

**“Living Securely With Those Eagle Wings”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Martha Shiverick**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**February 5, 2006**  
**Text: Isaiah 40: 21-31**

The scripture passage this morning is one that fills us and gives us strength. It is one to contemplate in times of crisis, when we need to be lifted up and held by God. It is also one for the church to contemplate as well. It is an aid in church health. It speaks to God's power in might and how we might feel empowered if we turn to God and acknowledge God's rule. If we turn to God, we will not feel weary. If we allow God to carry us, we will soar! One commentary I read described this part of Isaiah as being the opening to a court case on God's work in the world. Much like in the book of Job, the question is asked where God is and a case is given for God's rule and sovereignty to the earth. Israel has had it bad. The complaint is made that other nations are rising in power. The scripture says that these are but grass to God. God need only to breathe on them and they will wither and blow away. The question is asked how to compare God's rule? Well, we know the answer to that ... God create the world, God has control over the entire world. God's rule is incomparable. SO the final question is asked, then why does God seem so distant? And that answer is that God is not. You need only to reach out and God will hold you up, empower you, and give you the direction and strength you need to do God's work.

Read Isaiah 40:21-31

In my previous life, while on the Presbytery staff, part of my job was in church development and church transformation which is what we used to refer to as redevelopment. I worked with our Presbytery's new church developments which there were still far too few and helped existing churches redirect their focus and mission to meet with the changing times and demographics of the areas in which they were placed. And in one case, I helped a church move to a new location where they might have a better chance of flourishing and answering God's call into the future. The frustration with the job was that being Presbyterian and having no Bishop with divine authority, we could not enter into the churches until asked. And often when asked, the church was so bad off that all that could be offered was a small amount of funding to begin a redevelopment project with an exhausted congregation feeling defeated which was doomed for failure. What we really needed to do was to be a hospice to these congregations, helping them to die with dignity holding up with thanksgiving the past and glory times and the wonderful ministries and missions they had accomplished to God's glory. My opinion was that the energy and resources of the presbytery should be in two areas of work, one priority to help bring about more new church developments in the areas where the population within our Presbytery is growing and moving and the other priority being to help the successful healthy congregations stay that way.

I worked with the Church Development and Redevelopment Ministry of the Presbytery of which Steve Reger was a member. Together with others, I studied the post modern church, the missional church, and took many people with me to our national church's new church development and transformation conferences and seminars. But probably the thing that made the largest impression on me was visiting all the churches within our Presbytery and seeing what was similar in the healthy churches and also what the dieing churches shared in common.

I observed the following truths throughout the churches with which I worked. Churches are living entities. They are born, and they either flourish or are "failure to thrive" within their first few years. Many New Church Developments do not make it but I strongly believe that it should not frighten us from trying again. The New Church Developments that make it through that first hurdle then go through a vital vibrant period of growth, and as they mature and become established they must continue to adapt to meet the changes in their locations demographics and the spiritual needs of their congregation and neighborhood. These changes must be seen to be the new mission of the church, and must be constantly reassessed and adapted and changed or the congregation will wither and die. Several constants should be mentioned here that I saw in ALL churches. Any church that was around in the 50's and 60's or even the sixties, had a glory day which the older members still refer to. These old days should be celebrated but realistically looked at as a part of history. We move on. Any church whose leadership says things like, 'we always have done it like' that or 'we tried that before and it didn't work', will die. Expressions like that are terminal cancers. They cause exhaustion within the leadership of the church and a feeling of low self esteem within the congregation. I went to lead worship at one church where the congregation that Sunday was under 20 people. The elder who greeted me said it was OK if I didn't preach my sermon since the congregation was so small. Attitudes like that finally kill the church. People will not join churches like these. These churches have withered and are dieing and as the scripture describes, will blow away. Another dieing church is the mega church of the last decade. They were dependant on the one charismatic pastor, who when they stepped down left the congregation with a huge corporation to run with out leadership. Churches are congregations, not one pastor. These churches did not see that God was in charge and that Jesus was the head of the church. They made the mistake of the second question addressed in today's scripture lesson. They did not rely on God as the power of the church.

So why are some churches healthy and why do people attend them. People come to church to be fed, to be spiritually nourished, to be empowered by God's love, and to be challenged to make a difference in the world as a follower of Jesus Christ. I interviewed visitors of the churches I considered dieing within our Presbytery and they all said the same thing. The congregations might have been nice, treated them well as visitors, but they felt that the church expected more than they could give at this time. Of course they did, they were dieing! They looked at the visitor as their life line, supplying people for the congregational roles, and funds and new volunteer blood to the ill church. People would come to the churches wanting spiritual food and would leave feeling sucked dry!

