

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from February 7, 2021



Opening Prayer Holy God, Creator of the world and everything in it. We come before you this morning to praise and glorify you. We rejoice in the wonders of your creation and all the ways you faithfully provide for us and sustain us each day. Open our hearts and minds to your Word and fill us with your Spirit as we worship you today. Amen. Let's sing along with *Forever...*

Music *Forever*

Call to Worship From Philippians 2:1-16a (R1, R2, R3 = Readers 1,2,3)

R1: [Intro to Reading]: Because God is faithful, Paul rhetorically asks, (the answers are supposed to be an obvious yes)...

R2: Does your life in Christ give you strength? Does his love comfort you? Do we share together in the Spirit? Do you have mercy and kindness?

R1: Then live in harmony by showing love for each other, having one mind and purpose. In whatever you do, don't let selfishness or pride be your guide. Be humble, and honor others more than yourselves.

R3: Don't be interested only in your own life, but care about the lives of others too. Think and act like Christ Jesus. He was truly God, but he did not think that his being equal with God was something to use for his own benefit.

R2: He gave up his place with God and made himself nothing. He became like one of us. And while living as a man, he humbled himself and was fully obedient to God. He obeyed even when that caused his death on a cross.

R1: So God raised Christ to the highest place and gave him the name that is greater than any name. So that every person will bow down to honor Jesus Christ our Lord and bring glory to God the Father.

R3: Continue to live in a way that gives meaning to your salvation. Do this with fear and respect for God. God is working in you. He helps you want to do what pleases him, and he gives you the power to do it.

R2: Do everything without grumbling or arguing so that you will be blameless and pure, children of God without any fault.

R1: You live among evil people who have lost their sense of what is right. Don't do anything that they can say is wrong.

R3: As you hold firmly to the message that gives life, shine among them like stars in the dark world.
 (Adapted and Blended from ICB, CEV, ERV)

Theme Last week we concluded by saying that while we study in order to be the very best representatives of Christ that we can be, the real success of growing a spiritual life in ourselves and others is not as dependent on our expertise as on God's actions in, through, and around us. It is all the better if we can cooperate with his agenda. *The Fox and the Cat* almost gets to the point.

A cat walking in the woods came across a fox. She thought the fox was clever and experienced in all the ways of the world so she addressed him pleasantly, "Good morning, dear Mr. Fox! How are you, and how do you get along in these hard times?"

The pride-filled fox studied the cat for a long time, trying to decide whether he wanted to give an answer. At last, he spoke condescendingly, "Oh you poor whisker wiper ... you silly piebald, you starveling mouse hunter! What makes you think you can dare ask me how I am getting on? What have you learned? How many arts do you master?"

"Only one," said the cat meekly.

"And what might that one be?"

"When dogs run after me, I can jump into a tree and save myself."

"Is that all?" said the fox. "I am master of a hundred arts, and I have a sackful of cunning tricks in addition. But I pity you. Come with me, and I will teach you how to escape from the dogs."

Just then, hunters came along with four hounds. The cat sprang, scrambling up into the topmost branch of a tree, then stealthily crept to where she was entirely hidden by twigs and leaves. Then cried down to the fox: "Open your sack, Mr. Fox! Open your sack!" But the dogs had already gripped him and held him down.

From her high invisible perch, the cat said to herself as she watched the terrible scene below, "Oh, Mr. Fox! You with your hundred arts, and your sackful of tricks, are held fast, while I, with my one, am safe. Had you been able to creep up here, you too could have been saved."

The moral of the story is that "It's not necessarily *how much* you know, but *what* you know, that counts.

(Adapted from: Bennett, William J., editor and commentator, *The Moral Compass: Stories for a Life's Journey, The Fox and the Cat* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). p 148.

It is not how many *different things* you know, but if you know the thing that you need to know. And in our context, it is not how much or what, but *Who* you know that counts.

The theme of our series is rising up, and the point of the day is, we can't do it by our own "bag of tricks", but only by humbling ourselves before God who then can and will lift us up -- so for this week and next, when this particular series ends -- our prayer chorus will remind us that God is most willing to do just that... The first time through we will sing it as a statement of faith – God will raise us up – the second time through as a prayer of faith to God – You will raise us up...

