

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

Alice M.C. Ling, Senior Pastor

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

5 February 2006

Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:29-39

Sing: They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength
They shall mount up on wings as eagles
They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint
Help us, Lord; help us, Lord, on our way.

Seven and a half years ago, I stood in front of you, and perhaps for the first time, certainly one of the first times, spoke directly about the issue of homosexuality. I was spurred to do that because a young college student had just been brutally beaten and left strung up on a fence post in Laramie, Wyoming. And quite honestly, it was the venomous preaching of a Christian minister saying that Matthew Shepard had gotten exactly what he deserved that forced me to break my silence. Since then, as a culture and as a congregation, I think we've come a long way. Legislation has been passed that protects people from being the victim of hateful acts because of the color of their skin or the sound of their accent or the shape of their religion or the focus of their love. As a congregation, we've studied and discussed questions of orientation and the perimeters of our hospitality, we've listened to stories of rejection and pain, we've welcomed in couples and families and learned that we're really all far more alike than we are different. We all struggle with how to pay the bills and when and how and whether our bodies will heal and how to help our children grow up happy and keep them safe. And we've wrestled with each other about what we believe is good and right and faithful, and while that's been challenging and not without a cost, I also think it has strengthened us as a congregation, and reassured us that we can disagree on some crucial issues and still walk together in love. All of which is a long-winded way of saying, it has felt good to hear and see and feel progress, to dare to begin to believe that maybe the world is growing a little more kind and maybe a few less people have to live in fear and isolation and maybe, just maybe, there is reason to hope. And then a young man walks into a gay bar and starts swinging a hatchet and emptying the barrel of a gun, and I just want to hang my head and weep. What's the point? What difference does any of it make? Why do we bother?

This morning's lesson from Isaiah was written and read for just that kind of futile, world-weary hopelessness. Specifically, it was written for people who had been sitting in exile for so long that all their children knew about home was from the stories they told them. Sometimes they had trouble remembering which street bordered on which, and what the name of that corner market had been or just what color they had finally decided to paint the new school. The mental images were growing dim and undependable, their children were far too comfortable in this foreign godforsaken place, and it had been so long since they'd heard from God that they had just about decided God had forgotten their names and lost their address. Into that context of defeat and

despair, the prophet brought beautiful words of promise and remembrance. Do you not know who created the universe? Have you not heard who it is that rules the heavens and has power over even your ruthless captors? Have you not been told from the very beginning of time who is trustworthy and steadfast and sure? Of course you have. You know all that – so remember. It is God. And God does not grow weary. God does not grow faint. God’s understanding is unsearchable. And before they even had a chance to open their mouths and remind the prophet of all that the prophet had been reminding them, of what they had done to get themselves into this mess, of how they had screwed up and failed and turned away from God and deserved every last ounce of punishment they got, Isaiah rushed on to say, Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

From what we know from watching her life from the outside and from afar, I dare to believe that Coretta Scott King understood what Isaiah was talking about. We’ve seen enough and read enough and listened enough that we have some sense of the kind of hatred and prejudice she grew up with, from her place at the back of the bus, or hunched over the designated drinking fountain, risking life and limb if she spoke up for her children or raised her eyes at the wrong moment; and even if she played it safe and played by the rules, there were no guarantees of safety or wellbeing. She knew what it was to take all of that on, to watch her husband instill hope in countless people, to receive death threats and still keep speaking and dreaming and believing. And she buried her husband at a young age, finished raising their children without their father. And yet, from what we saw, she did not grow weary, she did not faint, she did not give up. She carried on his work, which was also her work, for civil rights, for justice, for equality, for peace. Her faith sustained her. Her community journeyed with her. Her God supported her and carried her and nurtured her and strengthened her.

There are times in all our lives when the hopeless weariness is so overwhelming that we just want to crawl up in a ball and make it all go away. But then comes this promise and this hope, calling to us, offering us strength for the journey and courage in the struggle. The hard part of the promise is that it tells us to wait. It doesn’t tell us God and deliverance and strength are present in the here and now; it tells us to wait for God, trusting that God will eventually show up and speak and act and deliver. The good part of the promise is that God is absolutely sure and certain. The creator of the universe, the ruler of the heavens and the earth, the source of all that is, ever has been and ever will be sustains the weary, gives strength to the weak, food to the hungry, hope to the hopeless. God comes to us in the kindness of other people, in the still small voice that we’re not even sure we heard, in the mystery of a gift we don’t begin to understand, in the strength that seems to almost come out of nowhere and keeps us going one more day. And God meets us at a table; and in a morsel of bread and a swallow of juice offers us a love that knows no limits, a power that no earthly power can touch, a peace that the world can neither give to us nor take away from us.

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