And the churches that were thriving within our denomination were feeding people, not with food, although that is nice, but with the spiritual nourishment, with the knowledge that God is with and for them and a sense that God cares and is calling them into this community for a purpose. The words missional church and purpose driven church is thrown around about this. In real talk, the visitors left feeling spiritually charged and spiritually directed to the mission of their church, of the work to which God was calling them.

I learned that the church of the future might be different. The growing churches were not afraid to be multi-sensory, grabbing a new generation that lives in it, the growing church is multi-cultural to reflect the growing populations within our society, are not afraid to use multi-medias in an era where the computer and its uses allows it, and are intentionally missional. Although I'd like to talk about all these characteristics, this morning I will dwell on one. That is the emphasis on God's call to the mission in church.

The healthy growing churches were not all the same. Although some of our conservative churches are growing, some mainline ones are as well. One of the fastest growing churches in the denomination is in western central Ohio. The congregation took out the side pews in the sanctuary and put in café style seating. Good coffee and a continental breakfast were available to take to the seats. At first the congregation sure that no one would sit at the tables but after a few weeks those places were occupied first. What do you think would happen if we did that in the chapel at the 8:30 service? I wonder if we advertised it, whether a whole group of Sunday coffee shop dwellers would also shop for spiritual food? Membership certainly grew in the church outside of Dayton. The Starbucks worship atmosphere might have attracted the people to the church, but what got them coming back and becoming a part of the mission of the church, is that the church has a lot of spiritual energy around a mission program and people come, sense the positive energy and the feeling of being under the power of God's call and direction, and they get charged up too.

And what about us here? Just this week I was talking with a couple who are long time members of this church. Although we did talk about some of the good old times, this couple sees the congregational energy and health here at Fairmount growing and at a high. They were upbeat about the future and saw us heading into a vibrant time in our history. I do too. Several members of our church in the last few weeks have commented on our congregational life here as being fun. Calvin might roll over in his grave at the idea of us thinking of our church life as fun, but fun means alive and vigorous. AND, FUN means the opposite of draining and dieing. I believe what the church has got right at this time is the combination of spiritually feeding the congregation at the same time as pointing out the missions to which we are called as Christians and members of the Fairmount Congregation. If we were just calling people to mission or just nurturing them, the health of the congregation would not be as strong.

Think of how we nurture our members. Through worship which includes awesome music, through Christian Education for all ages, through small group ministries for all ages, through the loving outreach to the congregation through the ministry of the deacons

and Stephen ministers, the members of Fairmount know they are loved by God. In our nurturing ministries, we emulate the love of God in order that all here renew our strength, that we do not grow weary and feel drained, that we feel the energy of God's Holy Spirit, to soar like on wings like eagles and do God's work in the world. Pumped up like that we go out and do the individual and corporate missions to which God has called us.

Let us now turn back to this morning's scripture passage. It is a speech made to Israel which is intended to drive home matters that are already known, or that Israel has forgotten about God. Its purpose is to lift up strength, and to bolster and rejuvenate. Stated again is the fact that God created the world and everything is within God's authority. However Israel feels exhausted and weary. Like a dying church, Israel feels a distance from God's presence and purpose. Their cry is honest and you can feel the anguish in what is written. They do not understand God. They feel that their way or direction is hidden from God. They feel withered; they feel they could be blown away like dry grass. What is their mission? what is their purpose?, where is God? This cry is what I heard from many of the churches within our Presbytery. Churches with this cry are terminal. However the last lines of the passage reflect the healthy congregation. They reflect the relationship and love that God has promised Israel and us. God promised to all who hope in the Lord that our strength would be renewed, that we could run and not grow weary, that we could walk and not be faint, and that we could live life as if we are on eagle's wings. So Fairmount Family, I believe we have turned to the Lord and that we are now soaring on wings like eagles. We have faith and hope in the Lord, that God is with us and is holding us in our ministry, and God has empowered us. We feel God building us up and sending us forward. Let us trust that God has a wonderful ride in store for us in the work and missions set before us in our personal lives and at Fairmount church. Amen.

**The Rev. Martha M. Shiverick M.D.V., M.S.**