Prayer Chorus *On Eagle's Wings*

*And God will raise us up on eagle's wings, bear us on the breath of dawn,
make us to shine like the sun, and hold us in the palm, of God's hand.*

*And You will raise us up on eagle's wings, bear us on the breath of dawn,
make us to shine like the sun, and hold us in the palm of Your hand.*

Prayers Dear Lord, it is good and fitting to praise you. You are kind and trustworthy. You watch over every part of your creation, and you personally know each one. From your abundance, you graciously provide what we need. We thank you for calling in the clouds to water the harvest and supply every need. We thank you for you gathering us together and building us up. (be it in person or through technology) You bind up our wounds and heal the heartbroken. You are great, and powerful, and understand things beyond our imagination. In your time, you bring down the wicked and lift up the humble. Therefore, we do not turn to the strength of animals or humans, but to you – for you take joy in us when we honor you and we put our hope in your mercy. We do that by turning to you with open lives, and by lifting our praises and needs to you. This week we name Terry Clark, and old friend of this church, who fell and hurt her ankle, for Bill Martin who is having eye trouble, has fallen several times, and is having some memory issues, and is in the hospital for a couple days, and for his wife Jan Martin as she cares for him. And we also remember others that have been named previously, or are only known deep within our hearts in this next moment of silence... **SILENCE** Lord accept the gifts or our resources, our time, talents and energy to strengthen your people here and throughout the world, so that we all may live as you taught us to pray, **Lord's**

Prayer

Bible Reading Isaiah 40:21-26

R1: The Lord taught us a prayer not just to model for us how to speak words to God, but to model our lives as a living prayer to God. It is in that living that we live like Christ and shine like stars in a dark world. This is a mighty task. But Isaiah reminds the intimidated, defeated people of his day that the person who holds the stars holds us, his stars, as well...

R2: Surely you know the truth, don't you? Surely you have heard. Surely someone told you long ago. Surely you understand who made the earth.

R3: It is the Lord who sits above the circle of the earth.

R2: And compared to him, people are like grasshoppers.

R3: He rolled open the skies like a piece of cloth. He stretched out the skies like a tent to sit under.

R2: He takes away the power of ... the world's leaders. They are like plants that are planted in the ground. But before they can send their roots into the ground, God blows on the "plants"... and the wind blows them away like straw.

R3: The Holy One says, "Can you compare me to anyone? No one is equal to me." Look up to the skies. Who created all those stars? Who created all those "armies" in the sky? Who knows every star by name?

R2-R3 TOGETHER: He is very strong and powerful, so not one of these stars is lost. (ERV)

Music Intro It is because of his powerful strength that may so easily override what would pull us down that we have confidence to lean into our future, as we lean into his arms -- as it says in Deuteronomy 33:27 -- The eternal God is your dwelling place (your refuge, your place of safety), and his everlasting arms form a foundation that supports and holds us up forever. Our spiritual journey (our pilgrimage together), will be filled with joy and peace and brightness, for we have nothing to fear with our Lord so near as we lean on Jesus, our foundation...

Music *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*

Message *Rise Up to Focus* **Philippians 2:1-16a, Isaiah 40:21-41:1**

There's a story of a young soldier who was fighting in Italy during World War II. He jumped into a foxhole as bullets whizzed around him. He immediately began trying to deepen the hole for more protection. As he frantically scraped away at the dirt, he unearthed a crucifix. A moment later another leaping figure landed beside him as the shells screamed overhead. The first soldier saw on his new companion's collar the insignia indicating he was a chaplain. He showed the

chaplain the crucifix and asked, "Do you know how to make this thing work?"

Isaiah writes to people who were "under fire" in Babylon, exiles who didn't seem to know how to make their faith work. In those days, might made right. The assumption was that the nation who won the war had the more powerful god. So these Jewish captives, victims of the Babylonian Empire's military machine -- would have a hard time not thinking that Babylon's astral deities, their star gods, were the more powerful force.

