
Have You Not Heard?

Isaiah 40:21-31

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, February 4, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

‘Oh, to be young again.’ A phrase heard in poetry and prose. A linguistic dream, normally espoused by the old. To be young again. A yearning for some glory from the past. A desire to rewind and alter some decisions. To find love again, hope again, vision again, vigor again. ‘Oh, to be young again.’ It’s a utopian view of youthfulness and what it did offer, can offer, will offer. This seems to be a common societal perspective—the adoration of youthfulness. But how many of you have been young, recently? How many of you are young right now? In ancient times, and in ours, we’re told through the prophets that “even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted.” Actually, this seems like a throw away phrase in Isaiah with all of his good emphasis on God. But maybe this apparent ‘literary throwaway’ is what we need to consider today—young people who are weary and exhausted and who maybe mental throwaways for us. This isn’t something we think about a lot. But it’s true—youth can get weary, though I know some of you are thinking about how young people can wear you out, too, sometimes. Youth can get exhausted and weary; this may not be something we consider much. Just as it is a very small piece of Isaiah, it is a small part of our normal thinking.

But today, think about it. Have you not known or have you not heard about what young people are going through today? 28% of U.S. students in grades 6–12 experiencing bullying and 70.6% of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools. The most common types of bullying are verbal, social, physical, and then cyber. One can’t underestimate the impact that bullying has on young people, sometimes with dire death-dealing effects. Youth get weary. In 2016, an estimated 3.1 million adolescents aged 12 to 17 in the United States had at least one major depressive episode. This number represented 12.8% of the U.S. population aged 12 to 17. The prevalence of a major depressive episode was higher among adolescent females (19.4%) compared to males (6.4%). Depression increases a teen’s risk for attempting suicide by 12 times and 30% of teens with depression also develop substance abuse problems. Others faint under the weight of eating disorders or attempt to hurt themselves in ways that serve as an escape from their own reality. But you can’t wash or cut away your hurt or exhaustion.

It sounds weird but youth suffer from exhaustion because of the pressures of life, trying to keep up with every activity and every extracurricular club, whether it be sports and travel ball or music lessons or community service or schoolwork, while maintaining an active social media persona on Snapchat or Instagram, sharing the latest relationship gossip or showing their latest hairstyle. In an odd way, to use the phrase of Sherry Turkle’s book, youth are “alone, together,” expecting more from technology than other human beings, experiencing so-called cyberintimacies which lead to cybersolitudes. “Oh to be young again”? I’m not sure this is what we want. 21% of all children live in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold—for a family of 4, in 2018, that is \$25,100. This may not be our story but it is the story of many young people. And it has them weary and exhausted.

Writer Anne Lamont captures this well by saying: “Growing up is not going as efficiently as I had hoped.” She echoes the thoughts of those who are considered to be invincible and indomitable yet who are almost invisible to us or at least their weariness is. “Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted.” I know children and youth get tired of their teachers sometimes and the feeling may also be mutual. There was a middle school science teacher who asked the class to read a portion of the textbook aloud as a class. This teacher asked one student to read a section, but at the time it was pretty rambunctious in the class, so many were distracted from the class reading assignment. The teacher eventually became frustrated enough to raise her voice loudly and sternly to prompt the student, whom she had asked to read, by blurting out, “Can you read?” And that same student, who shall go unnamed, replied, “Can you teach?” Teachers get weary and so do youth.

Today, there is a biblical reminder that even those who are deemed to possess the preeminent physical prowess faint, grow weary, and fall exhausted. Even at our supposed peak of performance, our stallion strength and stamina are limited. None of us are self-sufficient, self-created, or self-sustaining, whether we are in our prime or not. Fatigue and fainting fall on all of us, and we, including young people, may find ourselves in exile like Israel, in a liminal space between a beholden past and an uncertain future, and we don’t even know how we got here. But we are right there by those ancient rivers, stretching from Babylon to Bahama, that seem to flow with our tears. In this exilic existence, we recognize that we are indeed powerless, unable to change our situation in our own strength or with our own remedies. Medicines alone, therapy alone, friendships alone, exercise alone, healthy eating alone, education alone, church alone, Bible reading alone, cannot, will not, solve our problems, cannot extract us fully from our exile predicament. All of our human attempts are feeble and reach their limits.

Though we may not always make this explicit, I believe we know this, deep down inside. The people stood in line for at least 5-10 minutes under the dim lights of Duke Chapel as music played. Some of the faces were solemn. Others produced a small smile while others had tears falling from their eyes, but all had hope in the chest of their hearts and were intent on one thing—receiving prayer. Their waiting for prayer was really a sign of them waiting on the Lord. 5 minutes or 5 years, standing, waiting on the Lord, because they were tired of being exhausted. And they knew it was worth the wait.

This is Isaiah’s point after all. It is worth the wait. Youth faint and grow weary and 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.” This is the theological remedy for human exhaustion, regardless of your age—God is the redeeming, righteous remedy. Isaiah paints a portrait of God through rhetorical amplification and literary expansiveness. By doing so, he signifies the vastness of God compared to our little lives and bouts of weariness. “Dear God, be good to me; the sea is so wide and my boat is so small.” Our finite limitations are nothing compared to the limitless resources of God.

“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...To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal?...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...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.”

Compared to the size of God we are like grasshoppers, so “patience, young grasshopper” (Kung Fu). Our weariness, exhaustion, or problems are miniscule in the light of God’s majesty. Isaiah magnifies God while we may have diminished God to a handheld puppet. Isaiah calls Israel, calls us, calls young people, to remember this God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. This God who does not faint or grow weary. This God who gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Isaiah gives us a biblical call to focus on this God. We’ve been focusing on everything else but this theological reality. Even with all of our technological revolutions, and all of our economic progress, and all of our research insights, we are still wearied as a human race and as St. Augustine teaches, “Our heart is restless until it finds rest in [God].” It is a scriptural challenge to lift up our eyes on high and see, and gaze into another realm of reality rather than be so caught up in the malaise of the day.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The current malaise will mess you up. We lose our way when we try to fix things on our own. It won’t work, it hasn’t worked. It is worth waiting on or for the Lord. This waiting is a state of being, “a *lifestyle or disposition* – *the ethic for the exilic community*” (Roger Van Harn). There is no quick fix and though the future may be uncertain, one thing is certain—those who wait for God will renew their strength and they will mount up with wings like eagles, an allusion to when God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt and bore them on eagles’ wings. Have you not heard? On our own, we will faint, but with God, we will fly.