

Grasshoppers and Eagles
C. Gray Norsworthy
Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
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Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?
He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.
He brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.
No sooner are they planted,
no sooner are they sown,
no sooner do they take root in the ground,
than he blows on them and they wither,
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

“To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.

Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,
“My way is hidden from the Lord;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?
Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint. – Isaiah 40:21-31, NIV

This past week, I was watching the movie *Groundhog Day* starring Bill Murray. It may have been a coincidence, but my guess is someone thought scheduling this movie during the pandemic was somewhat appropriate because, as I've heard on more than one occasion, every day feels like Groundhog Day. I think most of us have grown tired and weary of this. We all look forward to the time when there will be enough vaccines to bring an end to COVID-19. But in the meantime, we wake up every day having grown tired and weary, looking for strength and hope to make it through. And I think it affects those of us of all ages, maybe even the young, who have had their normal routines of school and education and social interaction disrupted. So, is there a word of hope for those of us who feel this way? I think there is, and it can be found in our passage that we have just read from Isaiah.

For some of us this is a familiar passage, one we sometimes read at funerals. But as I read it this week, what jumped out at me were two words: *grasshoppers* and *eagles*. So, what do grasshoppers and eagles have to do with finding strength and hope when we face the challenges of life? Isaiah begins this passage trying to convey the idea that God is above all things and that God is sovereign - meaning that God alone is God, and this God is in charge. When we say that God is in charge, as Presbyterian Christians we do not mean that God causes everything that takes place. That would be predeterminism and it's not what we believe. However, we do believe that God alone is God, and that God is involved in all aspects of life. And ultimately, God has a plan that God is working out through the events of the world, in order to save the world and those of us in it from the sin and brokenness that we find. One example of that brokenness is this virus, COVID-19. But God's ultimate plan is to bring healing and wholeness to our world, which is why God sent Jesus as God in the flesh to live, die on a cross, and be resurrected - in order to begin God's restoration project. And God is Lord over all of that.

In Isaiah it describes God as sitting “enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers.” If you've ever been up on a really high place like a skyscraper or a mountain top, or even looking down from an airplane, you can probably remember what it's like if you see people down below. They do seem like insects, perhaps like grasshoppers. Isaiah is using this poetic language to compare us “grasshoppers” to the God who created not only the whole world, but the stars above and all that there is. But, I have to admit that when I think of us as grasshoppers, another image comes to mind.

When I was a teenager, one of my favorite TV shows was called *Kung Fu*. It starred David Carradine as a Buddhist monk named “Caine” who was well-versed in the ways of Buddhism as well as the martial arts. So, this was not a monk that you wanted to mess with! The series was set in the old American West. Caine wandered from place to place, searching for his brother while trying to act humble -- though he always seemed to end up fighting someone. I remember the beginning of each episode and how they retold the story of Caine in thirty seconds. They showed Caine, or “Grasshopper” as he was nicknamed, as a young boy back in a Buddhist monastery. An older monk holds out a pebble in his hand. He tells the young Caine, Grasshopper, to try to

snatch the pebble from his hand. He tries but fails. Then it flashes to all of the training he goes through in martial arts and other religious practices. It ends up with a more mature Caine, standing once again in front of his master who is holding the pebble in his palm, awaiting Caine to try to snatch it away. In a flash, Caine's hand grabs for the pebble. Both hands clench closed in fists, waiting to see the outcome. The master slowly opens his fist to reveal the pebble is gone, and Caine opens his to show that he has it. Then the older monk says to him, "It is time for you to leave." I thought that whole thing was so cool that I actually took a year-long karate class at school in ninth grade. So, I also need to warn you that I am a yellow belt in karate, so you may not want to mess with me either. This week, I also found out something about the meaning of the words "Kung Fu." One person wrote:

"The Chinese words 'kung fu' translate more or less as 'a man hard at work over a long time'. If you want to unlock the full power of kung fu, it is not going to be easy: you are going to have to work, you are going to have to sacrifice and you are going to have to suffer – over a long time. There really is no such thing as a free lunch." (Master Iain Armstrong)

A while back some of us read Eugene Peterson's classic book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* that echoes this same theme, but from a Christian perspective. But let's face it, while the idea of all of us being like grasshoppers in relation to God our sovereign Creator makes some sense, how many of us really want to be like a grasshopper?

This week I was also curious as to what is the difference between a grasshopper and locust. While there are a few differences - they are not the same, but they are very similar. Probably the two main differences I could find are that grasshoppers are primarily solitary creatures who are not particularly social except to mate, However, there is something within locusts that allows them to connect with other locusts to form large groups that can swarm. Locusts also have the ability to fly much farther than grasshoppers. And we know that when locusts swarm, they can destroy acres of vegetation very quickly. Remember that one of the plagues that God sends upon Egypt and the Pharaoh when the Pharaoh refuses to release God's people who are in slavery in Egypt is the plague of locusts. So, apparently God doesn't view swarms of locusts as a good thing. But here we're talking about grasshoppers and how small they are, and we are, in relation to God.