You heard a small portion of Isaiah's majestic starry night scenario. Its lesson was much more than a powerful poetic picture of God's majesty displayed in cosmic nature. It is declaring against common thought that winning or losing on the battlefield doesn't necessarily prove whose deity, whose God, is right, or better, or stronger. The star gods may control the Babylonians, but God creates, controls, counts, and names the stars, and only because of him are they all in place. Our God is not ever a defeated victim of other powers. Even though our circumstances may be difficult, it doesn't mean God is uncaring or powerless. He still loves, he still cares, he still has unlimited power that is not constrained by anything. Hold on to that thought and we'll come back to it in a moment...

Stars (Christians) that shine:

In the Call to Worship, Paul instructed us to shine like stars in a dark world. In the broader

biblical context, then

1) Give glory to God

Stars give glory to God. Psalm 19 begins: The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no [place] where their voice is not heard. (Ps 19:1-3) (NIV) In a similar way, people see us, and by the way we "shine", they will hear God speaking to them.

2) Give guidance

Stars also give guidance. Before technology, stars were the primary source of finding direction in nighttime travel. Likewise, if people want to find direction in the Christian life, they look to mature Christians to guide them.

3) Dispel darkness

Stars also dispel darkness. When there are no stars and moon in the sky, when we are away from city and street lights, it can get very dark. But even more than that, when I was a youth, I was in Kentucky on a tour going deep into Mammoth Cave where light does not reach (except through technology). They flicked off the lights just for a second to demonstrate what real darkness is like. If they left them off for an extended time,

we'd all be on the floor, because in just the second that they have them off, we lost our balance. Star light penetrates and removes darkness, so that people who have lost their balance, have lost their way in life, can see something to find their way again.

4) Illuminate a way of living

Paul describes what glory giving, guidance providing, darkness dispelling shining stars look like:

Stars act worthy of Christ's life. They are not motivated by jealousy, envy, duty, or fear of authority. They are not quarrelsome, they have no anxiety or worry, they have no selfish ambition, they strive for unity, they live in harmony, they are obedient, they have awesome respect for God and others, they offer selfless sacrifice, they look out for the interests of others, they help those in need, and they are blameless and pure because they do all of this is without complaining, or grumbling, or arguing.

That is a tall order. It is easy to look at a list like that and to realize it is beyond our reach and settle for doing something different. To stick with Paul's star metaphor, we look to the stars for navigation, (we look to God's word for direction); but we don't understand which way it is pointing, or we don't think we can follow that direction, or we may even think the stars must be off, because they aren't lining up with the way we want to go.

Yet we are clearly instructed to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (meaning -- eager to honor and make proud our heavenly Father) for we are accountable to God for maintaining, strengthening and progressing in our "shining" Christian faith.

So on the one hand, we work hard at growing in our faith. On the other hand, the text is also very clear that we cannot grow in our own strength. It is *God who is working within us*. It is he who "energizes" the action of his people and even motivates us to want to grow, and because it is God himself at work in our efforts, there is no obstacle that can successfully shackle our efforts to shine like stars.

This leads us to the remainder to the Isaiah text. Picking up where our reading had left off:

...why do you complain, "The LORD doesn't notice our condition"?... why do you say, "Our God doesn't pay any attention to our rightful claims"?

(Isaiah 40:27) (NIRV)

To frame those questions in Paul's Philippian context, it is kind of like the people would be complaining, "Doesn't the Lord know or care that faithfulness like that is impossible for us? We'll just wear ourselves out in exasperation if we keep trying?"

But then the answer comes in Isaiah:

Don't you know who made everything? Haven't you heard about him? The LORD is the God who lives forever. He created everything on earth. He won't become worn out or get tired. No one will ever know how great his understanding is. He gives strength to those who are tired. He gives power to those who are weak. Even young people become worn out and get tired. Even the best of them trip and fall. But those who trust in [who wait on] the LORD will receive new strength. They will fly as high as eagles. They will run and not get tired. They will walk and not grow weak. The Lord says... come and stand quietly [be still] in front of me... Isaiah 40:27-41:1a (NIRV)

If you want to shine like stars, you have to remember who created the stars, who sustains the stars, and who calls them out by name. In the New Testament context where we are the stars, he is calling us by name, he puts us where we need to be, and doesn't let us be forgotten. It is not our own worn-out intentions, our tired attempts, or our weak efforts that make it all happen. It is only as we rise up to his calling that we can reach new horizons of growth. It is by waiting on his unending power and his never flagging energy that keeps us moving forward.

