

“From Grasshoppers to Eagles”
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Isaiah 40:21-31, Psalm 147:1-11, 20c Homily
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There is one particular scene with my dad from almost 25 years back that I will never forget.

I had just accepted my first publishing job. And after 4 years of college in rural West Virginia, I was venturing into New York City for the second time in my life--the first time being for the job interview. I was moving into an apartment with 2 women I'd only just met through a newspaper ad... Yes, I was excited to embark upon this adventure, but I was also *scared out of my wits*.

That fear rose exponentially when one of my new roommates disclosed her salary to me and then announced that \$20,000 a year was the bare minimum necessary just to survive in New York.

My editorial assistant salary was not even 70% of that figure. And so, as my dad prepared to drive away and leave me to begin life as an independent adult, I broke down in tears. We huddled together on the steps of that Brooklyn brownstone, and he did his best to console me and assure me I would be okay... Inevitably, he made his way north. And I had no choice but to move forward into my new existence, *whatever* it was going to turn out to be.

Now my family was not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination. And I was under no illusion that they would support me through my self imposed purgatory. Whenever they visited, they did present me with some grocery staples--tuna fish, peanut butter, and—my personal favorite—brownie mix. But, other than that, I was left to my own devices, learning the ropes of urban frugality and ingenuity from my roommates and co-workers. At 3 boxes for a dollar, I ate lots of macaroni and cheese. Lunch was PB and J. And I became well acquainted with the handful of restaurants that served free food at happy hour...

Years later my dad and I would reflect almost fondly on our anxious moments together on that stoop in Brooklyn. Fondly because I had survived, just like he'd said I would. Fondly because he'd felt so protective of me in those moments, and so helpless. Fondly because I had not just survived New York, but thrived after years of scraping.

And, yet, a decade or so later, I would find myself even *more* frightened than the first time around. This time there were far more obligations in the mix: a mortgage, a car, homeowners' association dues. My savings account was a shadow of its former self. And there was no regular paycheck: I was temping as I launched into my ordination and search processes. As clear as I had been about my call and my response to that call, now everything felt out of control...

This time it was my *mom* who would calmly say to me, "Why are you so anxious? God has always provided for you in the past. Why should it be any different now?" And, as much as a part of me wanted to discount her words as naïve or unsympathetic, a deeper part of me listened closely and began to remember. Began to remember that a couple of years after I had tired of the pace of "the city that never sleeps," an unlikely opportunity emerged that brought my career from book publishing's capital to Boulder, a city I'd fallen in love with while on a business trip. Began to remember that, a couple of years after I had tired of my publishing work, people and circumstances had converged to guide me toward what would be a truer calling for me, ministry. Began to remember how when I had no clue how I would pay for grad school, my employer decided it really needed to keep me on staff half time. Began to remember that, a couple of years after that source of income dried up, temp jobs dribbled in, and a roommate materialized... Then, as in my early days in New York, I'd had just enough for each day, nothing more, nothing less.

So many blessings and yet how effortlessly I had slid down a slippery slope from trust and gratitude into doubt and fear. How quickly I had forgotten that God had my back, that I wasn't in this alone. Not that life was perfect. There were almost always plenty of challenges. But, in the grand scheme of things, life was and is good.

In today's scripture readings, words of hope are proclaimed to a tired, dispirited community of Israelite captives in Babylon. Living under the hand of their enemy, all around them they witnessed signs of the power and might of their oppressors and, by association, their oppressors' gods. Powerless and so far from home, the captives doubted the strength and the faithfulness of their own God, Yahweh. Like grasshoppers they became focused on what was right in front of them...and lost sight of their long history with Yahweh: the blessing of Abraham and Sarah bearing a child long after that seemed even remotely possible, the blessings of manna from heaven and the exodus out of slavery in Egypt, the blessing of a Promised Land. In the big picture, theirs was in fact a God of power and strength, but also a God of *tenderness and mercy*. Theirs and ours is the God who created the world and all that lives upon it and who isn't done yet, but constantly re-creating and reshaping the possibilities for hope and redemption for individuals *and* communities; for human beings, plants, and animals, all of creation.

Surely these promises must have sounded naïve and maybe even unsympathetic to the captives, even as today we can't help but despair of ever restoring our planet to health, our nations to peace, or our poor and unemployed to prosperity. As we listen to politicians say they don't care about the very poor and watch as wealthy corporations manipulate our political process to their advantage, it's hard not to lose hope for the future or become at least a little jaded. But we'd be

forgetting the redemptive events that are woven throughout human history, even relatively recent human history: Forgetting the Israelite deportees' eventual return home to Jerusalem.

Forgetting the underground railway and the abolition of slavery. Forgetting the people who risked their lives to shelter Jewish children and families in Nazi Europe. Forgetting the end of apartheid in South Africa. Forgetting the election of an African-American president, the end of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and the spread of same sex marriage equality laws across the country. All things that at one time did not seem even remotely possible.

Part of the problem today may be that we have overdeveloped the grasshopper side of our natures, seeing only—or mostly--our immediate situations and expecting quick resolutions to our issues. And we have become so steeped in our secular culture that we come to believe the corporate and political giants just might be more powerful than our one *true* God. That we've been largely left *to our own devices* to fix these earthly messes, and, frankly, we're tired and discouraged. We may bring some of that fatigue here with us to church.

Well, Isaiah has a word for us today, and it is this: *...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.*

Wait for the Lord...

We're not very good at waiting these days, are we? What with smartphones and CNN and Facebook, we don't have to be patient. We can learn all about what's happening with our friends and the world instantaneously!...But that's not generally how *God* works. And it doesn't necessarily create the kind of space where we can best experience God's presence, God's

promises, or God's guidance. *Be still and know that I am God*, Psalm 46 tells us. Slow down, be still, wait, and *then* you will know that I am God. *Only then* will we mount up with wings like eagles and, in our soaring, catch glimpses of the bigger picture—past, present, and future. *Only then* will we feel the rush of the wind that is the breath of God propelling us forward with divine purpose and possibility...

As we move into our annual meeting in just a little while, I would invite us to hold onto the images of both the grasshopper and the eagle. We need the down-to-earth grasshopper's eyes on the ground to scrutinize our budget and our policies. But we and the grasshopper alone are not enough. The grasshopper view does not permit us to dream big or to fully acknowledge the powerful works of God in history or the ongoing possibilities that are available through God. Left to their own devices, grasshoppers can single-handedly destroy a garden. And yet they are also vulnerable—a source of food for toads, snakes, and birds. When they tire, grasshoppers are easily “smooshed” underfoot. Despite all that joyful hopping and fiddling, extreme caution--and fear--must define their movements. But combine a wide eyed, detail oriented grasshopper with God and a visionary eagle, and we're in good hands.

Like a loving father or mother, God is present to our fear and our challenges large and small--from a church budget gap to that lingering dilemma of how to get the cleaning people to stop burning the sanctuary carpet with the vacuum cleaner. We might not resolve those issues this afternoon. In fact, we probably won't. But we know from our history that somehow gaps do get closed. And we know from our life experiences that the carpet burns won't detract from our mission, that there are much larger things at stake here.

And so it is my sincere hope that we will move into 2012 together with confidence and trust that are informed by our own memories...and those of our ancestors.

May it be so...