

“Ends of the Earth”

Isaiah 40:21-31

“I believe God made me for a purpose. But he also made me fast,” Eric Liddell wrote in a letter to his sister Jenny before competing as a sprinter for Great Britain in the 1924 Summer Olympics, 100 years ago. That calling he felt to run led to conflict. His sister thought he was wasting his life pursuing competitive running. But his calling would lead him to take actions that would show the importance of his Christian faith in a way that wouldn’t be forgotten.

Liddell had trained to run the 100 meter race. But when he found out that the opening heats would be run on a Sunday, he withdrew. Instead, he ran the 400 meters, a race that he’d never run before in international competition. Despite that change, he won the gold medal in that race. His success and willingness to sacrifice for his beliefs inspired many, and became the source for the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*.

That wasn’t the end of the story, though. Liddell was the son of Scottish missionaries and had been born in China. He returned there in 1925, and spent much of the rest of his life in China, serving the poor and teaching the gospel. During World War II, Liddell was taken prisoner by Japanese forces and devoted the last two years of his life to ministering to his fellow inmates at the internment camp. He died just a few months short of the camp’s liberation by American forces.

During one of the climactic scenes of *Chariots of Fire*, Liddell quotes from this passage from Isaiah. The appeal to knowing that they shall run and not grow weary certainly would have appealed to someone who spent so much time running and competing. But, too, the promise from Isaiah to a people far from home, reminding them that God was with them to the

ends of the earth, would have appealed to a missionary kid who would again be far from home.

Today’s reading from Isaiah reminds us of that. Isaiah is talking to a beaten, broken down people. Discouraged and depressed. In 587 BC the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and take the people away into exile and captivity. Far from home, they wondered if they’d been abandoned by God. Far from home, they were weary and worn, wondering how they would go on.

Isaiah gives them a message of hope. “Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:30). He points them to the eagle. It was a familiar image to them. In the Exodus, God told them “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exodus 19:4). Eagles and other birds were familiar sights, and they knew how an eagle flew.

It’s important that Isaiah points to the eagle. Isaiah doesn’t point them to hummingbirds, constantly flapping their wings and flitting from flower to flower. Isaiah doesn’t point them to the duck, which looks calm on the surface but is paddling up a storm underneath the surface. Isaiah doesn’t point them to a vulture, which is attracted to dead and dying things. He doesn’t point them to the peacock, which spends all of its time primping and preening itself. Isaiah points them to the eagle.

Eagles don’t just fly. They soar. They rarely flap their wings. One researcher notes that eagles flap their wings less than two minutes an hour. The rest of the time, eagles soar. They

don't stay aloft by their own efforts. They couldn't. The amount of exertion they would have to do to stay aloft by their own efforts is impossible to maintain. They are dependent on the thermals, the wind rising from below, to keep them in flight.

When a storm hits an eagle, it initially appears as though the storm's fury is going to crush the bird against a rocky cliff. The eagle, however, faces the storm, tilts his wings at the proper angle, and slowly the fury that might have crushed him begins to drive him upward. Soon he is rising above the storm. What's true of eagles can be true for us. The power that looks to destroy us is the same power that we rise to new heights.

That's why Isaiah points them to the eagle. Like an eagle, they are to wait for the wind to blow. The wind blowing from God, the one who is in control of the wind and the waves, the stars and the sky. The wind that will blow them back to the promised land, back home, back to freedom. They would wait for that wind, but even after their return from exile, they stop letting the wind blow them. They put all of their efforts into raising themselves up, instead of letting the wind of God keep them aloft.

Then something new blows into the world. The one who created the wind and the waves, the one who the wind and the waves obeyed, came into the world. In Jesus, God came into the world to bring again that good news of God's grace. The good news that, like an eagle in flight, we are carried along by God. And when we are weary and worn, tired of flapping our wings and trying to stay aloft on our own, we need to just spread our wings and trust in God.

And this is where we get a brief vocabulary lesson. Spirit and breath and wind are the same word in Hebrew, ruach. That's also true in

Greek, with the word pneuma, the source of English words like pneumatic. And that can get confusing in some passages, when we can wonder or look from English translation to English translation and see if something is translated wind or breath or spirit. But it also reminds us that the spirit of God is what brings life. It also reminds us that when we talk about the wind holding eagles aloft, we can think of the Holy Spirit keeping us in flight as we soar like eagles, dependent on where the wind is blowing.

That's why we pray for missionaries as we do every week, as they go where the Spirit is blowing, and are dependent on God to keep them going. If you asked any of the missionaries we pray for every week; Kebede and his family in Ethiopia, the Grulkes in Botswana, the Clausings and Tiffany Smith in Tanzania, and the Hansons in South Korea, they'd probably tell you the same thing. They can only do what they do because God is with them.

As we look to see where God is at work in the world, where Jesus is going on his mission, where the Holy Spirit is moving in the hearts and lives of others, we see that things are already happening. It's not dependent on us. We get invited to join in.

We may not be able to run fast enough to break Olympic records. We may not travel overseas to be missionaries. But we know that the God who watched the eagles watches over us, and keeps us soaring. God will renew our strength when we are weary. That's good news.

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