

Pastor's Sabbath

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The logo for AETH (Association of Evangelical Theologians and Hermeneuticians) features a stylized triangle composed of multiple thin, parallel lines radiating from the top vertex, creating a sense of depth and light. Below the triangle, the letters "AETH" are written in a large, bold, sans-serif font.

AETH

Pastoral Family Retreat

PC(USA)

Salt Lake City, Utah

June 23, 2007

Pastor's Sabbath

Isaiah 40:28-31

*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.*

Justo: We all know at least part of this passage by heart: "Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles," and so on. It is an inspiring passage. It is a comforting passage that comes as the culmination of a chapter that begins "Comfort, O comfort my people."

But, quite frankly, the mood of much that I hear in our so-called mainline churches today is much more like verse 27: "Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel: 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right hand is disregarded by my God?'"

What I hear is not so much "we shall mount up with wings like eagles," but rather: "Our time of glory is past. There was a time when our churches were the most influential institutions in

town. But now our membership is declining. There was a time when our churches could make their voices heard in the halls of power. There was a time when our theologians spoke, and it made news. But no longer. Our churches do not have the influence they used to have. The press and other mass media mostly ignore us. We are living in a post-Christian era.”

That is what I hear. And it sounds very much like what Israel is quoted as saying in verse 27: "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God." Israel complains that God does not seem to care about its way or its right. And it is a genuine complaint. Things were not going too well for Israel when these words were written. And, frankly speaking, things are not going too well for most of our churches. So, our complaint is justified.

But wait a moment! It is not just a matter of what Israel says; it is not just a matter of what we say. It is also a matter of what we hear: "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" There is good news! Not all is failure and gloom; not all is decline and despair! Even beyond its gloom and its despair, Israel knew that there was good news: "Have you not known? Have you not heard?"

There is good news. But, contrary to what we often think, the good news is not primarily about Israel; the good news is not primarily about the church; the good news is not even primarily about our salvation. The good news is about God: "Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint nor grow weary." You

may think that your way is hidden from God. But God's "understanding is unsearchable." For Israel throughout its history, the good news is that God does not grow weary; that God sees the ways of Israel even in exile, even in captivity, even in oppression. You may look at the world and society around you and bemoan the passing of the time when the church spoke and everybody listened, but still the God of the church is the creator of all things who does not faint or grow weary. Israel may look at its condition, at its weakness, and grow faint. But the prophet reminds it—and reminds us—that the God of Israel 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."

Likewise, for us today, the good news is that we may grow weary of tending to churches in which enthusiasm sometimes lags, but God does not grow weary. We may try to understand what is going on by looking at statistics and budgets, but God's understanding is unsearchable.

There is good news! And the good news is primarily about God, and only secondarily about us!

Catherine: This passage shows one of the great differences between God and us. We are told that God "does not faint or grow weary." We do. We are often tempted to think that our weakness, our weariness, comes from our sinfulness. Granted, that is partially true. But we were created to be dependent upon God. We are creatures, and as far as we know, unlike other creatures, we were intended to be in constant relationship with our Creator. That is part of what

is meant by our creation "in the image of God." Our sinfulness has damaged that connection, though as redeemed creatures, the relationship has been restored.

Imagine an appliance—like a toaster—that is supposed to be plugged in. If it loses its connection, it is not going to work. Human beings were created to be related to their Creator. Severed from that connection, they become less than human. When that connection is restored, they are human again. We are in the process of becoming really human beings, creatures as the Creator intended. But that does not mean that once fully human, we will be able to go on in our own strength, no longer needing to be related to God. We are not "battery operated" appliances that can go on their own once recharged. We need to be connected to God all the time. God had a Sabbath—not because God was weary, tired from creating the world. God took a Sabbath to rest and enjoy all the work that had been done because the great task was now completed. We need Sabbaths both to enjoy finishing tasks and because we do grow weary. All creatures need rest, which is why the commandment about the Sabbath includes making sure that all of creation for which we have responsibility—employees, children, animals, land—all have time to rest. Those who rest may not know the Creator—the animals do not—, but they are thankful that they have been given the rest they need.

