

February 7, 2021
The 5th Sunday after Epiphany
Year B
Isaiah 40:21-31
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Strength to the Weary

I was assigned to do my internship at a church in Jacksonville, Florida. When I was in seminary internship was a year that pastors in training spent in a congregation to get practical, on the job experience of what it meant to be a pastor.

I wasn't thrilled to be assigned to a church in Jacksonville, Florida. Britton and I were engaged when it was time for me to fill out my internship paperwork and we had filled some of it out together, knowing that it would be the first place where we would live together as husband and wife. We talked about where we might want to live and decided that the internship year, the first year of our marriage, would be a good time for us to spread our wings and get away from anything that was familiar to us. We decided that we wanted to try a new part of the country, something that neither of us had every experienced before. After all, it was only for a year, and then we would move back to seminary, close to Britton's family again and a long, but familiar drive from mine.

So, feeling ready for an adventure, as our first choice for where we might want to end up, we checked off the box for the northwest. Then we checked off the box for southwest. Then we checked off the box for Midwest, all places that neither of us had ever lived or spent much time traveling. Then we checked off the box for northeast, since, even though I had grown up

there, it would be a new experience for Britton, who had hardly spent any time there, other than to visit me and my family a couple of times while we were dating. Then we checked off anywhere. And then, as our very last choice for where we might spend my internship and our first year of marriage, we checked off southeast, because that would not be something new for either of us.

Did you catch where I said that I did my internship? Jacksonville, Florida, very much in the southeast.

We were not pleased when we saw where I had been assigned. My concerns grew about the assignment after I had my first interaction with the pastor who would be my internship supervisor.

He was an intense man, to say the least. He was a hard worker himself, but he was also a hard man who drove the people around him hard. He also wasn't sure that women should be pastors. He didn't like the fact that I would be newly married when I went to my internship, sure that my new marriage would be a distraction from the work that he wanted me to do at his church. He made all of that clear in no uncertain terms, before I ever got to the church.

During the first phone call I ever had with him, the very first words he ever spoke to me, after saying hello and telling me his name, were "I have a real problem with the date of your wedding." His problem was that he would end up being alone at his church for almost a month, after the last vicar left before I arrived after my wedding and honeymoon. He seemed to think that it was very thoughtless and selfish of me to have planned my wedding, long before I ever knew that he existed, without taking his schedule into consideration.

I admit, even after just that one conversation with him, I had misgivings about going to work and learn under him. I shared those with the person at my seminary who was in charge of internship assignments. He asked me to wait and meet the supervisor before I asked to have the assignment changed.

I waited a couple of months until the supervisor and his wife came to my seminary's campus to meet Britton and me. We went to dinner, and that's where he let it slip that he wasn't convinced that women could or should be pastors. He made a big speech about how a girl like me couldn't possibly have any idea about what it meant to be a pastor, and he punctuated each point he made by banging a huge cross ring that he was wearing on the table where we were sitting. Britton and I sat like deer in headlights, listening to his speech. He made it clear that if I went to his church, I would be going as a representative of every woman who ever felt called to be a pastor, that if I lived up to his expectations, I would vindicate every woman pastor, but if I failed, I would prove to him that he had been right all along about the suitability for women as pastors.

Now, we could have long discussions about why this man was allowed to be an internship supervisor in a church that had, 29 years before my internship, voted to ordain women, but that's a conversation for another time. We could also have a long discussion about why, after my disappointment about the geography of the internship placement, and the supervisors' rudeness about my wedding date, and his performance at our first dinner, I ever decided to accept the placement and go to that church for my internship.

I know that part of the reason I decided to go, was that I knew that it would throw my whole seminary schedule off if I rejected the placement. As

someone who had chosen her high school classes with an eye toward going to seminary after college and being a pastor and who had marched along as though to the beat of a drummer from college and candidacy to seminary, it would have been entirely out of character for me to get off schedule, to step out of line. Also, Britton and I knew that a gauntlet had been thrown at that dinner. The supervisor didn't think I could do it. He didn't think we could do it. He didn't think I could survive as a pastor. He didn't think that what would be our brand-new marriage could survive internship at his church. We both knew that if I backed out of the assignment, it would prove to him that everything misguided, sexist, uninformed thing that he believed about women in ministry was true; that we couldn't cut it. Britton felt that the assumption that he couldn't support me as his new wife in my vocation was also insulting to him as a man and as a husband. So, we decided to go.

Let me say something good, maybe great, about my internship experience. That congregation taught me so much that was good about being a pastor and about the deep and loving bond that could exist between a pastor and a congregation. I'll always be grateful for those lessons and the relationships that we formed there, and for the way the people of that church celebrated and nurtured me as a pastor and Britton and me as a newly married couple. I'm not sorry that I went there for my internship.

But, as predicted, the internship supervisor never ended up being a friend or a confidant or any kind of support system. I can tell you that he liked my Christmas Day sermon. I mention that because it is the only compliment, he ever gave me about anything that I did there. Everything else was a criticism. Some of his critiques were valid, things I needed to learn. But some of them were just arbitrary criticisms, from a man who viewed others

as a threat, and who didn't like that I was succeeding, in the eyes, of his congregations, when he had counted on me to fail.

But at what cost was I "succeeding"? I was working ridiculous hours at that church, working weeks without a day off and working multiple twelve-hour days a week. Honestly, for the most part, except for the constant criticisms, I loved the work, but still I was exhausted.

