

Renew Your Strength

Preached at Edgewood UMC, Fargo ND

Isaiah 40:21-31

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Earlier in my ministry, my children and I spent time among the Navajo, or the Diné, the People. I spent part of that time as the only white (“bellaganna”) staff member for Adsani doo Alchini Bighan, the Home for Women and Children.

This domestic violence shelter in Shiprock, New Mexico began under the auspices of United Methodist Women.

I also participated in a work project and taught Vacation Bible School at Kitsillie Chapter on Black Mesa, Arizona.

At Kitsillie, I learned to make fry bread from Mary Whitehair, an elderly Navajo woman who didn’t speak English.

We also lived in a hogan, the traditional 8-sided Navajo house, and in the morning, at dawn,

I would go out and sit in the grass on the rise behind the hogan and wait for the sun to come up.

At sunrise, I would watch Mary Whitehair mount her horse, gather her dogs,

and herd her sheep to pasture for the day.

They would return each evening at sunset.

During the day,

we would teach Vacation Bible School in the morning and work on building projects in the afternoon.

The stories about Jesus as a shepherd made a lot of sense.

And I learned a lot about sheep and the art of shepherding from the Navajo children and their parents.

But we gave up on the fishing stories,

because no one there had ever seen fish, or a large lake, or boats.

And the stories just didn’t make sense.

So we stayed with sheep stories, and eagles . . .

One night, while we were at Kitsillie,

Johnnie Begay and I had a conversation about eagles.

Johnnie is a good Methodist, and a member of Shiprock UMC.

He also comes from a line of medicine men so, as a child and then as an adult,

he had watched eagles in the canyons of the reservation for hours.

He told me that mother eagles keep their eggs turned

so that the eaglets will hatch facing the cliff wall instead of the canyon.

The mother eagle won’t let the eaglets see that great empty space until they are ready to fly.

And, he told me,
 when eaglets first try to fly,
 they always fail.
Usually they fail two or three times.
 And, each time, the mother eagle swoops below the eaglet,
 catches it,
 and brings it back up to the nest.
Eventually, the young bird is able to fly on its own.

I later saw another example of the way mother eagles teach their young.
There's a video on the internet
 of a mother eagle teaching an eaglet to fish.
The mother eagle flies out above the water first,
 and touches down,
 and then flies right back up.
She repeatedly does this "touch and go" maneuver
 until the little one gets the hang of it.

Well, Johnnie Begay's stories about eagles
 got me thinking about our images of God.
 And I went looking through my Bible.

In the Book of Exodus,
 at a point about 3 months after the people have escaped from Egypt,
 I found this:

Moses went up to God;
the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying,
 "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites:
 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,
 and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.'"
 (Exodus 19:3-4)

That's the mother eagle!
 Like a young eagle, we are carried by God
 when we are in danger, or tired, or weary.

And then I looked a little further.
 In the 32nd chapter of Deuteronomy
 there's another passage about God being like an eagle.

Well, for some reason,
 although the KJV correctly translates the Hebrew,
 the translation in the NRSV turns the eagle into an "it."
The eagle is a "she" – and she is very clearly a mother eagle!
 So we hear how God, like a mother eagle,
 hovers over and then carries Jacob (meaning the Israelites):

The Lord sustained [Jacob] in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste;
the Lord shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye.
As an eagle stirs up her nest, and hovers over her young;
 as she spreads her wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on her pinions . . .
 The Lord set [Jacob] atop the heights of the land,
 and fed him with produce of the field . . . (Deuteronomy 32:10-11, 13a).

That's the mother eagle again!

And once again, we are reminded that,
 like a young eagle, we are carried by God
 when we are in danger, or lost in the wilderness, or weary.

The Psalms, too, give us images of God as an eagle . . .

Two of these are:

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. (Psalm 36:7)

And

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.
 (Psalm 57:1)

All our lives we are being lifted up, and carried, and protected by God,
even in our darkest moments,

 just like the young eagle is lifted up, and carried, and protected by its mother.

So my prayer for each of us this week is:

 May God sustain you in desert and wilderness times,
 and shield you, care for you, and guard you
 as a mother eagle hovers over her young.
 Amen.

Sources:

Hornby Eagle Group Project Society, <http://www.hornbyeagles.com/index.htm>

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/bald_eagle/lifehistory/ac

“Mother Eagle Training Its Young,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzD_Z9wUIkY

“Change” by J.C. High Eagle, February 4, 2012

“God As Mother Eagle” by Suzanne Gorhau, 5/8/2011, www.centervillepresbyterian.org

“Decorah Bald Eagles,” Raptor Resource Project,

http://www.ustream.tv/decoraheagles#utm_campaign=synclckback&source=http://www.paulhelmick.com/2011/04/this-eaglecam-is-amazing-live-mother-eagle-w2-babies/&medium=3064708

Texts:

Isaiah 40:21-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.
To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.
Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
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.

Exodus 19:3-4

Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.'"

Deuteronomy 32:10-11, 13a

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Psalm 36:7

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Psalm 57:1

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