

“Be Born in Us Today Bringing Renewal”

Many of us have come to love the Christmas carol “O Holy Night.” My initial encounter with the carol was in grade school, when one of my classmates insisted on singing it as a solo at our annual Christmas school concert. Unfortunately for the rest of us in the class, this young girl couldn’t quite reach the high notes. Consequently, this carol has not always been in the top tier of my favorite Christmas music.

First written in 1843 by French poet Placide Cappeau, the lyrics were translated into English a few years later by American pastor John Sullivan Dwight. The carol’s initial popularity is often traced to its third stanza cherished by abolitionists in the United States fighting for the freedom of African-American slaves. Lines from that stanza read:

*Truly he taught us to love one another;
His law is love and his gospel is peace;
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother,
And in his name all oppression shall cease ...*

These days the carol may be appreciated for still another reason: its recognition of a very weary world. The carol sings in stanza 1:

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
'Til he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn ...*

The carol sees a weary world thrilled by the hope of an end to a long and tiring life of unabated “*sin and error.*”

“O Holy Night” doesn’t stand alone in this recognition of a weary world. Edmund Sears’ classic carol, “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” written in 1849, describes the song of the Christmas angels floating over a “weary world” In stanza 2 he wrote:

*Still through the cloven skies they come
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heav’nly music floats*

O'er all the weary world ...

So with a cue from these carols, let me ask you: Are you weary? Are you exhausted? Are you fatigued? Will the song of the angels this Christmas float across a weary you? Do you maybe find yourself “in the middle of in-between,” waiting for resolution or reconciliation or vindication or at least a change—but with none of it in sight? What has you weary? Are you weary of circumstances, your age, your illness, your relationships, your job?

In J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the hobbit Bilbo Baggins says to Gandalf: *“I am old, Gandalf. I don’t look it, but I am beginning to feel it in my heart of hearts. Well-preserved indeed! Why, I feel all thin, sort of stretched, if you know what I mean: like butter that has been scraped over too much bread. That can’t be right. I need a change, or something.”*

Do you feel stretched thin? Are you winded or exhausted from a pace that has you spent, physically and emotionally? Have you just about given up hope that we can solve any of our big problems: the economy, war, sickness, tribalism, racism, immigration? Is it all too much—this marathon our life has become?

There are many ways to go when we are wearied by life. Isaiah counsels that with the Lord’s strength we can soar like an eagle. Yet weary people are often difficult people. We can live with despair. We can complain, and we can blame. How does the old proverb go (I think it also found its way on a T-shirt or two)? *“It’s hard to soar like an eagle when you’re surrounded by turkeys.”* When we get weary, we may not see the needs of those around us or the opportunities right before our eyes.

In each of us there is this struggle between weariness and being strong in the Lord. It is one aspect of the saint-and-sinner paradox in every Christian. American poet Carl Sandburg is credited with this introspective thought: *“There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud.”*

This evening's First Lesson from Isaiah is for the wallowing hippo in each of us. "Weary" is all over this text. Isaiah first uses the word to say that God does not faint or grow weary. Now that's good news! The One running the universe, Isaiah says, does not fatigue. You would if you were God. I would if I were God. Thank God we're not God!

With all God has to do and to be, you'd expect God would get weary at some point. God has always been and will be God. That's a long marathon of divine responsibility with some very high expectations. Isaiah reminds us that God never feels (how did Bilbo say it?) *"all thin, sort of stretched, like butter that has been scraped over too much bread."* In fact, God, says Isaiah, gives **"power to the faint"** and increases the strength of those with no strength left. In the long history of God and humanity, God has always been strength for the weary, a second and a third wind for those who are ready to fall.

Do you see what is happening here? Isaiah spoke words of comfort to people weary of the long wait for a Messiah. He spoke to a chosen people who were losing their sense of being chosen. Isaiah's comfort speech was for those who forgot the chapter in their history titled "the Exodus" and those who would spend decades as exiles in a strange land.

Today Isaiah's comfort reaches any of us who want to follow Jesus but find ourselves weak and weary. He doesn't bellow like some NFL line coach, *"Brace up! Lean into it! Dig deep! Don't go soft on me now!"* Isaiah doesn't even say, *"Be strong!"* or *"Be courageous!"* is if you can reach in deep and find that in yourself. What Isaiah does do is bring to remembrance the God who has always been there for the weary.

"Have you not known?" he asks. **"Have you not heard?"** To put it another way, *"Don't you remember? Have you forgotten?"* Isaiah is a remembrancer. Historically, kings had remembrancers in their court to remind the king of significant past events or commitments, lest the kingdom suffer from forgetting. So what we have in our text is a remembrancer speech, a comfort speech, turning us from our weariness to remember a tireless, an all-wise and all-powerful God.

Isaiah has us remember who God is and what God is like: ***“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 to him who has no might he increases strength”*** (verses 28-29).

More than this, though, Isaiah turns us to God, who offers divine strength to replace our weariness. There is a wonderful exchange here that some of you have experienced personally. The exchange is your weakness for the Lord’s strength. Isaiah puts it this way: ***“He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they 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”*** (verses 29-31).

Who doesn’t want to soar like an eagle? A classmate of mine, Dean Nadasdy, tells of a time when he was about seven years old, a friend of his wanted to fly. He was so taken by the idea of flying that he gave it a try from his garage roof, fortunately only about 12 feet off the ground. He wiped out and fell hard on the alley cement. ***“Like eagles,”*** Jesus says. ***“They shall mount up on wings like eagles.”*** The image presents an eagle ascending, well beyond expected boundaries. Eagles do that. They can fly at altitudes of 10,000-15,000 feet.

It isn’t a new image, this picture of an ascending eagle. When God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, God said, ***“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself”*** (Exodus 19:4). Isaiah no doubt is doing some remembrancing here. Our God has a history of taking the weary and putting us into eagle-like flight. For us, on this side of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has exchanged our long weariness of “sin and error” for a thrilling hope that rejoices in the strength of Christ to overcome sin, death and a very weary world. This is the God we know, the God we trust.

In one of his letters, the apostle Paul remembered how in his weakest moments, God's strength had come through. ***“When I am weak,”*** he wrote, ***“then I am strong”*** (2 Corinthians 12:20). That is the voice of someone acquainted with the exchange of the Lord's strength for our weariness. At the front of many churches (including more than one in the Cleveland area) is a replica of a sculpture originally done by Bertel Thorvaldsen, titled “Christus Consolator (Christ the Consoler).” When you look at the picture in your bulletin you recognize the extended hands of the often life-sized Christ figure are scarred by crucifixion nails. Standing before this image of Christ, one can hear the echo of his invitation in Matthew 11:28, ***“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”***

Rest for the weary. Strength for the weary. *“A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices, For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn ... ”* So we pray, *“Jesus, be born in us today.”*

Amen.