The only other place in the Bible that I can remember grasshoppers being used as a description is in the book of Numbers. This takes place after the plagues in Egypt and Pharaoh has let the people of God go through the Red Sea. They have wandered through the desert for 40 years, and they are on the border of the promised land that God had promised that they would inhabit one day. They send spies and to look at this land and its people. But when the spies return, they describe the people there. This is what they say: "All the people we saw there are of great size . . . We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them." (Numbers 13:32-33) Once again, human beings are compared to grasshoppers as a way of conveying how small we seem, not only to others, but sometimes to ourselves.

Maybe in comparison to some of the problems and challenges we are facing today, not only the pandemic, but the emotional, economic, and even spiritual challenges -- we feel small,

insignificant, weary, tired, and needing strength to make it through. It's at this point that we need to remember that while Isaiah starts out comparing us to grasshoppers, it doesn't end there. Listen again to what Isaiah says:

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

While we may grow tired and weary in life, especially during this pandemic, God never grows tired or weary. That's important to remember. God never grows tired or weary even though we do. That's good news, but it doesn't end there. Isaiah reminds us that while we cannot understand or fathom fully the mind of God, we can remember that God “gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.” And whether we are young or old, whether we are youths or chronologically mature, just trying to put one foot in front of the other and keep going, Isaiah says “those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.”

And instead of comparing us to grasshoppers, Isaiah uses a wonderful image when he says, “they will soar on wings like eagles; They will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” While we may feel small like grasshoppers, God wants us to soar like eagles. That is what God wants us to be like!

There is a story I have shared with some of you before about a man out west who found an eagle's egg and put it into the nest of a prairie chicken. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them. All his life, the changeling eagle, thinking he was a prairie chicken, did what the prairie chickens did. He scratched in the dirt for seeds and insects to eat. He clucked and cackled. And he flew in a brief thrashing of wings and flurry of feathers no more than a few feet off the ground. After all, that's how prairie chickens were supposed to fly. Years passed. And the changeling eagle grew very old. One day, he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. Hanging with graceful majesty on the powerful wind currents, it soared with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings. “What a beautiful bird!” said the changeling eagle to his neighbor. “What is it?” “That's an eagle – the chief of the birds,” the neighbor clucked. “But don't give it a second thought. You could never be like him.” So, the changeling eagle never gave it another thought. And it died thinking it was a prairie chicken. (Ted Engstrom, *The Pursuit of Excellence*)

My sense is that often times, like the eagle in that story who thought he was a prairie chicken, we need to remember who we are. To put it in the context of our passage from Isaiah that we have read this morning, God desires us to be like eagles, and yet we often forget that and return to living our lives like grasshoppers. Maybe we listen to voices that try to tell us we really are nothing more than grasshoppers -- that is our lot in life and there is no escaping it. But when we face the challenges of life, when we feel weary and tired and need strength, we need to remember who we are and Whose we are. We are children and men and women of God, loved by God, made in the image of God, redeemed, and forgiven of the sin and brokenness in our lives. And as one of our Presbyterian catechisms reminds us, we belong to God. And the God who loves us wants us to “soar on wings like eagles.”

What is that like? You may remember a poem that has been read over the years on different occasions. I remember it being read during the funeral service remembering those NASA astronauts who died in the Challenger explosion. It was written by John Gillespie Magee – a pilot and poet who died as a result of a mid-air collision during World War II. (June 9, 1922 – December 11, 1941)

HIGH FLIGHT

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air....
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark nor even eagle flew—
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Now we may never be able to actually fly like an eagle, but when we are renewed with God's grace, we are given the strength to walk and not be faint, to run and not grow weary, and maybe even to “soar” through life even as we face life's greatest challenges. The promise is that God will see us through. That is our hope. It is not hope in our own strength or our own ability to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. No, it comes from faith and hope in the God who made all creation - who cares for us no matter how insignificant and “grasshopper-like” we may feel.

Earlier I talked about the TV show *Kung Fu* and described that beginning scene Caine or Grasshopper -- a young Buddhist monk being challenged to take the pebble from his master's hand. Finally, when he is matured and grown, he is able to snatch the pebble from the hand of his mentor. And it's at that point when the older monk says to him, “It is time for you to leave.” And

“Grasshopper” enters the long, somewhat arduous journey of his life. As we know from experience, life is not always easy. As Isaiah says, “even you grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall.” But we each have this journey in life.

Here at Johns Creek Presbyterian Church, we have adopted a motto: Give, Go, Live. Even in a pandemic we can still Give, Go, and Live. For now, there may be limits for how we do that. We've all had to adjust, and yet God calls each one of us, and all of us together, to take one step at a time - strengthened by God's grace to do whatever it is God calls us to do. We can give of ourselves and our time to others. We are limited for now for how far we can actually go, but we can go to zoom meetings or reach out by phone and make a difference in the lives of others. And we can live even in the midst of these challenging times because we have hope. The book of Hebrews reminds us that “faith is confidence in what we hope for an assurance about what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1, NIV) And Isaiah says, “but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.” So, hold on to that hope -- knowing God is holding on to you!

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.