mathematician, one of the greatest in the history of the discipline. One night in 1654, Pascal had a vision. He had an experience of God in which, I think it’s fair to say, he soared up on wings like an eagle. He was so overcome by the vision that he wrote it down on a piece of paper. Here’s part of what he wrote: “*The year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement... From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight, FIRE. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God... Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy... Complete submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.*” After the experience he took the note and sewed it into the lining of his jacket. He kept it there, next to his heart for the rest of his life.

That’s an example of God helping someone by making him soar on wings like eagles. These soaring moments are beautiful, and they become the touchstone moments of our faith. But they are rare. They are not the chief mode of our walk with God. They are not the chief way God helps us from day to day.

The second clause tells us that the Lord helps us to run and not grow weary. This is a promise for the busy seasons of life. As Claypool says, this is God giving us the strength for activism. Our faith isn’t just soaring experiences, it’s worked out in daily tasks. Tasks of loving and healing and working and creating. These moments might not be as exciting as the soaring eagle moments, but they are rewarding in their own way.

We experience this help when we feel God supporting us in the accomplishment of some kingdom task. For me I think of the intensity of preparing for Sunday worship. All week long, an enormous amount of work goes into preparing for Sunday services at LaGrave. Teachers prepare lessons, choirs prepare anthems, Larry prepares hymns and service music, ushers, deacons, greeters, nursery attendants, are all mobilized. Bulletins are typed and printed. Sound volunteers and video volunteers are put in place. Sermons and children’s sermons and liturgies are all prepared. Every Monday morning those of us charged with service preparation get up early to plan another week. The alarm goes off and we hit the ground running. And every week there are parts of the week where you feel like: there is no way I’m going to get this all done. It’s going to be a disaster. The whole service will be blooper reel material. But you keep running, and somehow, by the grace of God, it all comes together on Sunday.

Sunday night, we rest for a moment in the joy of this weekly miracle. In that moment of Sabbath, you realize, “I didn’t do this. This was not my strength. God was in all of it.” And you say, with Isaiah, “Wow. It’s true. Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They will run and not grow weary.” Then Monday comes, the alarm goes off and we are running again. This isn’t just worship planners and church workers. All of us servants using our talents to work in the fields of the Lord know this feeling of completely relying on God’s help as we run the race marked out for us. All of you who will be running this week—keeping the family together, running a business, teaching, leading—know this: He will renew your strength.

Finally, the last of the three kinds of help is listed in the last line of the triplet. They will walk and not faint. This is the line that drew John Claypool to Isaiah 40:31 as his preaching text when his daughter’s cancer returned. He wanted to give testimony to this kind of help. Here’s what he said about this kind of power in his sermon. “Now I am sure that to those of you looking for the spectacular, this [help] may sound insignificant indeed. Who wants to be slowed to a walk, to creep along inch by inch, just barely above the threshold of consciousness and not fainting? That may not sound like much of a religious experience, but believe me, in the kind of darkness where I have been, it is the only form of the promise that fits the situation.”

No one wants to be slowed to a walk, to creep along inch by inch, just barely above the threshold of fainting. Nobody wants to be in that place, but we all end up in that place. The caregiver who steps alongside her loved one, holding him together day by day, reminding him of who he is and what he’s done. The best she hopes for is to walk and not faint. The person who’s fighting a chronic disease. The person fighting acute grief. The prisoner. The refugee. The abandoned spouse. All these people know what it is to creep along, just trying to hold it together. To these people, the promises of soaring on wings like eagles and running without being weary just don’t fit the shape of their days. They are hoping that God will help them walk and not faint. When Laura Lue’s cancer came back, the fight was long and hard. Repeated trips to the hospital. Struggles to fight the cancer. Struggles to manage the pain. Claypool described nights beside his daughter’s bedside holding her hand and rubbing her back while she cried out in pain. You don’t run through something like that; you creep, you limp, you stumble and you try not to faint. Claypool was honest about the pain and the darkness but he also said this: “Here I am this morning—sad, broken-hearted, still bearing in my spirit the wounds of the darkness. I confess to you honestly that I have no wings with which to fly or even any legs on which to run—but listen, by the grace of God, I am still on my feet. I have not fainted yet... [I am] hanging in there, enduring with patience what I cannot change but have to bear.”

I did a google image search for Isaiah 40:31 this week. That search brings up all the images most associated with the words of this famous text. Guess what the most popular image was? Eagles of course. There were lots of eagles, all of them soaring and most of them bald. Everyone loves the soaring moments. There were no images of people walking and not fainting. There were no images of people who were just hanging on. Not surprising I suppose. But after reading Claypool, this will be the image I will have most prominently in my mind as I think of the help God gives us on the journey of life.

There’s one more interesting observation to be made about this poetic triplet, these three parallel poetic lines. They come in a surprising order. Wouldn’t you expect the order to go upwards—from walking to running to soaring? Wouldn’t that be more glorious? Instead we go down—from soaring to running to walking. Why is that? Could it be because that is the real trajectory of life? Isaiah talks about youth at the beginning of this passage—even youths grow

weary he says. It is in our youth that we soar, and then we run, and then we walk and try not to stumble and faint. The order of the three lines fits the downward slope of human strength.

Of course there's one step missing. The day will come when we *will* faint. Our legs will fail, and so will our minds, and we will be laid down in the dust of death. What about then? Will the strength of the Lord be able to reach us in that place? Will those who hope in the Lord have their strength renewed when they've gone all the way down to sleep in the dust?

“Behold I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed. In a flash in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable.” Jesus is risen! And so those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will rise upon wings like eagles, they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not faint, they shall be laid in the dust but they shall rise in the grace and power of Jesus.

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