

## *Receiving Power*

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Isaiah 40:28-31; Mark 1:29-39  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
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“God’s understanding is beyond human reach, giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted.” I don’t know about you, but these words from Isaiah 40 – that particular phrasing is from the Common English Bible translation – can land in my life with a decent amount of force these days. The words that are used in Isaiah 40, words which Linton just read for us, are not words that seem remote these days; humans are described in this text as tired, weary, tired, exhausted, tired, weary, stumbling, tired, weary. Methinks I detect a theme here. And while, in their original context, these words were addressed to Jews who had been deported by the Babylonian Empire, uprooted from their security in their homeland and dislocated to an unfamiliar place where their values and their faith were not shared, where they were mocked and taunted, where they felt that everything that they had known and cherished and held dear had been ruined, and other powers now lorded over them – so you can imagine why they were tired, weary, and exhausted – while these words were not originally addressed to those of us in 2021, these words are clearly not trapped in the ancient past. For we, too, know a thing or two about being weary.

We are approaching a full year of our own experience of the pandemic. The availability of the vaccines is wondrous news and feels like a miracle, being rolled out and made available - a number of you have already begun to get yours - and you can find out eligibility guidelines and criteria at [fairfaxcounty.gov](http://fairfaxcounty.gov) or by talking with your healthcare provider. At the same time, words like “variants” and “virus strains” are finding their way into our vocabulary, and we are needing to maintain our vigilance with wearing masks, washing hands, and physical distancing. And not just the pandemic. Illnesses and cancer find their ways into our lives. Businesses and organizations are having to figure out how to adapt and thrive in this new environment. The realities of racial injustice endure among us, which is why Lewinsville is engaging the work of the Matthew 25 initiative around the realities and the issues of racism – the racism that is within us and around us. Political division and turbulence continue in our country and around the world. The words “tired” and “weary” can feel *very contemporary*.

Which is why Isaiah chapter 40 is such a gift to us. This text acknowledges human weariness as a reality, but it does what biblical faith always does. It brings human weariness and human loss and human pain into relationship with God’s renewing power. Isaiah 40, and biblical faith generally, hold human hurt in one hand

and trust in God's redeeming grace in the other. In doing this, biblical faith – which we at Lewinsville are seeking, in our halting, stumbling ways, to enact and practice – avoids the twin temptations of religious triumphalism and escapism on the one hand and secular despair on the other.

Secular despair – which has its liberal, moderate, and conservative expressions – is very aware of what is wrong in our world. It is very good at diagnosing the ills of society. But secular despair cuts itself off from the hope that is beyond us, that comes from God, that lifts us up on wings like eagles, and so it can either lead to a despair that things can ever get better, or it can lead to an angry criticism that is hesitant to build anything new.

Religious triumphalism and escapism – which can also be found across the political spectrum – wants to focus our attention on God and spirituality, but it doesn't quite know what to do with the pain of the world. It talks a lot about victory, about transcendence, a lot about Easter, a lot about praise and glory and power, but it just sort of mumbles about human suffering and loss, so it can lose credibility in the eyes of a hurting world, and can seem like it wants to live in something of a fantasy land.

But Isaiah 40 – and the Bible generally – summon us to *hopeful engagement* with the world, where we hold human weariness in one hand and God's renewing power in the other, and bring them together – which is where transformation always happens.

And of course, we see this throughout the gospel narratives about Jesus. Jesus moves towards the suffering in the world: Simon's mother-in-law with a fever, people in Capernaum who were sick, people who had been possessed by demons – ancient language that can strike us as weird, but which can refer to how we can be taken over by an addiction, or by a destructive and cruel spirit, or by a crowd mentality, some compulsive spirit that takes hold of us and drives us to harm self or others – Jesus does not avoid these people. Jesus does not say, "Come back to me when you're in a better place." Jesus moves towards them with compassion, with grounded authority, and he engages them right where they are.

But we also notice in our gospel text that *Jesus withdraws to be with God*. Jesus structured his time, so that he woke early, went to a deserted place to pray. His power – even *his* power – did not come from himself alone, but from his live connection with God. Jesus held human hurt together with God's redeeming, renewing power, held together heaven and earth.

As we enter Black History Month in our country, as many of us are learning in new ways about the history of African Americans and the church – from Bruce Douglass' recent class here at Lewinsville, from the Reformed Institute's recent convocation – recordings of both of which are available – as we are becoming more

aware of the *fullness* of our history as a people; as we continue to lean into life in these days of the pandemic; as we continue to lean into life in these days of political polarization and turbulence, let us follow in the path of Isaiah 40 and Mark 1. Let us not look away from the hard things, let us not feel like we can't handle these things, let us accept and face the realities of our weariness and our exhaustion. But let us not think that's the end of the story. Let us not think that's all there is to say. Let us do what Isaiah 40 summons us to do and *wait for the Lord*. Let us do what Jesus does in Mark 1, let us withdraw on a regular basis, let us structure our time so that we are maintaining our live connection with God, let us bring our weariness and need into dialogue, into engagement, with the renewing power of God. As we do that, we may find that, while youths may faint and be weary, and while the proud and macho ones fall exhausted, those who wait on the Lord will have all the *strength* they need, all the *guidance* they need, all the *direction* they need for the living of these days. To God and to God alone be all the glory. Amen.