

I Will Raise You Up On Eagle's Wings

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From time to time I've mentioned my older brother Steve, five-and-one-half years older than I, who would have been sixty-three yesterday had not his life been cut short due to a case of *hairy-cell leukemia*, which took his life in 1984. Verse 30 from Isaiah 40 was the scripture passage Steve loved most, a verse that was featured on his funeral bulletin and memorial cards. "*Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted. But those who wait upon 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 never grow faint.*" Steve was not alone in finding comfort and strength in this passage. It is a powerful promise that speaks to the heart, to the very depths of our being when serious challenges surround us and suffering envelops us. Steve struggled with leukemia for four years before it claimed his life when he was thirty-eight. It was quite a regimen of one step forward, two steps back, as he endured various cycles of experimental chemo-therapy. He showed a lot of courage battling in the trenches with each new round of chemotherapy with his medical team at Yale University's cancer clinic. I thank God for his faith, a gift that helped sustain him in the face of some extraordinarily difficult circumstances in life.

We have had another *Steve* right here at Zion who has faced some extraordinary challenges in life. Steve Dague reminded me yesterday that we are coming up on the one year anniversary of that startling fall in his garage last February 17th. It's been quite a journey from his being immobilized on the cold concrete floor of his garage, through weeks of waiting at Aultman Hospital, and then months of physical therapy at Edwin Shaw, with all sorts of challenges, giving rise to lots of questions, varying degrees of chronic pain, and a few miracles along the way. This journey continues as he amazes us every Sunday with the progress he's making, the grit he's shown, and the determination that drives him. But it is not his determination that unlocks the secret to getting a look at what drives him. It is his faith. Steve has written the first of what will become forty meditations that will guide our Lenten journey in another of those devotional books that I force us to write (and read) from time to time. Steve's reflections are again right on the mark, eye-opening and masterful. His meditation talks about how faith in God has come alive for him, beginning with that moment when he struggled to choose life over death as he lay on his garage floor almost a year ago, continuing on with his finding the strength to move his toes as he lay paralyzed from the neck down in the Intensive Care Unit at Aultman. To this day, Steve remains on course in his efforts to work his way through the complicated maze of progress, which has been his goal and challenge ever since. Steve's is an incredible story, still in progress, and you will surely want to read his meditation when we produce it in our Lenten Devotional Guide, which will be ready for distribution at the Ash Wednesday Service on February 25th. His, too, like my brother Steve's, is a story that makes Isaiah 40:30 come alive. Let's listen to these words again: "*Even youths*

will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted. But those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run, and not grow weary. They shall walk and never faint.” These are words that proclaim God’s glory, inspire great faith, and express our heartfelt hopes for God’s strength sustaining us in very difficult circumstances.

I have not had to face the kind of challenges that Steve Dague wakes up to everyday. Nor have I ever had to deal with the long nights and daily struggles that my brother Steve endured. But what our Gospel is telling us today is that we don’t need to wait for the worst of circumstances, the most difficult of scenarios, or the most serious of life-threatening challenges to get God’s attention. Mark tells us that Peter’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, not particularly life-threatening, nor at all unusual. Yet, that was enough to elicit Jesus’ interest, compassion, and action. Jesus came to Peter’s mother-in-law, took her by the hand and lifted her up – physically and spiritually. The fever left her, and she began to serve her guests. (Mark 1:29-31) It wasn’t much, but Jesus cared; and Mark made sure to remember it. Jesus will raise the dead, quiet the winds, calm the seas, give sight to the blind, make the lame to walk, and the deaf to hear. These are serious plights and miracles worthy of the man who would be proclaimed God’s Son, our Savior. But Jesus wants us to know that he’s here for us as we face ordinary problems in regular ways, even when the world’s not watching, when few notice that God has come to save the day. That’s important to God, too. Those, too, are the circumstances in life where God wants your faith to come alive.

