

# A Deist? Not Even Close!

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,  
at the eleven o'clock service, February 5, 2012.  
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany.  
Based on Mark 1:29-39.*

“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; and they shall walk and not faint.” These deeply emotional and hopeful words come to us from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE book of the prophet Isaiah.

Last week in my sermon I posed a question about how a church, which is rooted in an ancient liturgy and an even more ancient scripture, remains relevant and modern as the decades, centuries and even millennia pass.

How do such words as these from Isaiah stack up in our effort to remain current and significant in the lives of ordinary people? Do they encourage us and make our hearts soar with visions of God's strength and power? Or do they make us wonder if we were absent the day the eagles' wings got handed out? In our lives does God seem all-powerful or largely dormant? Perhaps at our most honest, many of us would admit that our answer often depends upon how swimmingly things are progressing for us at the moment of the question.

This passage is a portion of Isaiah, which was composed during the time of the Babylonian exile, a low point in the history of the Hebrews. After years of warning from Isaiah's forebears, Jerusalem had indeed fallen in 587; most of the Israelites had been relocated to Babylon, a land of foreign gods, people, and customs. Far from the land of their temple, separated from a land they believed to flow with milk and honey, the Promised Land, the exiled Israelites no doubt heard these words with a mixture of emotions.

A couple of weeks ago in my blog (I hate admitting that I have a blog, but I suppose that is what it is), I shared a story that was very heavy on my heart about the death of a friend. Only 46, she was brilliant, beautiful, beloved, a cherished mother, and an adored wife—all of it. I had many moving responses from readers, some asking where in the world God can be found in such a world as this, posing the question, of course, without much expectation of a satisfactory answer. It is a question known to all of us; and how we answer it, how honestly we are willing to confront it despite the discomfort it may give us, will more than any other single issue define how seriously we will be taken in this world, how seriously we will be able to take even ourselves and the tenets and practice of our faith.

Answering this question homiletically is fraught with danger. Every choir has at least one diva and sometimes several. The choir at another parish I once served, somewhere below the Mason-Dixon Line, in a land flowing with grits and butter, had a diva to end all divas. With blond hair that was big enough for two voting districts, she was just marvelous—straight out of central casting. I adored her and was slightly afraid of her. One Sunday, after what I thought was an earnest, if not perfect, attempt to answer this question in a sermon, she stood in line to greet me at the door, not a good sign in her case. As she approached, she proclaimed practically at full forte, which was her style after all, “Buddy Stallings, I 'luv' you; you are not a Christian, you are a Deist. But I 'luv' you anyway.” I couldn't even muster so much as a “bless your heart.” I share that story now because it was after a sermon in which I made a point similar to the one I am now attempting to make that she reached this conclusion, which though she 'luv'd' me was not a compliment.

Both the beautiful poetry of the Hebrew scripture and the soaring claims of our highly Christological New Testament are breathtaking in their way of being truthful, replete with eternal metaphors that can give life to us, and potentially just as breathtakingly devastating to one who reads them literally and without nuance. The God of Isaiah's writing is the one “who sits above the circle of the earth; he is great in strength, mighty in power. He is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” The God in Mark's miracle stories about Jesus is the one who cures mothers-in-law and casts out demons by the dozens and heals all sorts of other diseases.

Is this a God we know? Is this a God whom we can acknowledge and worship, let alone love, in 2012? Again how we answer this is very important in understanding our future. In a

classically Anglican way, my answer is a yes and a no. In the most literal sense of the question, the answer is an unqualified yes for many of us in this room. Many of us believe that God is powerful in precisely the same way in which God was understood to be powerful in these ancient texts. It is utterly defensible as a position. Some who thusly believe accompany their conviction with supporting stories that I have no need or desire to disparage. Many others, though, take a look at the state of the world, the planet, and for some the details of their own lives and conclude that these words and stories often leave them empty and on occasion filled with guilt and shame as well. Why can't I believe, as I want to? Why don't I soar as with eagles' wings? Why am I tired and worn out when I should be running without weariness? Maybe it is because I do not have enough faith, we ponder. Maybe it is because I do not believe with my whole heart.

Is it possible that what we have is a problem of definition? I'd like to suggest another way of imagining God's power in the world. (In the interest of full disclosure, this is where I got in trouble with the diva.) In this passage from Isaiah and more directly in others, we are told that God's ways are different from ours. Maybe that extends to the definition of how God is powerful. Could it be that God is powerful in a way that is so utterly different from what we consider to be powerful that we are continually, and have been through the ages, tripped up by this claim about God's omnipotence, being regularly disappointed? Maybe it is so hard to grasp because we are trying to understand something that is not true in our sense of the word powerful. Power for us is about action, decision, purpose, movement, solution—to name just a few of the words that we associate with power.

Could it be that God's power is God's presence, God's willingness, God's insatiable desire to be with us? Simple, profound, changes nothing and yet somehow changes everything. In thinking about this I downloaded a YouTube of Tom Dorsey telling of the circumstances that led him to write the beloved gospel song, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." Shortly after being married, he left his young pregnant wife in Chicago while he traveled on business to St. Louis. They were thrilled about the coming birth, and life was good and rich. Gone only a day, he received a telegram that she had suddenly died. Confessing that it almost "killed him," he said, just hours later, he sat down at a keyboard and began to play. The words, he said, "Fell like drops of water from a crevice in a rock above"; and these are they: *Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, let me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. When my way grows drear, Precious Lord, linger near. When my life is almost gone, take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.*

Presence. In a world like ours, it seems like a small offering, far from a powerful, life-changing act, no dramatic intervention, no last-minute deliverance. And, yet, in the end it matters more than anything in the world. We don't get Superman; we get something much better. We get God, and the presence is so powerful that it doesn't need to miraculously deliver us from anything. It holds us, it takes our hand, it leads us home. Tom Dorsey's wife was still dead, he was still heartbroken, but he lived through it—and he flourished again as though on wings of eagles.

What our faith offers people—today just as surely as it has through the ages—is a holy presence, the presence of God. Far from Deism, my friends, this God whom we share is one who comes very, very close—a coming that rejoices with us, weeps with us, waits with us.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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