

SUSTAINED BY SCRIPTURE'S SONG - EVERLASTING GOD
A SERMON BASED ON ISAIAH 40:25-31
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
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Dr. Kennon Callahan tells the story of the time

his wife and young sons were sailing
on the waters around the Bahamas.

The day had started out well;
the water was perfect for sailing and the sun shone brightly.

But before long, things began to change.

The waves started rolling; the wind was pulling at the rigging.
They discovered on the shortwave radio
that a hurricane was blowing far in the distance,
and its fringe reached their boat.

It seemed wisest to find a safe harbour to spend the night.

On the map they saw a small deserted island, a key,
that had a little cove where they could weather the storm.

They arrived, set the anchor and readied for the night.

Before long, the anchor slipped
and their boat started going towards open water.
So they hauled it in,
used the outboard motor to reposition the boat in the cove
and set the anchor again.

The bottom must have been sandy,
the anchor kept slipping over and again.
So all that sleepless night, the ritual was repeated.
Haul anchor, motor into the cove and reset it.

The next morning, the sun was hidden behind storm clouds
and the winds were no better.
If the storm was staying, so would they.
To avoid a day like the sleepless night,
Callahan decided to take the anchor to shore,
and bury it deep into the beach.

He hauled up the anchor, picked the heavy weight up in his arms,
and stepped off the boat to walk it to shore.

One of the beauties of Caribbean water

is how perfectly clear it can be.

Meaning the bottom can look

much closer to the surface than it actually is.

As Callahan stepped off the boat he began to sink, deeper and deeper.

As he tells the story he says,

“Halfway down it dawned on me

that if I let go of the anchor, I would stop sinking.

The anchor was tied to the boat it would be fine.

He on the other hand, wouldn't be, if he didn't let it go.

So he let go of the anchor, and low and behold, he stopped sinking.

The Israelites were sinking in Isaiah 40.

The Israelite nation had been overrun by foreign invaders

a number of times by the time we get to this passage.

The Assyrians had come through and destroyed the nation.

The Babylonians had come through and taken masses of people

back to Babylon into exile.

For decades Israelite and Judean kings had tried to manipulate
and orchestrate their fate among the nations.
Tributes were being paid to foreign kings.
Alliances had been attempted with neighbouring nations.
All kinds of strategies, solutions and scenarios had been tried,
to keep Israel and Judah
safe, prosperous, happy, and in control.

They tried everything,
except looking to God and turning to the God
who gave them this promised land in the first place.

They tried everything except leaning upon the God
who got them through the desert the first time.

They tried everything except taking strength from the God
who soars above the heavens,
and who has been commanding the stars in their formations
from the first day.

What they were holding onto,
their manipulations and their orchestrations was sinking them.
They were sinking with doubt.

They were sinking with mistrust.

They were sinking because they didn't know
what they should let go of
and where they should grab hold.

Isaiah questioned why they are sinking at all.

Why do you say Jacob,

Why do you say Israel,

Why do you say,

'The Lord is not aware of what is happening to me.'

My God is not concerned with my vindication.'?

We know that sinking feeling.

It comes when we are being pulled down by a bunch of different things.

Illness. Grief. Anxiety. Boredom. Insecurity.

So we know why Jacob says,

'The Lord is not aware of what is happening to me.'

And we know why Israel says,

'My God is not concerned with my vindication.'

We know because we've also asked the question

'What is going on here God?!

We ask it because when our hearts are sinking,

the cry becomes 'How do I fix it?!'

How do I fix this?

How do you fix a sinking soul?

One of the things required of us in faith.

Is understanding and paying attention to what things we hold onto.

In an earlier part of the book of Isaiah

there is a passage where God says, 'Comfort. Comfort my people.'

It is the passage that calls for a straight path,

so God can get directly to you.

So that like a shepherd he can tend his flock.

Gather up the lambs with his arm.

Carry them close to his heart.

Which sounds really nice,

but when one's soul is sinking,
the panic makes it hard to ask anything other than
'Is God even concerned with what is happening to me?'

Isaiah provides faith faith perspective.

He fixes the question.

From why am I sinking?

to What am I hanging on to?

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is an everlasting God,
the creator of the whole earth.

Isaiah provides the right faith questions.

Earlier in this passage he taught some of these questions.

'Who has measured out the waters in the hollow of his hand?

Who has carefully measured the sky
or carefully weighed the soil of the earth,
or weighed the mountains in a balance

or the hills on scales?

Did you do that?

Isaiah has taught us the question,

‘Who comprehends the mind of the Lord?

Who gives him instruction as his counsellor?

From whom does he receive directions?

Who teaches him the right way to do things?

Would that be you?

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told to you since the very beginning?

He is the one who sits on the earth’s horizon.

He is the one who stretches out the sky.

He is the one who reduces rulers to nothing.

God himself interrupts Isaiah’s questions

with a question of his own.

‘To whom can you compare me?

Whom do I resemble?

Look up at the sky! Who created all these heavenly lights?’

Isaiah continues

‘He is the one who leads out those heavenly lights in their ranks.

He’s like their military commander.

They line up in formation for him.

He calls them by name and rank.

Under his command, not one is missing.

These questions and these answers are very similar to what we hear
in the book of Job.

Job, the man who had everything stripped away from him,
livelihood, family, his own health.

Job had the same question to ask of God,

‘Do you even see what is happening to me?’

God gave him the same faith instruction.

It was learning to ask new questions.

‘Where were you when I laid out the foundation of the earth?’

‘Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!’

'Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons?'

'Do you give the horse its strength?'