Still no matter how much I worked, no matter how much I did, no matter how many times a member of the congregation pointed out all of the things I was doing and how much I was working, all my supervisor would say, was, "Well, she's young. She should have unlimited energy."

And with those words or with words like them he would dismiss my work, my commitment, and my exhaustion. It was infuriating. It was unfair. It was unjust. But it was an opening for God to reach me through the words of scripture and give me hope and comfort and encouragement that I needed and that gave me life, even when I was starting to crumble under the weight of constant criticism and unreasonable expectations.

Those words were from my favorite prophet, the second prophet of the Old Testament whose work is included in the book of Isaiah, Isaiah chapters 40-55. He wrote his words to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon and he spoke words of redemption, rescue, restoration. But he wrote to a people who had been in exile for almost 50 years, many of whom had been born into captivity and who had heard their parents or their grandparents tell them about what it was like to be taken away from their homeland, to see the Babylonian army trample across their fields and vineyards and slaughter their herds. To see hundreds if not thousands of their people killed. To see their cities and villages burned. To see their Temple desecrated, looted, and

ultimately to see it burned too. To make the long journey through the wilderness to Babylon, where there was nothing that they could do, but keep their heads down and mourn their losses.

Some of them tried hard to remember, that they were God's people, that they were sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah, and Rachel, and Zilpah and Bilhah, they tried to remember their stories and the prayers and the commandments and the Temple. Others tried hard to forget, to pass as Babylonians, to be something other than a defeated people living in a foreign land.

But then the voice of the prophet came to them to tell them that even if they had tried to forget, they were not forgotten. Their God was working for them. The first word of the prophet to this exiled people was, "Comfort."

And then he went on to tell them that their God, the eternal creator of the stars, so high above the earth that the princes and rulers of the earth were as nothing, had not forgotten them. Their God saw them; saw their powerlessness, saw their captivity, saw their weariness, saw their fear, saw their exhaustion, as a people who did not know who they were, who they belonged to, if their God was with them or not. Their God knew them. Their God saw them and was with them and would act.

Ultimately, the promise to these weary ones was the promise that they would be given a way in the wilderness, a way to return to their land and their Temple, that the God who had never left them, even during their time of exile, would be with them as they were invited to leave a life they knew and live a new life.

But first there was this promise:

²⁹God gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
³¹but 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.

And those are the words that gave me peace and hope when my work, my weariness, my exhaustion, was being disregarded and dismissed, because I was “young”.

These words reminded me that God saw me. That God cared about me. God was not indifferent to my needs and concerns. That there was nothing about me that disqualified me from God’s compassion and care, not my age, not my gender, not when I had chosen to get married, nothing. God saw me, God knew me, and God would act, in compassion, giving me what at times, I definitely did not have: strength, power, life, energy, hope.

I suspect that a lot of you today, listening to this sermon, are feeling exhausted, weary, fatigued.

You might be exhausted because your work is overwhelming right now; because you’re an essential worker, because the pandemic has tripled your work, because you’ve missed time off, because your work has become ever present in your home, because you don’t get to go home as much as you want to because of the nature of your work, because people are counting on you and you have to show up and keep showing up. That might have seemed

doable, a sacrifice you were able and even willing to make when the pandemic began, but we're coming up on a year now, and there's no definitive end in sight, and the longer this goes on, the more we know that things aren't going to back to exactly the way that they used to be.

You might be weary because you're home alone, and days and weeks and even months might go by without you seeing another human being for more than a few minutes or a few hours and even then, they're wearing a mask and keeping their distance. You might be weary because you haven't been touched by another human being for almost a year. You might be weary because of the pressure of the silence, the boredom, the loneliness, and even though you know it's for your safety and to keep people healthy, still as days run into weeks and into months and now, into a year, the year that time stood still, the year that lasted ten, it's hard to keep going, one weary step in front of another.

You might be fatigued because you're never alone. Kids never leave to go to school; parents and spouses never leave to go to work. You're all together all of the time, everywhere you look there's someone there wanting to interact. And while the world falls down around you, you're expected just to keep going; to do your homework, to show up at the Zoom meeting, the Google class, the conference call. You're supposed to pretend everything is fine, to keep up appearances, to keep your little corner of the world spinning, even though no matter what you do, whether you go out or stay in, you hear the criticisms swirling around you. The pressure to create a sense of normalcy to preserve people's mental health and carry on with life with precautions and the fact that we all need to make sacrifices right now, for the greater good. So, no matter what you do, someone online or in your family or in

your circle of friends will be sure that you did the wrong thing and will almost be equally sure to tell you. No matter what you do, you'll be sure to be disappointing someone, and the weight of all of those expectations might feel bone deep. Pandemic fatigue, indeed.

But I hope, that, as they did for me, in a time when I was feeling alone, feeling exhausted, feeling unsure how to keep going under the weight of pressure and expectations, these words can come to you as a gift, as a word of the Lord for your strength, for your peace, for your hope, in a long and hard winter.

No matter how old you are, no matter how young you are, no matter what burdens you're carrying, no matter how this pandemic or something else in your life is a struggle for you, no matter what, the Lord sees you. You are not forgotten by your God. You are not disregarded. You are loved. You are not alone. And...

²⁹God gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

³¹but 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. Amen.