
Are You Tired?

Isaiah 40:21-31

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 5, 2012 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Picture the scene. It's Sunday night. You're at home with your loved ones – except just tonight, they don't really feel like loved ones: they feel like your dull, ordinary, hang-around ones, the people who leave their laundry on the ground for you to pick up, the companions who put their dishes in the sink for you miraculously to beautify, the housemates who never in a million years remember what day the garbage truck comes along your street at 6 o'clock in the morning and think to put the trash out the night before – those kind of take-for-granted, been-years-since-you've-really-looked-me-in-the-eye-or-gave-me-flowers loved ones. Bodies are splayed out over sofas, as if to say "I'm so tired I can hardly face Monday morning and there's nothing that could raise my body from horizontal," and even the idea of feeding the eyes on TV candy or a mindless computer game seems too demanding. If this apocalyptic scene were a cartoon, the caption would read, "The night that energy levels finally plummeted below zero."

And then... the telephone rings. And in this digitized age, it's that rare thing – a caller whose number is not recognized by any of the technology your household has assembled for the purpose. And your companion answers the call. Suddenly the whole ecosphere changes. Your companion starts laughing and agreeing with everything their conversation partner says, rocking back and forth on the sofa with breathless intensity and jumping up to fetch a document from another room and answer whatever pretext it was that occasioned the call. Your companion's found a reserve of energy that's convulsed them, as dramatically as a computer screen booting up from hibernation mode to full activity. And you immediately wonder, "Who *is* this person on the other end of the line? What *precisely* is so exciting about them that suddenly turns a sack of potatoes into a dancing ballerina?" And it's almost impossible to avoid a paroxysm of envy. "Where did that burst of energy come from? Why do *I* never see that kind of energy? Maybe Sunday nights aren't about being tired of work or tired of life. Maybe they're about being tired of me."

Do you know what that Sunday night feels like? Do you know what it means to wonder if your head can think any more, if your limbs can move any more, if your mouth can speak any more, if your heart can beat any more, if your soul can breathe any more?

Are you tired? Are you so tired that it's like looking to the bottom of a very deep well and finding there's no water there – it's completely dry, and sending a bucket down will do no more than churn up the bare earth?

Maybe there's a good reason why you're tired. Maybe you're tired because you've tried so hard for so long. On December 1, 1955, the Cleveland Avenue bus in Montgomery, Alabama, was filling up. Rosa Parks was asked to give up her seat to prevent a white person having to stand. But Rosa Parks was tired. She was tired of giving in. She was tired of being humiliated. She was tired of being invisible.

Four days later, on the evening of her trial, the day the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott began, 50 clergy and community leaders gathered together. They had one thing in common. They were tired. But like your companion on that Sunday night, who received a phone call that elicited previously inconceivable energy, these leaders found something they'd never contemplated before. They elected a president, who spoke to them these famous words.

There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November. There comes a time.

Are you tired? Are you tired of “being plunged across the abyss of humiliation,” and experiencing “the bleakness of nagging despair”? I’m not saying everyone here knows what it means to be on the receiving end of the poison of racism and segregation. But maybe you’ve given your life trying to enhance the public schools, maybe you’ve tried your hardest to heal our health system, maybe you’ve spent your days trying to change laws or practices that grieve your soul and shame our country, on our prisons or on torture or on capital punishment or on care for those with a chronic mental illness. Or maybe your struggle is behind the closed doors of the home, and you have a child who’s broken your heart and you don’t know how to unwind the spiral of pain and mistrust, or you have a sibling who you can never look in the eye, or a spouse who you’ve covered up for and colluded with for decades, or a parent who undermines you by the tiniest gesture or the subtlest silence. Or perhaps your struggle is with your own place in the world, your studies, your career, your future, and you feel like you’re in a lobby and all the doors off it are locked and you’ve been beating on them with your fists for too long and all you can think to do is to place your forehead against one of the doors and slowly sink down to your knees and weep.

There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled on. There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of despair. There comes a time when people get tired of the piercing chill of a damp and chilly February day in a seemingly endless winter. There comes a time. I wonder if that time has come for you. Are you tired?

But there’s more than one kind of tired. Let me tell you about another kind of tired. A bad kind of tired. The 2011 film *The Help* portrays the interactions of a number of African American maids in a 1960s Mississippi neighborhood with the white mistresses of the households in which they work. A key figure in the story is Hilly Holbrook, a young woman who has successfully found a husband, successfully brought into the world a couple of designer children, and is now successfully devoting her time to promoting the “Home Help Sanitation Initiative.” Through this initiative Miss Hilly sets out on the brave but vital quest to provide, in every home, separate bathrooms for the “black help” because, as Miss Hilly puts it, “They carry different diseases to us.” The more absurd and unsustainable this cause gets, the more fierce and desperate become Hilly Holbrook’s efforts to promote it.

Miss Hilly is a symbol for the whole culture of segregation. Hilly Holbrook cannot tolerate having an African American maid who won’t play a submissive role in Hilly’s increasingly ridiculous attempt to provide a rationale for her prejudice and practice of subjugation. Miss Hilly becomes exasperated with a classmate from school days who won’t fit the stereotypical lifestyle of a southern belle with the desire for husband, children, maids, and segregated causes. She detests a woman whom she regards as white trash, who stole Hilly’s boyfriend and treats her African American maid much more humanely and respectfully. She falls out even with her mother’s generation of women who themselves are ceasing to believe in the moribund social structure Hilly is trying so hard to promote.

