

The Spirit of Renewal
#1 “Discovering Renewable Energy”

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating
Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39
Sunday, October 16, 2022

In moments of despair, God’s life-giving, ever-renewing promises offer us renewal and hope.

One of the things that is most enjoyable about long-term ministry is the opportunity to be challenged by new discoveries while travelling familiar paths. You discover that God indeed is doing something new, something surprising, even something unexpected. This year, I accepted a challenge from the stewardship team to build the sermons for this fall from scriptures they suggested.

God is always doing something new, even as the church travels the ways cleared by generations of people who have gone before us. It keeps us from grinding ourselves into the ruts so often described as the seven last words of churches: “We’ve Never Done It That Way Before.”

Our challenge, both individually and corporately, is to encounter the renewing Spirit of God. Pushed apart by the pandemic and other forces. Individually and corporately, as people of God and as individual disciples, we yearn for God’s gift of renewal to lift us from discouragement.

Adam Copeland, who teaches courses on stewardship at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis, says that at its best, the church sees the ministry of stewardship as an affirmation of our calling to love God and our neighbor.¹ Stewardship, he tells the church, is a lived concept “most often resulting in sharing that surprises, compassion that complicates, and love that inspires.”

¹¹¹ Adam J. Copeland, “Beyond the Offering Plate.”

Sharing that surprises, compassion that complicates, and love that inspires. This is what it means to discover the Spirit of renewal, and what it means to see God at work in our lives in new ways, and to hear God say to us, “lift up your eyes on high and see.”

Isaiah articulates a word of the surprises and challenges people who are weary and languishing. Sent into exile, they have lost everything: their identity, their land, their traditions, even, they feared, God.

But Isaiah hears the rhythmic drumbeat of God’s every-renewing promises. Isaiah visualizes what it means to be filled with grace and renewed by hope. He speaks to the exhausted and weary exiles in ways that disrupt their languishing exhaustion. He invites them to lift up their eyes and stare at the multitude of stars twinkling in the galaxies—and asks, “Who created these?”

He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because God is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing...”

This is the promise that brings us renewal.

Not long ago, the Pew Research Center released some projections regarding the continuing shrinking of American Christianity. It’s a rather bleak projection. And while the researchers take pains to say that these are not predictions nor are they fixed realities, the data is not hopeful. Currently, there are about 60% of Americans who attend church, with adherents of all other religions numbering around 6%. Those are numbers that have been declining for some time. There are approximately 30% of the population who define themselves as religiously unaffiliated—the so-called “nones.” And those are numbers that have been increasing for some time.

Should this trend continue, Pew researchers say that within 50 years, Christianity as well as other religions, will account for only about a third of all Americans.

Obviously, there are many factors which could alter that outcome, but still, it is a reminder of our ever-changing world.

It’s hard to look at that data and not become discouraged.

But perhaps it is also an invitation to discover God's gift of renewal. God is at work, we believe, renewing our lives, our world, and our church. That is the Good News that Jesus shared. And it is the Good news that 30 years ago led a group of Presbyterians to build a church at the corner of Clayton and Strecker in what was then unincorporated St. Louis County. We are a people whose spirits are renewed by the promises of God.

My good friend Brian Paulson is a Presbyterian pastor in Chicago and one of the most optimistic persons I have ever met. This summer he told me about a time when he was representing the Presbyterian Church at an international ecumenical gathering of churches. He said he listened to the ways the various bishops and church leaders introduced themselves. Each of them told a story of how the decline in their churches and how hard things were. When it came time for Brian to introduce himself, he looked at them and said, "You know, I have seen the same thing as you. But I believe that we are God's people, a people of hope. Our job is to look where God is at work in the world, and then to go and be part of that work. We are not people of death, but of renewal and resurrection."

This is the word of God Isaiah brings to us. Isaiah offers hope to those who have born the crushing blows of exile. Isaiah announces that God is not finished with Israel. Isaiah announces God's promise of renewal: those who are weary shall find their strength, those who are lost shall be shepherded by God.

The gods of Babylon might twinkle with splendor and beauty, for Isaiah knows that they are nothing compared to the promise of Yahweh, the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth.

Isaiah calls the exiles to imagine once more: where is God at work renewing faith? God's unmatched power is at work around us. These words call us to shift our perspective, to leave our disappointment and discouragement. Like a backyard fire on a crisp, cool autumn night, Isaiah's words revive us once more by calling us to trust in the God's power and justice.

Here, says Isaiah, is the promise of truly renewable and ever-replenishing energy. In the light of God, find the power to fuel imagination and hope. In the renewing

waters of God, be propelled into profound purpose. In the blowing of God's breath, find the windspeed that will enable you to soar like an eagle.

If we are honest, we will admit that many of us feel caught by the snares of discouragement. And when doubt and struggles to believe flood us, it is easy to walk away from God. It seems better to cling to something material, something tangible. We feel empty.

But Isaiah good news: God give power to the faint, and stands close to those who are powerless.

In his book, *Journey in the Wilderness*, church consultant Gil Rendle describes how he often works with church leaders in identifying Author and church researcher Gil Rendle tells the story of the time he was working with a church in developing strategic plans. Sometimes, says Rendle, he invites leaders to identify what part of the biblical story they believe their church is presently living—which can be a fascinating exercise by itself. I mean, how do you help a church that mostly identifies with the story of Jonah being swallowed by a whale? Rendle says that what most often is a stunning insight into the issues and challenges facing a particular church.

In one case, church leaders quickly identified with Isaiah 40:31: “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 shall walk and not faint.” They described all of the ways their urban church was making a difference in the world: they had built a food pantry, had formed a coalition of other churches to address neighborhood problems. The members of the church had worked hard to minister to the corner of the kingdom God had given them. Rendle says, “If the image of a soaring eagle is one of risk and courage to do what is right despite the cost, then these people fit the bill.”²

But, as we all know, keeping up the pace of that sort of work is hard. And over the years it had worn down the church. Thinning resources of people and money were confronted by the additional problem of policies that did not take kindly to scores

² Gil Rendle, *Journey into the Wilderness*, p. 34.

of homeless persons wandering the streets. Developers were eager to buy up dilapidated buildings and create housing for urban professionals. Recognizing all of this opposition, the church leaders added a second rationale to the image of a soaring eagle: “Because we believe that we are called to soar like eagles, but sometimes we feel like we chicken out.”³

It is the promise of God’s renewal that sustains us when things are hard. It comes to us like the touch of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, carefully breaking the fever of Peter’s mother-in-law and restoring her to new life. It comes as we open ourselves in prayer, gratefully acknowledging God’s transcendence. It comes as we trudge down the familiar paths God calls us walk – pathways of work, relationship, community. In those moments, when it feels as though we are about to stumble, God lifts us up. Amen.

King’s testimony of hope: <https://ncrc.org/dr-kings-testament-of-hope-amidst-melancholy-and-discouragement-in-2022/>

³ Ibid.