

Exhausted

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on November 8, 2020
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.*

*Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*

*To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.*

*Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?
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.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but 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.* (Isaiah 40:21-31, NRSV)

I have a confession to make: *I'm exhausted*. And I would bet, so are you. In the midst of such divisive and discouraging times, that may be one thing we all have in common. We're tired. And when we're all this tired, it's awfully hard to see the light ... to expect anything to change ... to dare hope for something fresh and new.

The people originally being addressed by our scripture text for this morning were tired too. For 50 years, the Jews had lived in a state of exile, separated from their homeland and their beloved Jerusalem. A thousand miles away, Jerusalem was in ruins and only a distant memory for the very oldest among these in Babylon, and only a sad bedtime story for the rest. They were a people whose hope, whose very identity, had withered in the face of the ever-present reality imposed on them by the most powerful empire in the world.

Years of living this way takes its toll. To live without hope is a very special kind of suffering. The sensed reality of God fades into oblivion, or even worse, God is somehow still "real," but is conspicuously absent, or deafeningly silent.

It is into this quiet despair that a lone poet speaks. He tells a weary people of the God who created the earth and the heavens and all the starry host ... who brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

Patiently but surely, he throws down the gauntlet to their sense of abandonment and resignation. He challenges them to look beyond the lies they had been told about the world and themselves ... the lies they had believed. He calls them to look up and discern the Truth ... and to know what is finally real and what is not:

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

He speaks of One who does not faint or grow weary, who does not give up ... of One who cannot be measured, boxed in, or figured out. He sings of One who is absolutely free and unbounded, but whose freedom is *for* us, to set free and make life flourish, giving power to the faint and strength to the powerless.

And so, in the name of this God, the poet is boldly able to declare that Babylon's narrative of what's real, of what *matters*, is a deception. Their story of what makes for true strength and worth – that "might makes right" – is utterly false and empty! He takes his stand and does not flinch or walk away because he knows, as Walter Brueggemann has written, that "the world could not be sponsored or sustained by such a deathly power. The creation belongs (and so do

you!) not to the life-denying, world-destroying, faith-nullifying empire, but to the God who cares in seeming absence and who governs in seeming defeat.”

You exiles are *not* alone and abandoned, the poet tells them, for you have an infinite source of life and strength. Your life has in it possibilities that smash through what Babylon has always told you. Let this faith have you *dream* again, launching you into a new beginning ... into new shapes of life together that Babylon has no power to stop!

This prophetic word was first spoken 2500 years ago, but for me, it breaks through, right into the midst of our 2020. Can you hear it afresh? I deeply believe this word of hope and life is a word for our own time too.

You and I know all too well something of this weariness of spirit that God’s people of long ago faced. We are tired too. We’ve lived with the realities of this pandemic. We’ve lived with politicians and their machinations. It is as though we all live under the dominion of powers – earthly and spiritual – that would condemn us to a never-ending cycle of conflict. And it’s all so exhausting.

Anxiety about the future is exhausting.

The threat of violence is exhausting.

Arguing is exhausting. Trying to *avoid* arguments is exhausting.

Social media is exhausting.

Conspiracy theories are exhausting.

Constant misinformation and disinformation *meant* to undermine trust in our institutions and in each other – all that is exhausting.

And most of *us* – we’re the *lucky* ones! Imagine, on top of all this, being poor, or unemployed, or sick, or having to deal daily with the reality of racial bias and systemic injustice, or having your basic human rights always being up for a vote or at the whim of a court ... I would imagine all that is VERY exhausting.

And we’ve made it this way. This is the system – the world – that we have created. We’ve created it in our own image. We feed it ... we tolerate it ... we complain about it ... we take it for granted. And yes – it’s exhausting.

And as I’ve said, when we’re all this exhausted, it really is hard to see the light ... to see good in the world ... to find real joy ... to hope for something more in our own lives and in the lives of others.

But here’s the good news: We need not be resigned to this fate. For the same Spirit who moved that poet long ago would now break through the fog of our own despair with the same message of hope and new life:

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

Here's the truth: We're not going to find the relief and refreshment we seek from the system. The gods of Babylon have no power to save. No politician or party can give us true life, or a lasting hope, or the strength to run our race to the end. There is only One who can do that – and does.

So, “lift up your eyes and see” – and see what is finally real and what is not. See the glory of God expressed in the heavens and in the earth. Be still and rest in the majesty of God, and revel in the freedom and love of One who sets free and loves beyond measure!

Like those exiles of long ago, we are *not* abandoned, for we too have an infinite source of life and strength. As one of our Summer Saints from this past July, Albert Camus, put so memorably,

In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger – something better, pushing right back.

Our lives are laden with hidden possibilities far beyond what we can now see. And in these possibilities come the many shapes of the divine call to us, for there *is* much to be done.

Even now, the Spirit is calling us to be among those who put their trust in the Lord and find the strength to rise up from our exhaustion with new energy and courage, refreshed and empowered to join with God in the tasks to which we are set. For this world, more than ever, needs men and women of conscience, compassion, and conviction, who are not naïve about the challenge ahead.

Against lies and falsehood, it needs those who speak the truth in love.

Against the toleration of cruelty, it needs those who practice kindness.

Against forces that would drive us apart and make us fear one another, it needs those who are committed to the hard work of listening and reconciliation.

Against a passive acceptance of the status quo, it needs those who will never accept poverty, racism, and violence as inevitable features of human life.

Against indifference to the environment and reckless exploitation of natural resources at the expense of the neighbor, it needs those who cherish the earth and care for it.

Against a worldview that defines success and worth in terms of cold hard cash, it needs those who operate according to a different set of values, for as science writer David Orr put it,

The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as we have defined it. (David Orr, Ecological Literacy)

And to that, I say “Amen!”

My friends, we know the feeling of exhaustion, but we are not condemned to it. Even now, the Spirit is on the move, stirring within and without us, calling us to new life. May we be a people in this day who trust in God and so find the strength to rise up from our exhaustion and joyously live into the truth that

*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.*

To the glory of God! Amen.