'Where were you when I set up the course for the sun across the sky?'

A new question with a clear answer.

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God.

He does not get tired or weary.

There is no limit to his wisdom.

He has the answer you do not have.

He gives strength to those who are tired.

To the ones who lack power, he gives renewed energy.

Even youths get tired and weary.

Even strong young men clumsily stumble.

But those who wait on the Lord, find renewed strength.

They rise up as if they had eagles' wings.

They run without growing weary.

They walk without getting tired.

So why sink to the bottom when you can soar?

There is a lot in the world that needs our attention.

It can be exhausting to think of it al.

There is a lot going on in our own lives that can wear us out
and bring us down.

Even strong young men clumsily stumble.

But those who wait on the Lord,
find renewed strength,
they rise up as if they had eagles's wings.

So, if we are going to soar, find renewed strength and not grow weary
the question that follows is,

“How do you wait on the Lord?”
When your instinct is to try and fix it,
when you want to throw all your strength
at something you can't control,
when you want to hold onto power,
and it just keeps pulling you down,
How do you wait on the Lord?

How do you find renewed strength?

How do you rise up as if you had eagles' wings?

What is it that brings you back to the surface where you can breathe?

I've always been fascinated by gliders.

I'm fascinated by the fact that a glider is an aircraft with no engine.

It is a vehicle that flies with no power of its own.

It should sink.

And indeed it does unless the pilot finds a place of lift.

A skilled glider pilot,

to stay in the air

to rise higher into the sky, must find what is called, a thermal.

A thermal is a column of rising air

created by the heating of the Earth's surface.

As the air near the ground is heated by the sun, it expands and rises.

Glider pilots look for terrain that absorbs the morning sun

more rapidly than other areas,

areas like an asphalt parking lot, dark ploughed fields or rocky terrain.

Near those areas there will be a thermal,
an updraft of hot air rising.
Positioning her glider into the thermal,
the pilot and the glider will rise
and soar on wings like eagles.
They fly.

Otis Moss III is a preacher that shares this story.

He says, "There is a story that I am told
has been passed from mouth to ear
somewhere along the palmetto dunes of South Carolina,
a story passed down from West Africa to the North Atlantic.

It is the story, a unique story, of the people who could fly.

The story takes place in St. John's Island,
just off the coast of South Carolina,
as Africans, who had been mislabeled slaves,
are toiling in the hot sun.

They are working so very hard to pick cotton.

There is one young woman and beside her is her small boy,

maybe six or seven.

She's working in the fields
and she has such incredible dexterity
that she is able to pick cotton with her right hand
and caress the forehead of her child with the left.

But eventually, exhausted by working so hard in the fields,
she falls down from the weight and the pressure of being
in the words of Dubois—"problem and property."

Her boy attempts to wake her very quickly,
knowing that if the slave drivers were to see her
the punishment would be swift and hard.

He tries to shake his mother, and as he's trying to shake her,
an old man comes over to him.

An old man that the Africans called Preacher and Prophet,
but the slave drivers called Old Devil.

The boy looks up at the old man and says, "Is it time? Is it time?"

The old man smiles and looks at the boy and says,

"Yes!" And he bends down

and whispers into the ear of the woman

who was now upon the ground and says these words:

“Cooleebah! Cooleebah!”

At that moment the woman gets up with such incredible dignity.

She stands as a queen and looks down at her son,

grasps his hand and begins to look toward heaven.

All of a sudden they begin to fly.

The slave drivers rush over to this area where she has stopped work

and they see this act of human flight

and are completely confused.

They do not know what to do!

And during their confusion,

the old man rushes around to all the other Africans

and begins to tell them,

“Cooleebah! Cooleebah!”

When they hear the word, they all begin to fly.

Can you imagine?

The dispossessed flying?

Can you imagine the disempowered flying?

The diseased flying?

The dislocated flying?

They are all taking flight!

And at that moment the slave drivers grab the old man and say,

“Bring them back!”

They beat him, and with blood coming down his cheek,

he just smiles at them.

They say to him, “Please bring them back!”

And he says, “I can’t.”

They say, “Why not?”

He says, “Because the Word is already in them

and since the word is already in them,

it cannot be taken from them.”

The old man had a word from West Africa,

cooleebah, a word that means God.

It had been placed into the heart of these displaced Africans
and now they had dignity and they were flying.

There are thermals in our faith.

Places where, if you position your life over them,
not only will you not sink,
you will fly.

Thermals like,

‘For I am convinced that neither death nor life,
neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future,
nor any powers, neither height nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

Thermals like,

‘In my father’s house are many rooms.
I am going to prepare a place for you
and if I go a prepare a place for you,
I will come and get you to be with me where I am.’

Thermals like,

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish;

no one will snatch them out of my hand.

My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all

no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.

Thermals like,

‘It is mine to avenge, I will repay says the Lord.’

Thermals like,

‘There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’

Thermals like,

‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

There will be no more mourning, or crying, or pain.’

Thermals like,

‘Love never fails.’

Thermals like,

‘The Lord is the Everlasting God.

He will not grow tired or weary.’

Let go of the anchor.

Find the thermal.

Wait on the Lord,

get caught in his updraft,

and you will fly, you will soar on wings like eagles.

In Otis Moss' words you will

Fly from breakdown to break through.

Fly from hurt to healing.

Fly from heartache to being mended to a whole person.

What is sinking you?

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God.

He won't grow weary.

Those who wait upon the Lord

will renew their strength.

They will rise up as if they had eagles wings.

Those who wait upon the Lord

fly.

Amen.