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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
2/5/2009, The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany  
Isaiah 40:21-31

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; *they shall run, and not be weary*; and they shall walk, and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31, KJV)

Sometimes, running is not so much a property of the young as of the joyous heart. Think of the father, for example, in the parable of the Prodigal Son. See that old man zooming along! There is something before his eyes -- someone off on the horizon. Why! It is his son, his long-lost wandering son. The sight of his son sets off joy in the old man's heart, which in turn sets off energy in his body. He gathers together his robes and dashes off toward his son. He might never win a race, but my! look at him run. His legs are flying, his knees are pumping as best he can. His running is a manifestation of the joy in his heart. It is akin to the ecstasy that could lead another person to dance on top of the mountain, the view is so grand. Running often amounts to joy breaking forth into physicality, joy invading and inspiring the muscles such that they just have to move! And this morning's text speaks of a running that is so happy it has no time for weariness. "They shall run and not be weary!" What a stupendous image of a joyful heart! They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. Joy shall come to them in due season in such a way that it will lift not only their hearts, but even their feet and let them skip and dance and run all over the place.

Ahh, but consider the father before he spied his son off on the horizon. Then, he was not running. Back then, his heart was not joyful and his body was subdued. His heart was heavy. "How is my son, right now? Is he safe? Is he eating well? Are his friends being true to him?" How could the old man run back then, how could he dance, when his son was in such danger? How could his body be ecstatic, when his son had abandoned him and thrown himself into such mortal danger? Nor do we know how long the father endured his sorrows, for we do not know how long it took the Prodigal Son to dissipate himself and lose his wealth in riotous living. But what we do know is that beautiful picture of transition from sorrow to joy, when the old man spies his son off yonder and breaks forth into running.

This is a sermon about spiritual desolation and consolation. Interestingly, in the Christian spiritual tradition, we are encouraged to value desolation even more than consolation<sup>1</sup>. It is counter-intuitive, and if left to our devices, we would naturally choose

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<sup>1</sup> In future sermons, I mean to speak again of this praise of desolation. It is especially appropriate for Transfiguration Sunday, when the Lord seems to grant consolation to the disciples, briefly, while they are on the Mount, for the sake of strengthening them for the crucial times of desolation ahead of them. I will not be doing so this upcoming Transfiguration Sunday because the Rev. Kelly-Ray Meritt, a member of our Choir, will be preaching then, the good Lord willing.

Meanwhile, here is a reading from Thomas a Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, along these lines:

*Be assured of this, that you must live a dying life. And the more completely one dies to self, the more one begins to live to God. No one is fit to understand heavenly things unless he is*

consolation above desolation. Still, the saints supposed that even when we are downhearted, the Lord loves us strongly, and indeed, is most hard at work crafting us into the kind of people he would have us to be and readying us for his work and for his kingdom. So, this is a sermon about times of desolation and how in such times, we should wait upon the Lord.

In olden days, when pioneers loaded their possessions in Conestoga wagons and headed west, not all of them made it. And there is no wonder about that since the obstacles they faced were formidable. It is the nature of an adventure that the one heading out faces uncertainty and risk. Hardships of hunger, thirst, illness, injury, and violence faced all the pioneers. Still, in spite of the democracy of dangers facing the pioneers, there were individual differences of spirit among them, as there are always such differences within any group of people. And these differences of spirit were such that the pioneers themselves could probably predict, with fair accuracy, who among them would make it to the far land. Yon elderly man: he no longer has the strength of youth nor his former spring in his step, yet he is tough as nails, and so is his wife, and they are probably going to make it. But that strapping young man there: we are not so sure about him. He becomes easily discouraged. He throws his hands up in the air easily and soon calculates the situation to be hopeless. We worry for him.

For most of our lives, you and I might have counted ourselves as among those who would make it. Some mysterious mixture within us of love of life, confidence in our abilities, encouragement from past accomplishments, and sheer stubbornness, was such that we figured we would somehow make it safe to that far shore.

But nowadays, we might not be so confident. For this particular season in our life, we might be unsure of ourselves. Life rocks us, declining strength discourages us, calculation of remaining life span appalls us, stories of those who have fallen frighten us.

This past week, on February 5, the church commemorated the Martyrs of Japan, 1597. Those martyrs of long ago are like the martyrs in all ages, including our modern age: They loved Christ more than even life itself. I am left in awe at the courage of the martyrs. They made it through to yon shore. Each one of them faced an awful threat, yet triumphed over that threat, not by escaping it, but by enduring it. A wave of danger was breaking upon them. A tidal wave of destruction was speeding toward them, and they survived it, not by wiggling away, but by letting it break full upon them. And that wave did break upon them, only it did not break *them*. When the waters subsided, there they stood, strong and upright, wearing their crowns of victory in the kingdom of the chief

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*resigned to bear hardships for Christ's sake. Nothing is more acceptable to God, and nothing more salutary for yourself, than to suffer gladly for Christ's sake. And if it lies in your choice, you should choose rather to suffer hardships for Christ's sake, than to be refreshed by many consolations; for thus you will more closely resemble Christ and all His Saints. For our merit and spiritual progress does not consist in enjoying such sweetness and consolation, but rather in the bearing of great burdens and troubles.*

*Had there been a better way, more profitable to the salvation of mankind than suffering, then Christ would have revealed it in His word and life. But He clearly urges both His own disciples and all who wish to follow Him to carry the cross, saying, "If any will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Therefore, when we have read and studied all things, let this be our final resolve: "that through much tribulation we must even the Kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).*

Martyr who had preceded them there. I mean Jesus Christ, whose blessed Name the Martyrs of Japan had brought to that land.

