

“The Cure for Fatigue”

Isaiah 40:21-31

February 7, 2021

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“Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength...”

- Isaiah 40:31

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, help us to wait upon you: to hear your word of comfort and strength: to walk with you in the power of your Spirit: In Christ’s name we pray: Amen.

Meditation

There is a little picture of Winnie the Pooh and Piglet walking along, talking: Piglet asks Pooh a question and then says, “I am tired of all this,” and Pooh responds, “I am too, Piglet, I am too.”

Maybe you can relate. Feelings of tiredness abound. And not just tired, but weary, weary in the sense that you don’t want to pay attention anymore, or you don’t care anymore, weary in the sense that you don’t see what the future may hold. With all the challenges we face – COVID pandemic, political unrest and violence, racial injustice, economic struggle – it is no wonder that many people feel their energies taxed. I know I feel that way. I imagine you might too.

In fact, in doing research for this sermon, I realized how we have developed a new vocabulary for trying to understand our situation, with words like pandemic fatigue and news fatigue, to name two.¹

Indeed, I came across a cute picture depicting what many are calling “Zoom fatigue,” due to the number of hours many are spending in front of a computer screen, speaking to people – Zoom fatigue. Hang in there, baby, as the saying goes!²

¹ “The Cure for News Fatigue,” in *Homiletics* (February 7, 2021) at www.homileticsonline.org. See also, Jeffrey Gottfried, “Americans’ News Fatigue Isn’t Going Away,” *Fact Tank: News in the Numbers* (February 26, 2020).

² Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy, “How to Combat Zoom Fatigue” at *Harvard Business Review* (April 29, 2020).

Another term I have found is “Decision Fatigue,” experienced by folks in leadership positions, whether in schools, or government, or businesses, or even churches. One pastor in Tennessee has mentioned that he is “tired of dealing with all the decisions he has to make related the COVID pandemic, trying to do the ‘right thing,’ when everyone else sees the matter differently.” Decision fatigue.³

I read a blog of a church consultant several months ago who projected that over half of clergy in churches will probably leave the ministry following the pandemic. That number seems a bit high to me, but I would not be surprised. I have heard similar numbers about health care workers and teachers.⁴

In a “Zoom call” on Friday, with other colleagues in ministry, for example, I heard the word “weary” used quite a bit to describe how they felt. Again, not tired *per se*, but weary, or the feeling you just do not want to go on, and the weariness of making decisions, the feeling of just wanting out.

I think it is in the book called *Apollo’s Arrow*, a book about the coronavirus, where I saw it referenced that if you think that what we are experiencing is new think again: human responses to a pandemic seem to go in multiple directions, whether in ancient Greece or in modern America. The author contends that, unlike wars or famines, in which folks seem to be able to come together and focus more on the problem, pandemics reveal the opposite, with folks behaving in all kinds of ways.⁵

What I don’t think is debatable, however, is the sense of separation and isolation we feel; or the growing concerns we might have with friends who are experiencing depression, matters pertaining to mental health and substance abuse, suicide, domestic violence, not to mention the ways underserved communities are coping – all these are prevalent anyway, but in a pandemic, exacerbated.⁶

³ Diana Chandler, “Pastors Express ‘Decision Fatigue’ as COVID-19 Pandemic Lingers” in *Word & Way Newsletter* (January 26, 2021).

⁴ Leah MarieAnn Klett, “Post-COVID Church: Expert Identifies Two Biggest Concerns Facing the Church” in *The Christian Post* (November 19, 2020).

⁵ Nicholas Christatakis, *Apollo’s Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of the Coronavirus on the Way We Live* (New York, NY: Little Brown Spark Publishing, 2020), 3.

⁶ See the Center for Disease Control and Prevention *Weekly Newsletter* (August 14, 2020). As of June 2020, four out of ten adults in the United States reported struggling with mental health issues or substance abuse; see also, Shari Rudavsky, “Health Care Disparities Rising in Pandemic” in *The Sunday Star* (January 31, 2021).

Collective Trauma

Now if all this makes you tired, you are not alone! I am tired just mentioning all this!

But let's face it: we are going through what many are calling "collective trauma" like none we have experienced before; and while each of us is impacted differently, depending on our circumstances, our common-coping mechanisms are in over-drive.⁷ We are trying to make simple what is very complex, and that means we might sometimes feel trapped, or tempted, in wanting to make things too simple, by wanting to be right all the time, or thinking we can control everything.⁸ All of which requires more energy!⁹

I think we all are trying to find the words to say for what we are experiencing. Indeed, we might feel as the people of Israel felt *during the Exile*, when they asked, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Ps. 137:4). The Babylonians had taken the people out of their familiar environment; they had become *dislocated* from what they knew, *uncertain* about the future, and, like us, they were asking questions like, "How are we going to help each other get through this moment?" "How do we minister to folks who might not want to connect?" "What is *God* trying to teach us?"¹⁰

They are questions that come out of a moment in history when Israel had to rethink how it would respond; and prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah try to help them understand that proverbial *Wizard of Oz* saying that "We are not in Kansas anymore." In other words, we are in a very strange place. We can't go back to the way things were, but we are not quite sure about the way things will be – yet.