This particular passage in the Gospel of Mark has led many scholars to speculate that Mark was close to Peter, perhaps his stenographer, writing down under his own name the Gospel recollections of St. Peter. Why else would he remember this rather incidental event, except that it meant something to Peter? Furthermore, if you read Mark through Matthew’s eyes, you would think that he mentions Peter many times because he thinks highly of him. However, if you look carefully at how Mark actually portrays Peter, it becomes obvious that Peter is more a model of foolishness than faithfulness. Peter is there with the twelve disciples huddled in fear when their boat is caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Peter is there with the right answer but the wrong understanding when Jesus asks who folks say that he is and what that means. Peter was bold to proclaim, “I’m ready to walk on water if you call to me.” Jesus calls; Peter sinks. Peter stands up to tell Jesus that others may fail him, but he will not. He is willing to fight for him, even to die with him. Then, when Jesus is arrested, Peter slinks into the shadows. He follows at a distance at first, and then not at all. When Jesus needs him the most, he fails, fearing for his life, and fleeing into the night – not a pretty picture, and not very impressive at all.

But that’s the genius of Mark; and that’s the Good News of the Gospel. Even when we fail, God is faithful. Even when we fall short, God goes the extra mile, and then some, whatever it takes, to make sure that His love is a part of our lives. Even in the midst of the very ordinary, God cares about us more than we can know. Let’s listen to the words

of a familiar hymn that our verse from Isaiah inspired: “*You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord, who abide in this shadow for life, say to the Lord: ‘My refuge, my rock, in whom I trust!’ ‘And I will raise you up on eagle’s wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of my hand.’*” (On Eagle’s Wings, verse 1) In this regard, God has been active, literally, in raising up Steve Dague off that concrete floor, holding him in His hand, and empowering him to walk again. My brother Steve was raised up on eagle’s wings to walk with the angels, to run without growing weary or faint. Their experiences are hardly anything we have endured; but I doubt that either *Steve* would begrudge us “ordinary sufferers” their insights into God’s love and a living faith. In fact, I’m sure that both *Stevies* would want nothing more than that the eyes of our hearts be opened to see what strength and comfort can come with faith’s trust in the love God gives through the person and presence of Jesus our Lord.

Growing in this knowledge of God’s love doesn’t happen in a vacuum. While it is intensely personal, it is not so private that we can’t share it. In fact, it is always relational. It is always related to the hand of God extended – through Jesus, through friends, through family. Here’s how Steve Dague describes it in the meditation he’s written. “There was another moment when I was reminded that I was not alone. One sleepless night, when I was in Aultman’s ICU, I was wondering if I had the strength to continue. I was beginning to have serious doubts about my physical recovery as there had not been any indications of feeling or movement in my arms or legs, after several days of tests. As I thought and prayed about my fate and wondered what I should do, I felt a very strong, very real hand laid on my shoulder. It was a very firm touch just as I remember my Dad would do to me many times in the past. It actually made me look to see who was there. I did not really know what to think. The very next day, when the doctor again asked me if I could move anything, I was now able to move my right foot. That started the beginning of a very miraculous recovery.” Even at a moment when it seemed that he was alone, Steve knew that he wasn’t alone at all. He could sense and feel the touch of God’s hand – and his Dad’s hand – on his shoulder, reinforcing the truth that faith is relational. It is intensely personal, to be sure, but always in a way that connects us with the family of faith.

We are all a part of this family of faith, which we call the church. We draw strength from the faith of others walking with us, alongside of us, out there in front of us. We’re in it together. That’s the picture we see on our bulletin, with Jesus reaching out, grabbing the hand of Peter’s mother-in-law, lifting her up, literally and spiritually. That’s the picture that Steve has painted in our minds with the hand of God firmly on his shoulder, lifting him up spiritually first, and then physically, as well, with the recovery that has followed. That’s the Good News that Steve’s experiences since last February have reinforced and proclaimed. We’re in this together. Growing in faith is a family affair, offering us the opportunity to listen and learn from the many stories that others are willing to share. Steve’s is one of these many stories that invite us to learn about God’s love coming alive, to experience our faith coming alive through the love we share and the faith we celebrate, right here, right now, as we gather to offer our worship and praise in Jesus’ Name. Amen