

Waiting for Tomorrow

Exodus 40:21-31

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By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Does anyone have plans to watch the Super Bowl today? Two football teams, the Philadelphia Eagles and the New England Patriots, will play for the coveted national title as the best professional football team this year. Or, as reported in *The LA Times* this morning, “The Patriots against everybody.” Only one team will receive the coveted trophy made of sterling silver and sometimes called the “tiffany trophy.” It was named the Vince Lombardy Trophy in 1970 after the death of Lombardy who died from cancer. He is best known as the coach of the Green Bay Packers, winning the first two Super Bowls under his leadership.

Vince Lombardy was a football version of John Wooden, UCLA’s basketball coach, who won so often, but more importantly won the admiration of those who played for him and those who cheered for him. Lombardy and Wooden were both known for their simple and uncomplicated approach to sports, their philosophy held many life lessons for others. Some of Vince Lombardy’s famous quotes include:

“Teams do not go physically flat, they go mentally stale.”

“Individual commitment to a group effort – that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.” (I might add “a church work.”)

“Leadership rests not only upon ability, not only upon capacity; having the capacity to lead is not enough. The leader must be willing to use it.”

“It is essential to understand that battles are primarily won in the hearts.”

“Confidence is contagious. So is lack of confidence.”

We're learning a great deal about physical limits and mental capacity to overcome perceived limits in the science of endurance. Many studies focused on the body but increasingly the focus now for elite athletes is on the psychology of sports.

The approaching Winter Olympics in Korea has a number of elite athletes mentally preparing for the games. In a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal*, one writer reflected on the mental tricks of athletic endurance.¹ He tells the story of Slovenian cross-country skier Petra Majdic in the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver. Petra had skidded off an icy corner and fell more than 10 feet into a rocky creek bed. She dragged herself to a medical tent on site for an ultra sound to determine how badly she was injured. The doctor said, "I don't know, but it looks like everything is okay." She was in excruciating pain that made her shriek every time she exhaled. "Later that evening, after gritting her teeth through a qualifying race, a quarterfinal, a semifinal and a final, where she fought to an improbable bronze medal, she finally went to the hospital where she was diagnosed correctly this time with four broken ribs. That stabbing pain she felt during the semifinal? That was one of the broken ribs puncturing her lung, which then collapsed." What drove Petra during the long painful day, after being misdiagnosed, to a bronze medal? "I thought that Slovenians need some message that it's possible," she told herself. "At the end of that path, the goal will be reachable. And you will have suffered to do it, but it doesn't matter. You can do better."²

The prophet Isaiah is saying something similar, "I thought that God's people need some message that it's possible. At the end of the path, the goal the Lord has set before us will be reachable, not without suffering but it doesn't matter." If we think too little of ourselves and our capabilities, we certainly think too little of our God. Our text today is written for those who have lost their confidence and whose hearts are fainting within them. They were living in exile and self-pity. The prophet is speaking to those ". . . whose faith is flagging and who were at the point of letting themselves drift. At the same time there were others who were living in the past. They kept the old rituals but didn't believe the rituals had any power to lead them to expect any new thing from their

1 Hutchinson, Alex "Head Games: The Mental Tricks of Athletic Endurance (*Wall Street Journal Review* Saturday-Sunday February 3-4 2018) C1

2 Ibid.

God.”³ Their worship was lifeless because they no longer really believed in the power and majesty of their God. The Lord is the creator, the God of history, whom no nation or prince in all their might can contend with. This is the Lord of Lord and King of Kings. Several years ago a book entitled, “*Your God is Too Small*” was written by J.B. Phillips.⁴ That is the message of Isaiah.

In the midst of difficulty, we find whether our faith has real content to it or is merely sentimentality. It is the storms of life that determine whether our lives are built on the rock or merely shifting sands. The people who first received Isaiah’s rhetorical questions were in exile, living in subjugation to a foreign power, wondering whether their faith had been misplaced in God. “How could this happen? God is supposed to protect us from this sort of thing.” One friend recently described his situation when he said to me, “You know, you try to do the right thing all your life, and then you find yourself starting over at 50 with little to show for all your work.” That’s precisely the kind of feeling that Isaiah’s listeners knew.

“Have you not known, have you not heard? Have you not been told from the beginning, have you not understood from the foundations? The Lord is the Everlasting God, the Creator who does not faint and grow weary.” These rhetorical questions seek to frame the matter differently. It’s not that God is absent or ineffective, but a deeper mystery is unfolding.

The complaint against God is based on poor information. “The non-fainting God ministers to a fainting creation. The non-weary God gives life to weary creatures.” Jesus, centuries later, says, “Come to me all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens and I will give you rest.”⁵ The contrast between God and humankind could not be greater. The best and only hope is to stay close to the Lord, who can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Trouble may diminish our portfolios but it will build our character. Adversity may take a toll on the exterior of life but strengthens the interior. Difficulty has a way of moving us from mere wishes in life to the motivating drive of a sense of purpose, which requires dedication and commitment. Every athlete in the Winter Olympics knows this. It is for

³ Westermann, Claus, Isaiah 40-66 (*The Old Testament Library* Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1969) p.6

⁴ Phillips, J.B., *Your God is Too Small*, Touchstone (June 1, 2004)

⁵ Matthew 11:28

this reason that in the New Testament Book of James it reads, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”⁶

In the face of persecution and adversity that would strike fear into any of us, the Apostle Paul wrote, “We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”⁷

Faith produces perspective, which in turn leads to endurance and then to purpose and resiliency. People of genuine faith seem to have a non-anxious presence in uncertainty. They just seem to soar in life like the eagle, even on the winds of adversity. Sometimes what is needed is a point of reference outside of yourself. Think of a ship in a storm tossed at sea that finally sees a lighthouse in the distance. Faith provides that kind of perspective, a steadiness of purpose that leads to endurance and direction.

Disciples, then and now, discover in the midst of life's storms that this same Jesus who fed people, and healed them, and helped them find a sense of purpose in living, and taught them discipline, and set limits for their behaviors, and turned them towards one another in love and forgave them their sins, releasing them from the burden of their regrets and shame — this Jesus also had the power to still the storms of chaos and push back the powers of evil that raged against them. Jesus has the power to restore peace to a storm-ravaged life. Here is the creator in human form. Now the re-creator again bringing peace and order to the chaos of life. What began in creation is being consummated in Jesus Christ. And here is a new Exodus proclaimed by Isaiah, a returning to the land of promise and a new way of life.

6 James 1:2-4

7 2 Cor. 4:16-18

God is not unconcerned or unaware of your chaos this morning. And God is not powerless against whatever storm is blowing in your life. Whether you are facing an internal squall with your own identity or mental health, or some family crisis, or relationship turmoil, or your financial security is “taking in water”, or you’re swimming in grief, or frightened by ill health — God is present and not asleep. You may be fainting this morning but the Lord God is not. The disciples learned what the prophets proclaimed: “Battles are primarily won in the heart.” And, “Confidence is contagious.”⁸

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? 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. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted 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.”⁹

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine,” says the Lord. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.”¹⁰ Wait for the Lord the way an athlete waits for the chance to compete. You and I are capable of more than we think, because our Lord God is greater than we think. Amen.

8 Ibid.

9 Isaiah 40:21, 28-31

10 Isaiah 43:1-4