Wait...

"Wait" Isaiah says, "wait on the Lord." "Wait" is one of the hardest words to apply in the American Language. Some of us get impatient waiting at a red light. And when it does turn green, we stop waiting. We are done waiting and we just move. It is like they are two opposite things - we wait or we move.

But in Bible language, waiting is filled with positive expectation, with complete trust and confidence; and it is accompanied by an ongoing action. Waiting on the Lord is an attitude of trust that we cling to even as we proactively live and move in our daily life; relying on God to strengthen us -- be it in the celebrations of life; or in the discipline of more difficult times. This process of waiting and transforming and trusting and strengthening is not idle -- it moves forward -- and it moves forward in four possible ways.

**Waiting while
1) soaring**

Isaiah says we fly like eagles! We often picture this as a life of smooth sailing – no problems, a big overarching view that is above the trenches of life. A life that is great and joyful and "easy". But sometimes eagles are soaring because they are starving and are searching for their next meal. They don't wait in their nest for the Lord to provide. They rely on him even as they seek that next opportunity to eat. So in "easy days", or in "difficult times", we ambitiously soar into our days and creatively deal with all

our obstacles head on; somehow lifted, even in challenging circumstances, to envision God's reality breaking into the reality of our world -- to see the heavenly kingdom coming and shaping the earth so it is here as it is in heaven. Sometimes we soar like eagles because we recognize that -- without God, we are nothing, but with him, our hero; we can fly -- because -- to paraphrase Bette Middler, "he is the wind beneath our wings".

**Waiting While
2) Running**

(See Heb 12:1-3, 1 Co 9:24-27 Php 3:13-14)

But sometimes we cannot imagine soaring. In those periods, Isaiah promises our waiting can be running without wearing out.

Strengthened by waiting on the Lord we will be able to move quickly. Scripture says: Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us *run* with perseverance the race marked out for us... in [order] to get the prize; [with] strict training; ...forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, we press on toward the goal ... for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus. We run without tiring.

**Waiting While
3) Walking**

(See 2 Cor 6:16, 7:1, Gal 5:25, 1 Jn 2:6, 1 Jn 1:7)

But there will also be times when soaring seems a pipe dream, and even running seems beyond our imagination.

And then Isaiah promises that we can walk without getting weak. God said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people"... And since we have these promises, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates... live in the Spirit... walk in the Spirit, [for] whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did... in love [and] in the light, as he is in the light... We walk without fainting, getting tired, falling down, failing.

But sometimes, walking is beyond us. Pressures mount, roadblocks persist, circumstances relentlessly try to drag us down. We feel like we've been trying to run at full speed in the deep end of the pool. Eventually we are depleted and our muscles begin to cramp. We have to stop and come up for air. Isaiah's words about a light at the end of the tunnel only musters the thought of a train's headlight that is barreling down on us."

And though we continue to do our best to make the most of each day, our waiting, relying trusting attitude cannot muster the ability to soar, or run. or walk, and we come to place where we need to --

**Waiting While
4) being still**

Psalm 4:4b, Psalm 46:8-10

-- be still (stand quietly) -- before God: "In your anger do not sin; search your hearts and be silent. Be still, and know that I

am God; I will be exalted among the nations [of] the earth." And in that silence our eyes rise upward from ourselves, rise upward from our circumstances, and begin to fix and focus on God.

It is in the silence of the "ever speaking night sky" that Isaiah reminds the exiles ripped from their homes that that didn't mean they were helpless losers to the star gods of their conquerors, but still belonged to the God who controlled even these alleged "astral deities". It is in the silence that the Spirit can assure us that we are not helpless victims of circumstances or temptations that seem so much more powerful than ourselves. We are reminded that our life is not ours, and the power we have to live and move and have our being as lights in the darkness is not our power, but His power within us. And he has always been and always will be in control, and our lives. We are in the loving hands of the One who never tires and is beyond our ability to comprehend.