As People of God, we also know that we need to worship. Worship is the conscious turning of the creature to the Creator in awe and praise. We need a time when we can gather as congregations for worship. That is not the same as a Sabbath. Pastors know that very well. The

commandment about the Sabbath says nothing about worship. The time of worship is not a time of rest. But worship is not limited to one day. It is part of our lives every day, and every day we are reminded that we are creatures related to the Creator. We need rest, unlike God. But it is not a matter that we work out of our own strength for six days and then recharge our batteries by tapping into God's power on the seventh, only to return once again to our own strength. We need one day in seven to rest. We need times of gathered, community worship. These are different elements of a fully human life. We are never intended to work out of our own strength. Always we are called to be related to God, and therefore to have God's strength in our lives.

Our passage says that even young people, those whose natural strength is great, will not be strong enough for the tasks that are given to human beings. Even they will grow weary. But those who "wait for the Lord"—who are creatures who turned to their Creator—will be borne up by God as though on eagles' wings.

Justo: If we then move to verse 29, and we take it quite literally, we will be surprised: "He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless." We can understand that God gives power to those who do not have enough. In this regard, we even have a saying, "God helps those who help themselves." This we like. We like to think that God is like an extra shot of adrenaline to increase our power. Or like a rocket booster that is added to the power of the rocket itself.

We like to think that if we succeed at something it is because we worked hard. And we like to think that we should thank God for rewarding our efforts by giving us the extra strength to succeed. We like to think that ultimately success depends on us—on our hard work, on our careful planning, on our endurance—and that then God gives us that added boost so that we may accomplish our goals.

But this is not what the text says. What the text actually says is that God empowers the powerless, that in order to receive God's power we have to be powerless! And this is hard to swallow. It is hard to swallow because we like to think that our power and our achievements count for something.

We know that this is not so when it comes to our salvation. Indeed, one of the fundamental Protestant tenets is that in the *ordo salutis* the initiative and the power are all on the side of God; that we are not saved by our works, by our power, or even by our good intentions but rather by the grace of God. It is God who grants salvation to those who have done nothing to earn or to merit it.

The problem is that in all the many discussions about salvation through the ages, we have narrowed the meaning of the word "salvation" itself, as if it were only a matter of living eternally with God. It certainly is that. But in the Bible, salvation is much more. In the Bible, salvation is the fulfilment of God's plan and promise for all of creation. Salvation is God's action

in freeing the people from the yoke of Egypt. Salvation is God's action in healing the lame man by the temple gate. Salvation is God's action in raising Jesus from the dead. And salvation is God's action in joining us as the body of the risen Lord.

And all of this salvation is by grace. Salvation by grace alone does not mean only that it is by grace alone that we live eternally in God's presence. Salvation by grace alone means also that the fulfilment of God's promises in history is the work of God alone. Salvation by grace alone means that Israel is freed from the yoke of Egypt, not because Israel is powerful, or smart, not even because Israel is faithful; but simply because God "gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless."

And so we return to the life of the church. It is not only individuals but the church, too, that are saved by grace alone. Churches are used by God, not because they are big, or because their members are influential, or because they have a large budget, or because they are respected in the community. The Lord of the church is the One who "gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless."

Why do you say, O church, and speak, O PCUSA, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? There is good news! The Lord is the everlasting God. God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

Catherine: John Calvin stressed that what God promises to us in the Word is given to us in the sacraments. It was for this reason that he believed that preaching ought always to be followed by communion, though the City Council of Geneva did not agree. In the Word today we have been promised God's strength if we are those who truly wait upon God, if we remember that we are creatures in need of both rest and the constant relationship with our Creator. We have been called apart to this beautiful place in order to have some rest but also to renew our relationship with God.

At this Table, we receive "bread for the journey," the sign and seal that God—our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer—will be with us as we return to the tasks that we have been given. We are not alone. Hopefully, we will return with renewed strength. But what is important is not the strength that might last a week or two, or even the strength that we might expect from a time of rest. What matters is that we will remember that we need to renew our relationship with God every day, at all times, so that we never try to carry on in our own strength.

Our baptism has given us the promise that God is for us, and that through Jesus Christ we have been adopted as sons and daughters of God. Communion renews that promise and shows that God nourishes us and gives us strength. What will we be if we are faithful and live our whole lives as creatures constantly related to their Creator? We will not be some superhuman beings, able to do everything imaginable. But we will be human—really human—not inhuman, not less

than human. Sabbath rest and true worship—two different things but both necessary—can make us what we were always intended to be.

At this Table, may that promise be fulfilled this day in us.

