

Where We Find Our Strength

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Isaiah 40:21-31 and I Corinthians 9:16-23

Like life itself, there are no typical days in the life of a church. Even so, let me tell you about this past Friday. The regular things happened. The sextons removed snow, and lots of it. Lots and lots of emails were sent and received; some were even returned. Phone calls were made. Food was delivered for RAIHN. Committees don't usually meet on Fridays, but there were small groups of people gathering here and there to work on tasks. We are putting finishing touches on the annual report, on the March church newsletter, on plans for Lent, which, as you have heard, begins in just over a week.

Many of the things we were working on – staff and volunteers together – are done at the places where you work, offices of one kind or another, profit and not-for-profit. While this work is important, so is yours; it all matters.

And what I am about to describe is also no more or no less important than the things all of us do; I share them, in fact, because they represent your life, and mine, and the nature of life itself, as it is lived out in a community of faith.

I headed to Strong to visit a member of the church. She is making progress on her journey to recovery. Church members are helping with food for the family during this time, and she is on our congregational prayer list. We spoke for a while and then ended our time together in prayer. As I left, I waited a while at the elevator. You wait for elevators a lot at Strong. A nurse got on with me. "Thank God it's Friday," she said, to no one in particular. Thank God indeed, I replied, and we shared a little human moment of solidarity. As I was heading to my car, I saw another church member, who volunteers at Strong by driving a cart taking patients to the cancer center. We shared a brief greeting and I thought for a moment, as I was walking down that long hall to the parking garage. I uttered a little prayer, for all those in that hospital, in all hospitals, and all caring for them, cancer patients, those recovering from injury, those facing diseases of all kinds.

When I returned to church, I put the finishing touches on an afternoon memorial service. The man who had died had been a long-time Rochesterian who lived primarily elsewhere now. He was not a church member *per se*, though many of you knew him and were present Friday afternoon. He had faced a long bout with cancer. And we did what we do. We read scripture; we prayed prayers; we sang hymns. The gathered congregation wept some and laughed some and stayed, it seems to me, a very long time in the sanctuary visiting with one another. It may have been because they didn't want to go back outside and face the weather, but my hunch was that it was something deeper than that.

Following the service a group of musicians brought instruments into the sanctuary, preparing for a Saturday rehearsal for an upcoming concert. You might know this only if you read the bulletin and newsletter, but ever since the sanctuary renovation, more and more groups are seeking to use the

sanctuary and chapel for such events. It is a great way for us to share our space creatively, and a great way for us to connect to many beyond our walls.

Finally, with things buttoned up pretty well, I headed out, this time to attend a memorial service for the father of a colleague. Though he lived well into his nineties and lived a long and full life, his death was not expected. The gathering captured that sweet and tender combination of grief and remembrance and gratitude. And, again, we did what we do. We read scripture; we prayed prayers; we sang hymns. I was sitting with some Third Church choir members and I must say we rocked the harmony on “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” and “Now Thank We All Our God.”

I thought, as I pulled into our garage, about that day. Lots of ordinary, quotidian things. Small decisions to be made, emails and texts and phone calls. Snow to be shoveled and car windshields to be cleared. For many of you, children to be readied for school. For many others of you, loved ones to be visited here and there. Food to be purchased. Bills to be paid. Some of you going to work in jobs you love; some of you going to work in jobs you don't love; some of you longing for work. All of us in relationships of one kind or another that ebb and flow in their strength and health.

I thought about all of that, and I thought of our member in the hospital, and in other care facilities. I thought about how that one journey represents so many journeys. I thought of the two memorial services. In this case, two long lives. I thought of the journeys of those who died, and all of the loved ones who made that journey with them. They will continue to remember, to give thanks, to grieve and mourn. I don't know about you, but I must confess that I think about my own mom in those moments, and her journey, and our family's journey, and our grief and gratitude.

“Life is difficult,” M. Scott Peck famously wrote in *The Road Less Travelled*. And it is. This past Friday was only a snapshot of the lives that we live, filled with what they are filled with. Rabbi Harold Kushner's well-know book was often mistakenly called *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, when in fact its title was *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, the presumed reality being that they will.

What happens when they do? Where will we find the resources to manage, to persevere, to survive, in some cases, simply put one foot in front of the other?

In our Isaiah passage for the morning, God is understood to be wildly transcendent, creating galaxies and universes and heavens and oceans. And God is also understood to be immanent, close to us as we inhale and exhale, in sync with our very beating hearts.

Walter Brueggemann writes that “This God is tireless, never faint or weak, never lacking in vitality or energy.” Look how any times Isaiah utilizes the words “faint” or “weak” or “weary.” That is us, perhaps not every day, certainly not every moment, but it is our reality. And in the face of all that, Brueggemann writes that “the nonfainting God ministers to fainting creation. The nonweary God gives life to weary creatures.” And so we are to wait, waiting as an act of faith, to be transformed by the God who will bring us the same life that has been brought to all creation.

And Paul, writing to the small, struggling church at Corinth. Last week he was speaking of food, but not food so much, but how those with one level of resources co-exist with those at another level, how we place our needs aside for the good of the community. Perhaps that is one place where we find strength – in compassionate community.

Paul understood this. He writes “To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak.” Here “winning the weak” is less about the victory and more about how those with lesser resources are welcomed into the community.

Paul would see the church as an amalgamation of those of different abilities and understandings and capacities. That is probably still true. But I also like to view the church as an amalgamation of people who carry *all* of those things around with us all the time, each of us – joys and sorrows, strengths and weaknesses, our better angels and our lesser angels.

Early on in seminary a professor spoke about how we, as ministers, not only will provide support in helping people navigate life’s difficulties but how we, as humans first, will navigate our own difficulties, not apart from the life of the community, but within it.

Where do we find our strength? Within ourselves, of course, finding the resources to make it day-by-day. We have reserves of courage and strength and hope that we call upon. And the circles of family and friends and loved ones surrounding us, who pick us up and carry us forward when we need it. I often wonder at the conclusion of a memorial service how people make it without community, and without faith, to hold them up, to walk along side, to pray, to laugh, to weep, to fix casseroles and to embody everything those casseroles represent.

We cling fast to the promises of the God who accompanies us, when we are weary, or faint, or exhausted, or powerless. Hear these words again: “God does not faint or grow weary; God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless...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.” May we be renewed. May we find strength, this day, and for the living of all our days. Amen.