

"Survive and Advance"

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²¹Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? ²²It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; ²³who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. ²⁴Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. ²⁵To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. ²⁶Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? ²⁸Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. ²⁹He 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. (Isaiah 40:21-31)

This year our Presbyterian Women are reading through the book of Hebrews using a study written by Melissa Bane Sevier, a Presbyterian minister and author. So her name caught my attention when I came across a short blog post that she had written about this text in Isaiah 40. She started with a lesson that many of us pastors learned early in our study of Hebrew and the poetry of the Old Testament.

It was a lesson on Biblical parallelism, a literary device that is often used to emphasize a particular point by repeating it in two or three different ways. Most of the time, we also learn, the last version in the series is the most complete version of the idea.¹ A good example is found in Psalm 29, which begins like this:

*Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.*

All four lines call us to ascribe honor to God, but each line builds on the last, and it is not until the fourth version of the statement that we see the full scope of the worship we are called to offer. It's like the poet is pulling the veil off of a theological gem a little more, and then a little more, until at last it comes into full view.

In light of this lesson, Sevier observes that the highly powerful and poetic ending of this passage in Isaiah is actually a bit puzzling. Isaiah is speaking to a people broken by exile. They have been beaten up by the world. They are utterly defeated, wondering how

¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/asbury-bible-commentary/Major-Characteristics-Hebrew>

they will carry on. Isaiah is trying to encourage them to remember that their hope is in the God who created the heavens and the earth, that the Lord is great in strength, mighty in power, and that God will save them from the worldly powers that have broken them down. Most of us would think that the highest vision of this salvation would be to fly on wings of eagles... to mount to the sky... to sail high above all of the problems of the world and reach heights where nothing bad can touch us. But Isaiah doesn't build to that. "Those who wait for the Lord," the prophet writes, "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." The logical progression would be to walk, then to run, and eventually to fly. But Isaiah reverses that order. As crazy as it seems, the parallelism in this passage seems to suggest that the pinnacle of finding strength in the Lord is not flying, or even running, but simply walking -- putting one foot in front of the other without falling down.²

In recent years, ESPN has made a number of prominent documentaries under the common title "30 on 30," and one of them focused on the miracle run that NC State made to win the 1983 NCAA Men's Basketball Championship. The basketball story is compelling in itself. For the last nine games of its season, a loss would have meant the end of the run. Just to make it into the NCAA tournament, the Wolfpack needed to win the ACC tournament, which meant they had to run the table against Wake, the reigning national champions of UNC, and a Virginia team led by the most touted player in the country, Ralph Sampson. Every one of their final nine games was do or die, and in seven of those nine games, NC State was losing with less than a minute to play. Again and again, they came back from the dead. Every time they would get knocked down, they would get back up again.

But you cannot tell the story of the 1983 championship without talking about Jim Valvano, and you cannot tell the story of Jim Valvano without telling the story of his fight against cancer. This, in my opinion, is the real miracle story -- a story about commitment, about brotherly love, and about never giving up.

Dereck Whittenburg, who was a key player on that 1983 team, was a driving force behind the "30 for 30" movie, which is where this sermon gets its name. Whittenburg tells a great story about the first time he met Jim Valvano. Valvano was coaching at Iona in New York at the time, and he happened to be in Boston to watch an AAU tournament game in which Whittenburg and his teammate Sidney Lowe were playing. They were both seniors at DeMatha high school, and both were being actively recruited by Norm Sloan, NC State's coach at the time. After they won the game, they remember that this wild guy came up to them, grabbed them by the arms, and said, "Hey, I'm Jim Valvano, Iona College. I love you two guys, I love watching you play." A year later, after Whittenburg and Lowe had finished their first season at NC State and Valvano was introduced to the team as their new coach, Whittenburg turned to one of the assistants and said, "Hey, I've met him before. That's that crazy Italian guy that says he owns a college!" Then someone said no, he meant "Iona College."³ That doesn't really have anything to do with anything but it's just too good not to share.

² Melissa Bane Sevier, "To be able to walk," <https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2015/02/03/to-be-able-to-walk/>

³ <https://www.jimmyv.org/2018/words-dereck-whittenburg/>

What matters much more is the example that Jim Valvano gave to his team, and to the world, when cancer began to knock him down. In that fight, his players saw in him the same conviction, the same determination, and the same assurance that they had seen in the 1983 run. It was ten years later, and Valvano was incredibly ill. It was very clear that his cancer was terminal. He could barely stand up, let alone walk. Even so, friends urged him to try and come up to New York City to the ESPY awards to receive a special recognition. His initial response was emphatic. "I don't care about a trophy," he said. "I'm not gonna see my little girl graduate grammar school. I'm not gonna to walk my daughters down the aisle. I'm not coming." But they persisted, "Jimmy, you've got to come."

They convinced him, and in March of 1993 he flew from North Carolina to New York to attend the ESPY awards. He threw up the entire flight. His wife stood beside the entire time with a bag. It was a miracle that he would even get into the room. No one expected him to stand up, let alone give a speech. But when the moment came, he stood up. Every step up to the stage was labored. He had to be held up. But he walked up there, and he did not faint, and he delivered an impromptu speech that many of us know very well, even now, 25 years later. We thought it had reached its peak with the phrase that is now famous: "Don't give up. Don't ever give up." But then his words went even higher, mounting up with wings like eagles: "Cancer can take away all of my physical abilities," he said. "[But] it cannot touch my mind, it cannot touch my heart, and it cannot touch my soul. And those three things are going to carry on forever. I thank you and God bless you all."

Every now and then, the simple act of getting up and walking without fainting is the greatest witness to strength that there is.

Even when it was clear that cancer would conquer his body, Valvano refused to give up the fight. On his death bed, he asked for a legal pad and a pen. On that pad he wrote a list of guys, friends who could carry on the battle against cancer. These would be the people who would keep standing up, and keep marching on, long after he could not. These were the people who built the Jimmy V Foundation, people who are still preaching the motto "survive and advance," people who are still urging others to not give up, to never give up. Dereck Whittenburg was on that list, and still today he is living out that dream and example that his coach gave to him.

I tell you all, that is the church. We can dream of flying with the eagles, we can hope for a time when we can run and not get weary, but sometimes just the act of getting up, day after day, and holding fast to the faith and the promise that God is present — in power and in truth — that is the most powerful witness that we have to offer to the world. That's what Paul said to the Galatians when they needed some encouragement. He said, "let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, **if we do not give up**. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith."⁴

It was also the message that Isaiah offered to the battered exiles in Babylon. "I know you are weary," the prophet said. "I know you are exhausted. But have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary... He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless." So don't give up. Don't ever give up, because the simple act of standing up,

⁴ Galatians 6:9-10.

again and again, every time that life knocks you down, can witness to our faith in ways that are even greater than flying.

Just this past week I heard news of a friend who has been battling cancer. Months of chemo had worn him slap out, but it seemed to be working OK. He had regained some strength. But you never really know with cancer. And just last week a scan showed a new spot. The cancer is back, in a new place. So now he will have to start again, and that is exactly what he is doing. He is standing up — even though he is weary, even though he is exhausted, even though it is not fair, and it is not right — he is moving forward, one step at a time, one day at a time. We all know people in this congregation who are doing the same thing, fighting similar fights and similar foes. And they continue to show us that, sometimes, just standing up, and putting one foot in front of the other, is the strongest, most inspiring thing we have ever seen.

So, people of faith. Don't give up. Don't ever give up, for "*the Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.*"²⁹*He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.*"³⁰*Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;*"³¹*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 might even walk and not faint.

Amen.