

"Renewing Your Strength"
Isaiah 40:28-31

February 8, 2015

5th Sunday After The Epiphany

So many people seem to be so tired these days. Is it any worse than it used to be in days gone by? I don't know. New technology and all our labor saving devices were supposed to make things easier so we could be better rested and stronger. But that hasn't proven to be the case so far. We are working harder and harder to get the things we think we need – the things we think we want. As a result, we become tired, worn out, and weak.

What's the solution? Why, it's more effort on our parts in the form of so-called leisure activities. We can't slow down. We have to keep on going. We want our children's lives to be enriched so we haul them to all sorts of fun activities – sports, music, school, clubs, and so on. Nothing wrong with any of those things, but they do wear us out. As adults, we may be involved in all sorts of leisurely activities, too, which are good, but wear us out. The best example of this is the so-called vacation trip which can be so chock full of activities that we come home more tired than when we left. We feel a need to have a vacation to recover from our vacation. Our efforts at rest, renewal, and rebuilding don't go so well. Our efforts often end up only making us tired and weak.

We can have a sense of weariness and weakness spiritually as well. For some who are not Christian or are borderline Christian, this may come in a vague sense of uneasiness in life. They are trying to do good and have a successful life only to feel that life is beating them up. Something is wrong.

The people of God know this sense of spiritual weakness well. In our text, the Israelites knew that well. They had failed to listen to the Lord and keep His Word. As a result, their nation had been invaded by Babylon and destroyed. They, as a people, had been carted off in exile to Babylon where they were at their weakest low point ever, wracked with guilt, despair, and hopelessness.

We may experience the same sort of thing in modern day America. If we take our spiritual lives seriously (and I believe many Christians don't), failure to live as God has commanded us – completely doing all the good He has commanded us all the time without fail and perfectly shunning all the evil He has forbidden all the time without exception - should fill us with guilt which often leads to despair and hopelessness. We are cut off from God by our sin and in exile in this wilderness filled with evil and death. We become weak and weary.

What's the solution? As with our physical weakness and weariness, we feel that a solution requires action on our part to refresh, renew, and rebuild ourselves. Non-Christians might try to refresh themselves and renew their strength by becoming immersed in volunteerism, fighting for causes, and so on.

As Christians, we might try to do something similar. We might try harder to be a better or more moral person. Let's try to obey the Ten Commandments better and love our neighbor more. We might try to be more religious and more pious and love God more. That's what the Israelites did when they returned from exile. Since their sin and disobedience had been the reason (they thought) for their exile, then they better do something about that. They thought, "We have been pretty bad. Therefore, to make sure it doesn't happen again, we better change and be pretty good." This led to the formation of groups like the Pharisees to make sure they did just that.

Does this really refresh and renew us? Too often, I suspect, it's like what happens when we take a vacation to renew and refresh ourselves from the weakness and weariness of every day life. We just become more tired, not less tired; weaker and not stronger.

Where can we find true renewal and lasting strength? The Israelites not only wondered if God would save them but whether He COULD save them. Our Old Testament lesson begins as a song of praise to God's power and majesty. One can conclude from these words that the Lord is very majestic and certainly has great power, but so what? The bank has a lot of money but it doesn't do

me any good unless it gives some to me. God has a lot of strength and power. What is He going to do with it?

The prophet can scarcely contain himself. He shouts out, "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 to him who has no might he increases strength." Praise the Lord! He is going to renew us and give us power and strength, but how?

He does it in a very strange way. We would expect visible displays of His power and mighty and majestic miracles to convey power and strength to us. But God does it in a very different way. He sets aside His greatness to become humble. He sets aside His majesty to become a servant. He sets aside His power and becomes weak. He does all of this so that we, who are weak, might become strong and share in His greatness and majesty.

In Epiphany, we straddle the time between Christmas and Lent. We look back to the incarnation where God became unspeakably weak. Not only did God assume a human nature which is beyond our comprehension, he assumed the human nature of a weak infant born to peasant parents. We usually get very sentimental around Christmas and think of the nativity scene as cute and endearing. But it wasn't. Having a cattle trough as your first bed is neither cute nor endearing. It was the beginning of a conscious choice by the Son of God to be weak, obedient, and enduring.

We also look forward to our commemoration of Lent when we remember the culmination of Jesus weakness and suffering. He was betrayed and denied by close friends. He was arrested and condemned to death by the ruling council of His own people. He was executed by pagans in a most cruel and painful way by being nailed to a wooden cross, lifted up and displayed for all to see, and left to suffer and die.

All of this He allowed to happen. Although Jesus had divine power as the Son of God to halt these proceedings at any time, He set aside His power and did not use this. In doing so, He may

have appeared to be the weakest of the weak, but, in reality, by refusing to use His divine power and resisting the urge to save Himself, He proved to be the strongest of the strong.

Why was Jesus born into this world weak and appear to die even weaker? He did it for you. Sin, death, and hell are strong enemies which control us. We are weak and stand no chance over them. By doing what He did, Jesus freed us from their control. By offering up His life as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, Jesus did just that. He took away the sin of the world, including yours and mine. By dying on the cross, Jesus defeated death and its rule over us (something He would declare to the world by defeating death Himself and rising back to life). By descending into hell, Jesus went straight to the capitol of Satan's power and declared His victory over him.

Jesus alone has the power over sin and guilt, death and the grave, Satan and hell. We who are weak are in need of His strength. But how do we get that? How are we who are weak to become strong? Our text for today tells us and the answer may surprise us. Isaiah says, "He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength."

Wait? That doesn't make sense to us. When we see a problem, we feel we have to do something to solve it. As I said before, our solution to our physical weakness and weariness is to do more in order to try and gain strength for ourselves. Not only does that not work, our efforts usually make things worse. We become weaker and more tired.

The same is true for our spiritual weakness and weariness. We think we have to do something – become more religious, become more pious, do more good works, and so on – in order to become stronger spiritually. After all our efforts to be good and be more religious, we are tired and weak.

Our Lord, who has all power and strength, yet set it aside and became weak, now wants to give you His strength. He doesn't ask you to do something to deserve it or obtain it. He simply says to wait for Him to give it to you. How do we wait for the Lord?

First, waiting for the Lord involves the humble admission that there are no other options than the Lord. Stop trying so hard to do it yourself or to find another way. Wait for the Lord.

Secondly, waiting for the Lord involves the refusal to engage in frantic worry. Worry over whether we've done good or enough good to become spiritually stronger can wear us out and weaken us. Stop worrying about whether you are good enough or have done enough. Wait for the Lord.

Thirdly, waiting for the Lord means have the confidence that He will come through in His time as He has promised. He often chooses very weak ways to give us His strength. He adopts us to be His children through the water of Holy Baptism to strengthen our standing before Him. He gives us the forgiveness which Christ won on the cross through His Holy Word which makes us strong against sin and Satan. He gives us a foretaste of the feast to come in heaven through the feast of His body and blood held every week at our altar. This nourishes us and strengthens us to face everything, even death.

Waiting for the Lord in this way means you are no longer weak and weary when it comes to your life before Him. You will soar on the wings of eagles. You will run and not be weary. You will walk and not faint. You will safely get through anything and everything that the devil, the world, and your won sinful flesh can throw at you in this life. You will get through death, share in the resurrection of our Savior and live with Him for all eternity.

Tired of being tired? Weary of being weak? Resist the urge to try harder and to do more to be renewed and strengthened. Wait for the Lord. Confidently use His means of grace. And your strength will be renewed again and again until you share in His perfect and eternal strength in heaven. Amen.