Isaiah's Word of Hope

Indeed, in one of the most famous passages in the Bible, the prophet Isaiah seeks to remind the people – those who had been *isolated* from what was familiar in Jerusalem – about the ground of their hope and comfort (Is. 40:21-31). And he reminds the people with a series of questions about their faith: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you from the beginning? Have

⁷ "Exhausted? – Maybe You Are 'Mindtrapped'" at *Congregational Consulting* (February 1, 2021) at www.congregationalconsulting.org.

⁸ Jennifer Garvey Berger, *Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps: How to Thrive in Complexity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See "Exhausted? – Maybe You Are 'Mindtrapped'" at *Congregational Consulting* (February 1, 2021) at www.congregationalconsulting.org.

you not understood from the foundations of the earth?” – God is creator and liberator! *God is the Lord of heaven and earth* (v. 21-22).

Don't underestimate, Isaiah says, what *this God* will do, when compared with the gods and goddesses surrounding you in Babylon! Nothing is going to defeat this God, or the purposes of God, for the good of God's creation, or for God's people! No matter how difficult the moment (Rom. 8:28).

This is the reason for Isaiah's hope: it is *in the very nature of God to create new beginnings for his people, to offer a way when there appears to be no way!*

Think, for example, of how *God* led Israel out of the wilderness *following the Exodus*: it was during this *wilderness time of struggle* that Israel developed the Tabernacle, the priesthood, the Sanhedrin, the Torah, and the twelve Tribes. It was actually a time of creativity.¹¹ Or, consider how *God* led the people of Israel back to Israel *following the Exile in Babylon*: it was during this *time of disturbance* that Israel created the synagogue, the teaching class called the rabbis, and wisdom literature.¹² God did not just create and then stop creating in Genesis. God is creating all the time, even now. New things are being born.¹³

Think of all the online-learning opportunities now occurring, for example, or of the ways some churches are now cooperating with other churches because they may not have the resources, or think of the different ways we are trying to connect and encourage differently, or the way we have had to adapt and experiment.

What's the old saying? Necessity is the mother of invention!

An Isaiah Moment?

Perhaps we are living in what I want to call an “Isaiah Moment”: what do you think?¹⁴

A moment when people feel isolated, separated, or fatigued, but also a moment when people are looking for hope, comfort, for new beginnings: a moment when so many are waiting for a return to some sense of normalcy. Waiting for the pandemic to end. Waiting to return to work, to church, to family. Waiting to see

¹¹ Canon Richard LeSuer, “To Live through a Pandemic Is to Occupy a ‘Plain of Waiting,’” in *Church Times* (February 1, 2021).

¹² Cf., Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978).

¹³ Genesis begins with the story of God creating the heavens and the earth (1-3). The book of Revelation ends with God re-creating the heavens and the earth (20-21). God creates throughout.

¹⁴ See Raymond Fung, *The Isaiah Vision: An Ecumenical Strategy for Congregational Evangelism* (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications, 1992).

grandchildren again. Waiting for kids to return to school full time. Waiting for vaccines. Waiting for people to act with more understanding! And it can be exhausting!

But here is the thing, and I mention this as a criticism of myself, if not most of American Protestantism: too often we make things about us, and we leave God out of the picture!¹⁵

And I wonder sometimes if therein lies a great deal of our fear and fatigue.

After all, if I hear Isaiah correctly, it is *God* who is sovereign. It is *God* who does not faint and grow weary. It is *God* who gives power to the faint, and who strengthens the powerless. It is *God* whose understanding is unsearchable (vv.28-29). And it is because of *who this God is*, that we can walk and not faint; that we can run and not be weary; that we can mount up with wings like eagles (v. 31).

It is why those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength (v. 31), which doesn't mean we simply wait around and do nothing, allowing all the bad news to wash over us, or that we be careless, doing what we want. No, it means that we look to God to provide, and that we seek out what the Spirit is doing and sayings, and lean into what Christ has done for us. It means waiting for that day when we all will gather around the table and encourage each other, and help each other; for the cure to our fatigue is not one more thing, but the Bread of Heaven himself, the One whose grace is the medicine for our weary souls. Amen.

¹⁵ See Jason Vickers, "Is It Time to Leave the Rif Raff for Rome," in *Firebrand* (February 1, 2021); cf., Phillip Cary *Good News for Anxious Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), especially the Introduction.