2-3/4-18 Rev Amy Haines

Isaiah 40:21-31 Encouraged

Have you ever had a soul weary day? A day where, by bedtime, you are mentally, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted? I’ve had a few of those over the years. Days where I felt overwhelmed by the needs and health concerns of my family and congregation. Days where meetings took a left turn when I expected them to go right. Days when the to-do list feels longer at night than it began in the morning.

As I look back and remember some of my soul weary days, I also remember what helped me to overcome those days—encouragement. In hindsight, the encouragement may not have always been immediate, or even recognizable as such at the time.

An unexpected message of thanks.

The opportunity to talk with a trusted friend.

Time to step back and gain a different perspective.

A long prayer session of pouring out my heart to God,

then being still in God’s presence.

Partaking in holy communion.

The words of a song.

Those, and many others examples, are ways that I have been encouraged by God and by others in my life.

How about you? Who or what has encouraged you? Who or what gave you encouragement to keep on in faith, in life, in love?

According to the dictionary, the verb encourage means “to inspire with courage or spirit, confidence or hope; or to help, stimulate or foster.”

--dictionary.com and thefreedictionary.com

Have you ever experienced a teacher whose encouraging words fostered growth in a challenging subject for a student? Have you ever experienced a coach whose encouraging words inspired players to reach for a skill they didn’t think they would ever master? Have you ever experienced a doctor whose encouraging words offered confidence that a health setback could be overcome?

…Scott Kregel rarely gave up. He was a dedicated athlete who spent hour after hour perfecting his free throw and jump shot during the hot summer months. Yet his life was changed drastically one fall just before basketball practice was to begin. Scott was in a serious car accident that left him in a coma for a couple of days. When he awoke, he faced a long rehabilitation process.

Like most patients with closed head injuries, Scott balked at doing the slow, tedious work

that was required to get him back to normal -- things such as stringing beads. What high school junior would enjoy that?

Tom Martin, Scott's basketball coach at his Christian high school, had an idea to encourage Scott. Coach Martin told Scott that he would reserve a spot on the varsity squad for him, if he would cooperate with his therapist and show progress in the tasks he was asked to do. And Tom's wife Cindy spent many hours with Scott, encouraging him to keep going.

Within 2 months of his accident, Scott was not only back to playing basketball, he was riding off the basketball court on his teammates' shoulders. Scott had made nine straight free throws to clinch a triple-overtime league victory. It was a remarkable testimony of the power of encouragement. -edited from Our Daily Bread, sermonillusrations.com:encouragement

You and I may not be encouraged so as to run a marathon or create a cure for cancer, yet we can be encouraged to believe that tomorrow is a new day, with new possibilities, and in the midst of whatever we face tomorrow, God is with us. Sometimes we are encouraged to make it through the next big project, or the next week, or even the next hour.

How easy is it, though, for us to get discouraged? How many times a week are we disheartened? How many times a day do we lose our confidence or hope? If you watch the evening news, if you observe the world around us, it is extremely easy to get discouraged!

We can be shaken at our core if we allow life to get to us so deeply, dejected by the state of our country, struggles at work, dysfunctional relationships in our families, apathy in the church,

anxiety over the future, fear for the present...and the list goes on.

When we are discouraged, how often do we feel like a jumpy grasshopper rather than a soaring eagle? We feel tiny and unimportant, in the way of others, inconsequential to our mighty God.

How do we respond to such discouragement?

Do we give up? Do we give in?

Or do we keep going? Do we live by hope- by trust- by faith?

Today, if you came to worship discouraged, take heart. God is seeking to encourage you here and now in many ways. God is seeking to encourage you today…through the presence of other beloved sons and daughters of God, through the grace of the bread and cup of Holy Communion, through God’s word, today from the prophet Isaiah.

Take heart, God declares! Be encouraged! You are not alone. God is with us all.

God’s Word today encourages us through the words of Second Isaiah to the people of Israel toiling in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem and the Temple lay in ruins. The people of Israel, now in exile in Babylon, feel forgotten and forsaken by their God. Although the prophet has declared that they will return to Judea, they grieve that Judea is not as they left it. The only way they remember whose they are is through the stories of God’s faithfulness to their ancestors, stories passed down from person to person, from generation to generation.

Yet even then they begin to wonder if God still cares for them. They begin to question if the Babylonian gods were stronger than God Almighty.

To the discouraged remnant in exile Isaiah declares hope—God is still with them! God was now preparing their return to the Promised Land. While they may feel small and insignificant, they were still God’s beloved.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims:

“Look at the night skies: Who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name—so magnificent, so powerful!—and never overlooks a single one? Why would you ever complain, O Jacob, or whine, Israel, saying,

God has lost track of me. He doesn’t care what happens to me?” (v26-27 MSG)

.. At this point, Isaiah declares a bold move by God. For in Babylon stars were not just burning balls of hydrogen; they were, in fact, their gods. The Babylonians are the guys who pretty much invented astrology, and the stars—the star deities—are the folks who controlled everything. So, God’s move is something of a checkmate here: “Let’s see, those are your gods, but, guess what, I made them! You can’t even count them, and I know them all by name.”

 -- Frederick J. Gaiser, “Who Is My Equal?” 2-23-03 luthersem.edu adapted

Think of the millions of stars that shine in the night sky, especially when we are away from the harsh lights of the city. Isaiah reminds the Israelites in exile and us here today, as God counts each star, God also knows you, by name!

So you who are weary, you who are discouraged, take heart. God is with you!

God is with us when we struggle. God is with us when we question. God is with us when we feel insignificant. God is with us.