By the end of the movie, Miss Hilly has lost all her allies, and is isolated and exasperated. In an effort to banish her latest insubordinate help, Hilly invents a story about her maid stealing some silverware. The slander is simply a pretext for banishing yet another person who won’t fit into her mistress’ game. But this time Aibileen, the maid, resolves not to go quietly. Aibileen is like Rosa Parks. She’s not going to take it any longer. She strides up to Miss Hilly, stands nose to nose before her, and says, “Mrs Holbrook, you’re a godless woman.” Aibileen then pauses, and says, more inquiringly and reflectively, “Ain’t you tired, Mrs Holbrook? Ain’t you tired?”

It’s a great question. Miss Hilly’s world is caving in around her, as fast as a clapboard house collapsing in on itself. Like a totalitarian dictator striving to prop up a disintegrating regime, Hilly Holbrook’s trying with all her might to save her disappearing universe. But Aibileen’s question catches her off-guard. Because of course Aibileen’s right. Hilly Holbrook *is* tired. If she stopped for one moment to admit how insane her life is, how

hard she's working and how fast she's running to protect a kind of honor that enriches no one and impoverishes many, then she'd collapse in humiliation and shame. So she doesn't. She goes faster and more furious because she's so tired and can't afford to admit it.

Is that you? Are you tired? Are you tired the way Hilly Holbrook is tired? Do you look at your life and see a state of delayed collapse, postponed only by your increasingly frantic and desperate attempts to keep the whole system functioning? It's painful to look in the mirror, because you're frightened of what you might see, it's terrifying to stop running, because the truth may catch up with you, it's too risky genuinely to catch someone's eye, because they may see into your soul, and say those paralyzing words, "Ain't you tired? Ain't you tired?"

Many of us are tired. Some of us are "Rosa Parks tired" – tired of being humiliated and tired of giving our all and having nothing to show for it. Some of us are "Hilly Holbrook tired" – tired of pretending and lying and upholding a life or a culture that's built on falsehood and pride and cruelty. D'you know what? There ought to be a whole lot of other kinds of tired, but I'm actually not sure there are. It more or less comes down to these two. Tired of being trodden down. And tired of pretending. Of course most of us are a mixture of the two. But I doubt we're an even mixture. I'm guessing when you sat down in your seat before worship this morning, you were tired. And I'm sure you were a mixture of tired, but I'm just as sure that one or other kind was the real one. And when I say to you right now, "Are you tired?" you know which kind of tired you are.

Well, I've got news for you. The prophet Isaiah's got something to tell you, tired as you are, whether your name's Hilly or Rosa. It's the simplest and best news in the world, better than a warm bath after a long day, better than a feather pillow to rest your weary head, better even than a nice cup of Earl Grey tea served by a loving hand. Here's the best news in the world. God's not tired.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? God's not tired. The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God's not tired. Are you listening Rosa? Are you hearing me Hilly? God doesn't faint or grow weary. God's not tired. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. God's not tired.

Listen up, Rosa. Sure you feel you can't take any more criticism, you can't take any more grief, you can't take any more humiliation, you can't take any more shame. But here's the good news: God can. In Jesus God took all your criticism and pain and humiliation and shame. And he still does. You may be stretched out the sofa on a Sunday night because you know the next week holds more conflict, and harsh words, and being undermined, and being afraid, than you can face even thinking about, and you're tired just imagining it, more tired than you can say. But God's not tired. God's not tired of justice. God's not tired of truth. God's not tired of the struggle. 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. You may be all out of your energy, but just like that companion sprawled out on a Sunday night who gets the phone call that releases a source of energy no one in the household knew was there, you won't be running on your own tank, you won't be living in your own strength, you won't be flying with your own wings.

And Hilly, yes you, Hilly, you listen up too. Isaiah's got just as good news for you. You may be tired – it's a good thing you *are* tired, because it shows you know you're running, and maybe you're just beginning to admit who you're really running from. You may well be tired from all that running. *But God's not tired of you.* You may be trampling on God, wounding God, neglecting God, forgetting God, hurting God. But God's not tired of you. I have on a chair at home a cushion that says on it, "I want to be the kind of person my dog thinks I am." Like a devoted puppy, God keeps coming back to you Hilly, even though you've constructed more and more elaborate devices to keep God away. All you've got to say is, "I want to become the kind of person God knows I really am, the person God made me to be, the person God's making me if I would just let it happen." And then suddenly it's like you're curled up in that fetal position on the Sunday night sofa and the phone call comes and you find a rush of energy and life that you hadn't known for months, years – perhaps ever. You can

walk, after all those years of hobbling and stumbling, you can walk and not faint. You can run, after all that time running away you now find the joy of running towards – and when you're running towards God you don't get weary. You can mount up with wings, because when you're filled with the wind of the Holy Spirit, you won't be needing your legs anymore, you'll be like an eagle, banking and swooping and soaring and diving like you could fly forever.

It's Sunday night. You're tired. You're tired as hell. But God's not tired. And God's certainly not tired of you. It's the best news in the whole world. Isaiah's calling – on a new number. And d'you know what? The call is for you.