We are not equal to the task of rising up to realize that God is dawning upon us, rising up to listen, rising up to move, rising up to show and tell, rising up to shine as stars... Rise up with a new focus, then and throw ourselves back on the One who made the stars, and is more than capable of empowering us to rise up to be and do everything he calls us to be and to do. He renews our strength as we reach out to him. One way we reach out to him is to participate (virtually for most of us) in the communion table to which he has invited us and through which he is already reaching out to us.

Communion Invitation Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with him and with one another. Let's prepare our hearts by being still before God.

Music of Preparation (vv 1,2) *Be Still, My Soul*

Confession Let's continue to prepare our hearts through confession: Dear Lord, it dawns on us that we come crashing, tripping, fainting, and collapsing across life's stage. Powerless grasshoppers, tiny ants, puffy seeds blown about by forces we cannot even imagine. Reality rushes in full force. But you come and change our focus, and we realize that the stage of life is not ours, but yours. You have always been and will always be in control, and our very lives are at your mercy.

And so, we plea for your mercy because we have sinned against you, against one another, and against the world and the creatures you have called us to tend. We have broken our covenants. We have lost our passion for your mission. We

have ignored the needs of others. We have failed to love you and our neighbors in your creation as we have loved ourselves. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Assurance The eternal promises of the One who knows you intimately comes to us in overwhelming waves. The Everlasting touches the eternity that he has placed within our hearts; renewing strength and restoring hope as Christ Himself reaches out to meet us in the stillness of the table, assuring us that if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. May Christ's peace be with you. The Holy Spirit is with you. You are the Father's.

We are all yours, Father, Son, Spirit. All our lives, all our thanks, all our praise; all our hesitations, all our grumbling, all our fears, we give it all to you, with all our bodies, minds, hearts, spirits, and voices. You deserve blessing and praise, for from the beginning of time to the ends of space, you are God, boundless in love and power.

What are we that you notice us, much less love us, much less that you should call us into covenant with you, a covenant we continually break, yet you continually sustain. How full of mercy you are! Therefore, we praise you, joining our voices with the song of angels and saints, servants and martyrs, the elders in heaven and all creatures on and under the earth, with strangers and family in every generation, saying: Jesus Christ comes in our God's name, you are worthy! Lamb of God for all creation slain, you are worthy! Hosanna to our King! Hosanna to our King!

We praise you with our lives and these gifts of bread and cup, remembering the mystery of faith that Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Come upon us, Holy Spirit. Come upon these gifts. Make them be for us Christ's body, Christ's blood.

Make us one enlivened body in Christ. One in heart, one in mind, one in you, that we may shine boldly for you; that we may offer your healing for all who are sick, who are torn and weary; that we may be channels of your mercy over all your works, in earth, and sky and sea; that the power of death will be vanquished, that all may receive your cleansing grace, that all who are possessed, oppressed, distressed, depressed and downcast may be set free at last. Now come and fill us, Holy Spirit, this day, and every day until we eat it anew at the marriage supper of the Lamb!

And where we will all proclaim: You are holy, O God! You are worthy, O Christ! Worthy in your birth! Worthy in your living! Worthy in your loving! Worthy in your serving! Worthy when you preached good news that God's kingdom has drawn near, worthy when you gathered disciples, then and now, to learn and show the world what life under God's reign means: healing for the sick, new life for the dead, cleansing for the lepers, deliverance for the oppressed, freedom for the possessed, beauty for the lilies, care for the sparrows, new birth, new life, new creation breaking in for all. You are worthy above all!

Worthy too, the night we betrayed you, when you took the bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to your disciples. Worthy when you told them, "This is my body broken for you. Remember me." [Remember as you now take and eat] [Pause] Worthy when you took the cup, praised God and shared it, and said, "This is my blood of the new covenant for you. Remember me." [Remember as you now take and drink]. [Pause]

Communion Blessing -- Now may all blessing and glory, thanksgiving and power, wisdom and honor and might, be yours, Holy God, now and forever... for he not only asks us to remember what he has done through Communion -- but through Communion, he also points us forward to that day when we meet in heaven and we will become like him for we shall fully see him as he is...

534 (v 3) *Be Still, My Soul*

Service Blessing Know that God's light has risen upon *you*. So through you, let his light shine into a dark world by rising up to live kingdom values and daring to serve Jesus in new and adventurous ways. Amen.