

“Renewal”
July 12, 2020

Isaiah 40:28-31
Philippians 4:4-9

The pandemic continues. We’re four months into it here and cases in Johnson County and in the State of Iowa keep increasing.

Economic turmoil continues. The stock market is doing well and a lot of people aren’t. Bankruptcies abound. Local employers worry about keeping their businesses; local workers worry about keeping their jobs.

Issues of racial injustice and racial inequality are in the headlines and in our minds and in our conversations. In a sense this is good news, but we also recognize the turmoil as we move into something new, something as yet unknown.

Then there is just the general uncertainty of these days—will schools reopen and what will that look like? Will students return to Iowa City and the University in August—and what will happen if they do or if they don’t? What will happen to international students?

And, of course, through all of this, global climate change does not stop.

So how will we keep going?

We’ve been addressing a lot of these issues not just recently but over the years. Quite often we look at them through the lens of social justice. It’s how we think about a lot of things in our congregation—that is our good heritage as Congregationalists.

But this morning I want pick up a different pair of glasses and consider the spiritual nature of the challenges that we are facing and the spiritual resources we need to draw upon as we address these issues as people of faith.

Most of us are feeling a little exhausted—or greatly exhausted—by all that we are dealing with in these days. It is not just health and finances and racial disparity, however, that are wearing us down. Our spirits, the very life force within us, our spirits are challenged each day. Our own might, our own strength is running out.

The question keeps coming up. When will things get “back to normal?” And somewhere inside we know that “normal” will be different months and years from now. We sense that we are creating a new world, with new ways of living.

And so, we seek renewal—that is the resumption of something after an interlude. Renewal of our strength after a time of weakness. Renewal of our hope after a time of despair. Renewal of our spirits after becoming fainthearted.

If, as the prophet affirms, God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless, we can hear a grace-filled invitation in those words. Before we do much more—and as we

continue to act in the days ahead—we need to give some attention to our spirits and renew what is weary.

How will we renew our spirits?

Paul urges the Philippians: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

And think about this: Paul wrote these words to a congregation, many of whom were enslaved and most of whom were poor. We might think that they would have *everything* to worry about and very little reason for thanksgiving. Paul himself was in prison facing a capital charge when he wrote to them.

“Don’t worry,” he tells them. “Let your requests be made known to God.”

We are slow to take this advice. We worry—often, it seems, with good reason.

To pray as Paul suggests—to pray with thanksgiving—is to recognize that there is a power in the universe that is immeasurably superior to us. And we who have been such well-off, self-sufficient Americans can have trouble with that.

When we pray we put ourselves and our lives in God’s hands.

Now, that’s where we belong. But let’s be honest—that’s not necessarily where we *want* to be. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I want God to take care of everything—or think God *should* take care of everything. That is why we have brains and feelings and the ability to think and talk and act. But to pray is to confess that there is a limit to our ability—to know, to understand, to act, to love. To pray is to confess that God is greater.

To pray is to make ourselves vulnerable to the greatness of God. That’s not always easy.

And then what?

The psalmist addresses God, crying: “O you who answer prayer.” And we sometimes wonder if this is a statement of faith or a desperate attempt to convince God and ourselves?

The title of a book: *Where Is God in My Praying?* is our question as well. Why should God answer my prayer and not the prayer of someone else? Why do some—all—of my prayers go unanswered?

Perhaps these are the wrong questions—or at least the wrong first questions. They assume that God has not answered and that we will know an answer when we see it or it will come in the way and at the time we desire. Human imagination is limited, and we should not presume that we know all of the ways in which God can respond to us.¹

Or as it has been said elsewhere: “If God doesn’t seem to be giving you what you ask, maybe God’s giving you something else.”²

One way prayer is “answered” is by bringing us closer to one another and to God. An ancient image is that of a circle, with God at the center and our many lives as lines drawn from the circumference toward the center. The closer the lines crowd in toward God, the closer they are toward one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God.³

Prayer not only changes God, it changes us. It puts us in a new position in relationship with God and with each other. The first things to change are our hearts, our lives. When we accept the invitation to pray we start to look at things differently.

Prayer changes us first.

As changed people in a changing world, we can hear again the comforting question of the prophet: “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” The God on whom the people wait—that is, the One in whom we trust, is the God of the cosmos, of all that is, not just a national deity.

This God does not discount our weariness and exhaustion. This God does not simply tell us to “shake it off.” Instead, through the prophet we are reminded *in our very weariness and exhaustion* that “weakness and powerlessness are never roadblocks to God’s grace.”

This is the God who, remembering our status as creatures, remembering that we are dust, lifts us up, even on the same eagle’s wings that Isaiah envisioned.

Life *is* fragile—we know that. In these days, the fragility and uncertainty of life are a great part of our daily reality.

And yet, an awareness of the fragility of life can lead to a deepening sense of grace—God’s care for creation, and for us, in our prosperity and through many dangers, toils and snares.

Friends, the days are difficult. The challenges are great.

We can’t do this on our own.

The good news is that we do not have to do it on our own.

Let us open ourselves to the renewing grace and strength of God each day and every day.

¹ Kamila Blessing, *It Was a Miracle*, pg. 22.

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, pg. 37.

³ Dorthaus of Gaza quoted in K. Norris, *Amazing Grace*, pg. 59-60.