

Aug12-18 **Strength in God's Presence**

While I was born in India, I spent many of my formative years, in West Africa, and my English text book, had this amusing if well worn limerick.

There was a young lady from Niger
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger.
They came back from the ride
With the lady inside
And a smile on the face of the tiger.

We learned early that the world can be a dangerous place.
Someone has said, Every newborn should be given a sign that says,
"Rough Road Ahead." That is what life is like. Sometimes it gets the better of us.

John Mortimer was an English barrister and the creator of the TV series, **Horace of the Rumpole** a rotund, defiant and blustering barrister. It was a very successful series but John Mortimer, titled his autobiography, **Clinging to the Wreckage**. Sometimes, it may feel that that is all there is left of our lives and the end is just around the corner.

Says **Emily Dickinson**, the New England poet whose life was continually surrounded by loss, separation and death.

"**We never know** we go when we are going,
We jest and shut the door;
Fate - following behind us -bolts it,
And we accost no more"

We know in ways perhaps too close to bear, about pain and suffering, about aging and cancer, about weariness and dark days. No one needs to tell us, life is precarious.

When our passage in **Isaiah** was written, the best and the brightest of Israel, were in exile in Babylon. They had been taken away by one of the most powerful dynasties on earth. They were surrounded by a pantheon of Babylonian gods, **Marduk, Nebo** and others. And there, on the banks of the Euphrates, they cried out, How can we sing the Lord's in this strange God-forsaken place.

God has failed, failed to help them. Perhaps their God has been defeated by the stone and wooden gods of Babylon. Such was their frame of mind and spirit. **It would be easy for anyone to feel wounded, broken and defeated.**

And in that context, like a fish making its way to its spawning grounds, Isaiah swims against the current without conceding defeat, and asks with a tone of indignation:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
Can there be anyone more powerful?

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 40:25-31

Those were the words which sustained **Martin Luther**, when he was in the fortress in Wartburg. And **David Livingstone** in heart of the “dark continent,” as he mutters to himself, in that quaint Victorian manner: God is a gentleman whose word is his bond.

They were words which sustained **John Brown** an abolitionist, who led a mis-guided attack on a US armoury at Harper’s Ferry, in W. Virginia – 1860. His actions were perhaps the first rumblings which led to the American Civil War, and the freeing of African slaves.

What is common about those people is their conviction that God is in charge, and it pays deeply, to be on his side, even if it means risking everything.

Isaiah boldly proclaimed:

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.

Some of you may be thinking, that does not ring true about my life. Furthermore, it seems as if Isaiah has the order, all mixed up. Don't we first walk, then run, then finally soar like an eagle? He has it the other way around. But it is not screwed up. When is it we need God's help the most, then when we can barely walk and we are ready to quit?

There are times in life when we feel like we are **soaring**. All is well with life and we are breathe deeply of the air on the top of a mountain. I wonder if **Jesus** felt that way, at the moment when he rode the donkey into Jerusalem as the crowds shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

Or if **Paul** felt it when the **scales** fell from his eyes and once again he could see. And **the women** felt it when they gazed into the empty tomb. Perhaps our faith is soaring when we hold a newborn, or we feel deeply blessed beyond any of our deserving. And we treasure those moments of a boundless experience, of God's grace and love.

But we are not always soaring. Sometimes all we can manage is run. And that is not bad. Says Isaiah, "They shall run and not be weary." **What does it mean to run? Let me mention one area where we might run.**

When we wait on the Lord, He gives us strength to do his work. God never blesses us, simply so we may be smug and comfortable. If you have been blessed, it is so you may be a blessing.

Peter, James and John have an amazing experience, on the mountain of transfiguration, there is work to do in the valley, meet a desperate father and his child and help them on the desperate journey through life. Those who wait on the Lord, find they have the strength to just that.

We can witness the tireless spirit of Jesus as he healed, touched, and spoke to countless thousands of people. Wait on the Lord, and you will find strength for what he calls you to do.

Waiting on the Lord begins by asking, What is God's purpose for my life, at this stage of my life? Who is my neighbour? My family, the person across the street, the ocean?

Those who wait on the Lord, discover what is pleasing to our God, and find the resources to do them. You are not buried in your own troubles, you are running with energy and purpose.

But the time may come, when you can barely walk. There are some problems, some deficiencies, some circumstances, which cannot be attacked by force or energy. What then?

Says the prophet, "They shall walk and not faint."

When we seek the spectacular, the strong the mighty, to merely walk may not sound like much. Who wants to walk, to barely creep along inch by inch, barely above the threshold of existence?

I wonder if that was the faith of **Mary and Joseph** on their flight to Egypt, or of **Jesus**, as he struggled with the demons on that lonely night in Gethsemane. Soon he would be on trial before Herod, and buckle under the weight of a cross on his march to Golgotha.

The greatest power available to Jesus was the power to hang in there, to walk and not faint, to cling to his situation and not abandon his task. Are there times in your life when you need that kind of strength?

John Claypool says his first great loss, was when his puppy died, when he was 4 years old. The second great loss was when his daughter died, when she was 10 years old. He says,

Grievance is when someone has hurt you,
and you have a case against them.

Guilt is when you have hurt them.

Grief is what you feel when life hurts us,
and you find that your spirit is fainting within you, and you feel broken,

and somehow, as you wait on the Lord,
you have the strength to carry on.

He wrote his first book, soon after the death of his daughter, struggling with his brokenness, but discovering there was a strength there, to walk and not faint. Where did that strength come from? Where can you find strength?

Says the prophet Isaiah to his crumbling followers: They who **wait** on the Lord will renew their strength. What does it mean to wait? The **root word** means **string, rope or cord**. It is like holding on to a rope, until God's answer comes.

What will happen when we allow God, to become a part of the equation? What will God have to say about our situation, whatever the issue may be, which is troubling us: our grief, our confusion, our disappointment. Will that still small voice of God's Spirit, change our thinking? We sometimes call this process **discernment**. Surely you will be wiser in the things of God, but discernment never comes quickly.

Perhaps we could learn from the young boy, standing at the bottom of a department store escalator, staring intently at the handrail as it moved along and refusing to take his eyes away. A salesperson asked, "Are you lost?" "Nope," the boy said, "I'm waiting for my chewing gum to come back." And so too, we wait on the Lord.

Begin with a simple and honest plaintive prayer, Help me.
Practise contemplative prayer.
Empty yourself and let God's presence be real.

Read Scripture – imagine yourself standing there, in its stories. When the Psalmist talks of reading the word of God day and night, it is not about reading a lot, or reading fast. It is about **reading deeply**.

Keep a journal. Write it like a diary. And pray for those things about which you write. I have found it to be the most helpful and beneficial activity in my journey of faith.

Hear again the words of the prophet:
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.