I wonder whether I would display such courage and faith had I been in their shoes. I wonder whether I would have made it with such integrity to the heavenly shores. I do not know. Maybe when I was young, I would boast that I would make it. But these days, I am not so sure.

But now, let us turn to the One about whom we *do* know. I mean our Lord Jesus. We might not know about ourselves how faithful we will prove in the time of trouble, but we do know about him! We might not know how we will endure this particular stretch of our path, but we do know about him and about how he walked his path. He is the one who fought through to victory in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is the one who dragged that cross till he collapsed in exhaustion. He bore on his beaten back the very instrument of his own execution so that you and I will one day land safe on that peaceful shore and that joy shall once again fill our hearts. At any particular season of life, we might be unsure of our own abilities, but I am fully persuaded that because he stands, in the end, we shall stand too. We shall not perish, for we rest in his hands, and nothing can pluck us out of his good hands.(John 10:28)

For encouragement along these lines, let us consider this morning's First Lesson, Isaiah 40:21-31. This passage contains our text -- one of the most tender, most fortifying promises in the Bible:

But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.(Isaiah 40:31, KJV)

This strong promise is addressed to a downhearted people -- to a people who have come to believe that they have been abandoned by God and that they are left all alone in this world. They can no longer keep their discouragement to themselves, but put it into words:

My way is hid from the LORD...(Isaiah 40:27, RSV)

They are not claiming that this is unjust. They are not claiming innocence. If they have languished in Babylonian Captivity for two generations now, they are not protesting that this is unfair of the Lord. After all, they have the prophets to explain to them that their sins brought their suffering upon them. So, they do not claim innocence, just discouragement. They are simply saying that they feel that the Lord has forgotten them.

Later in the book, in Isaiah 49, the Lord will comfort the captives by saying that he could as little forget them as a mother could forget the baby nursing at her breast.(Isaiah 49:15) Here, in this morning's passage, the Lord comforts those downhearted Israelites by promising them that he shall renew their strength. They might be at low ebb now, but their joy and their energy shall return to them if they will wait upon the Lord.

In Psalm 30, which is a Psalm our Monday Evening Bible Class admired very much, the Psalmist confesses that he seems to have fallen into overconfidence and presumption.

<sup>6</sup>And in my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved. <sup>7</sup>LORD, by thy favour thou hast made my mountain to stand strong: (Psalm 30:6-7, KJV)

It is nice to enjoy a season of spiritual refreshment, but the Psalmist here seems to be confessing that his contentment went beyond that and drifted into arrogance: “I said, I shall *never* be moved.” Then, in such overconfidence, we might be moved nonetheless. As St. Paul puts it:

Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.(1 Corinthians 10:12, KJV)

And so, the Psalmist soon falls. Soon, he must complete his verse about his strong mountain with the sorrowful news that he has fallen into trouble:

LORD, by thy favour thou hast made my mountain to stand strong: thou didst hide thy face, and I was troubled.(Psalm 30:7, KJV)

So, it is with you and me sometimes: it feels to us that the Lord is hiding his face from us, and then we are troubled. Our self-confidence becomes rocked. We are no longer so sure that we will load our possessions into the Conestoga wagon and actually make it to yon shore.

But, glad to say, *God* is certain about us -- more certain than we are about ourselves. And so, the Psalmist waits upon the Lord, with the result that one day he is able to sing this great testimony:

<sup>4</sup>Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name.

<sup>5</sup>For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:4-5, RSV)

The nighttime of discouragement shall not be endless. Joy shall come with the morning.

If the return of such joy depended only on our own excellence, then we would have no guarantee that “joy cometh in the morning.” If our ability to mount up on wings as an eagle depended on us, the case would be doubtful. If our ability to run and not be weary rested solely on our legs, then we would eventually fall exhausted.

But wait upon the Lord. He out-commands us. He has more authority over our destiny that we do ourselves. He *will* save us and cause us to fly, to run, and to be joyful again.

How can we wait upon the Lord? What is such waiting like? In general, I can think of two characteristics of waiting upon the Lord: First, when waiting upon the Lord, try to draw closer to his Holy Word. And second, wait in hope.

First, about the Holy Word of God. This is something you can do: you can draw closer to the Word of God even if you should find yourself now in a downhearted season of life. In Psalm 19, we read about the strengthening power of God’s Word:

<sup>7</sup>The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; (Psalm 19:7, RSV)

You have already made a good step in this direction, for here you are, in church. You have placed yourself close to the Word, both the spoken Word and the Blessed Sacrament. Continue along this path. If your Bible at home has dust on it because you have not picked it up recently, then start picking it up again. Many a Christian could testify that when they were in a time of desolation, the Holy Bible helped them.

And second, wait *in hope* upon the Lord. Do not wait upon the Lord as if the matter is hopeless and that you are just waiting for the other shoe to drop. No. Even if this should be a tough time in your life, say to yourself, This shall pass. Weeping endures but for the nighttime, joy cometh in the morning.

The Martyrs of Japan and all the saints waited upon the Lord, and their waiting took the beautiful form of confessing him even though they died in their confessing. But you will wait upon the Lord in your own fashion. And he will bring you through in *his* own fashion, and that fashion means salvation and joy, through the love and the life of our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.