Joshua was reminded by God after the death of Moses,

“Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not leave you or forsake you.” (Joshua 1:5)

Jesus reminded the disciples at the Last Supper that even though he would no longer be with them, the Holy Spirit would be with them, to comfort and to guide them.

“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26)

These promises long ago are also given to us today. God is with us. The Holy Spirit guides us.

 Jesus has shown us the way to live.

Be encouraged by God’s Word that reminds you or whose and who you are, and how you are to live. As the Psalmist declares, God is our refuge and strength. God is our hope and anchor in times of trouble.

Take heart, God declares! Be encouraged!

Look around you, at the beloved sons and daughters of God who surround you in worship this day. Be encouraged that they don’t have life and faith all figured out either. They, too, are sinners saved by grace. They, too, are trying to figure out how to live as Christ’s disciple in this world.

One of the reasons we gather for worship in person every weekend is to remember that we are not alone. We are part of Christ’s body, the church. There is power in the ministry of presence, one to another.

Take heart, God declares! Be encouraged!

Today we have the opportunity to share in the bread and cup of Holy Communion. In our United Methodist tradition all are welcome to partake today, because God’s grace is open to all

who seek to love Jesus and be loved by Jesus, whether or not we have this life of faith all figured out yet. Be encouraged, God says to us today, that sin does not have the final word.

Death is only a new beginning for those who love the Lord. Be encouraged, God says to us today, that Jesus is our bridge of grace to an intimate relationship with Almighty God!

Through faith in Jesus we are forgiven, we are restored, then we are sent forth as new persons.

Jesus is indeed God’s gift of love to each and every one of us. This we celebrate and remember and become a part of as we share in Holy Communion.

Take heart, God declares! Be encouraged! Don’t give up! God is still God.

We may not always understand God’s ways, God’s character, God’s action or seeming inaction,

yet as we have been reminded in our passage today, and throughout this new year, God still cares for each and every one of us.

God still looks at us and says:

I know you- I claim you- I love you- I call you- I send you-I am with you. Be encouraged.

.. Celebrated preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself.

"I am from around these parts," he said.

"My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens,

I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church.

One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister.

He looked closely at my face. I knew that he too was trying to guess who my father was.

'Well, boy, you are a child of. . .' and then he paused.

When he spoke again he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.'

Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.'

I left church that day a different person," the now elderly man said.

"In fact, that was the beginning of my life."

"What's your name?" Dr. Craddock asked.

He answered, "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper."

Dr. Craddock said he vaguely recalled from when he was a kid, his father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of their state. His name was Ben Hooper.

 --Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001, pp. 156-157

 --As told by Joanna Adams day1.org 1-10-10 God Believes in You

Through God’s people, God’s word, and God’s gift of grace, we are encouraged to remember who and whose we are. We are God’s beloved sons and daughters, forgiven and redeemed,

called to live for Jesus each and every day.

Yes, there will still be days when we find ourselves discouraged. Yes, there will still be days when we find ourselves overwhelmed by life. Yes, there will be days when we question why God does not miraculously intervene in our lives.

While I believe that God still works miracles, I also believe that often God allows us to suffer the consequences of our actions. After all, we are sinful human beings. We sin on both individual and institutional levels. If we were never to suffer consequences, we may never learn how we hurt God, ourselves and others.

Yet even in the midst of our consequences, even in the midst of our struggles, even in the hard times of life, God promises to be with us. God offers us the strength to go through our struggles, not around them.

Isaiah declared,

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.

We may not always run, yet we can walk. We may not always walk, yet we can crawl.

Our God is the everlasting God—yet cares for each and every one of us. And God will provide the strength, the endurance, and the encouragement to live by faith day after day after day.

Our journey of faith can be compared to athletes seeking the highest prize in their sport,

such as the Super Bowl or the Olympics. No athlete makes it to the pinnacle of their sport

without hard work and encouragement.

The athletes gathering this week in South Korea have endured countless hours of practice day after day after day for years. I love the commercials that thank the parents for encouraging their young athletes with hugs and cheers, with driving to early morning workouts or out of state competitions, year after year after year. These athletes each have a story of endurance and setback, of long hours in the gym and sacrifices made by their families.

Imagine if Olympic athletes gave up when they fell or crashed or placed fourth.

Imagine if baseball players gave up with every strikeout.

Imagine if football players gave up every time they were tackled.

In honor of the Super Bowl this evening- decades ago, when the Chicago Bears actually beat the Patriots in Super Bowl XX, there was a Monday night football game between the Chicago Bears and the New York Giants in which one of the announcers observed that Walter Payton, the Bears' running back, had accumulated over nine miles in career rushing yardage.

The other announcer remarked,

"Yeah, and that's with somebody knocking him down every 4.6 yards!"

Walter Payton, the most successful running back ever, knows that everyone --even the very best—gets knocked down. The key to success is to get up and run again just as hard.

-Jeff Quandt, Irving Wallace, Book of Lists, 1980. Sermonillustrations.com:perseverance

Take heart, God declares! Be encouraged! Don’t give up!

Wherever you find yourselves today on your journey of faith, know that God still calls you home. God still calls you forward. God still calls you deeper into discipleship every day of your life.

And God still calls you to encourage one another. May we show the world what it means to claim the name of Jesus, to live as forgiven and forgiving people, to share God’s love and hope,

comfort and justice, encouragement and peace with all whom we encounter, each and every day.

Have you not heard?—God is still God!

Have you not seen?—God is still moving in the midst of our daily lives!

Have you not known?—God is still with us!

Be encouraged- God is still loving you. God is still forgiving you. God is still calling you. God is still renewing you. Go forth in the strength, the comfort, and the hope of God, this day and every day.