

## “Kneeling and Soaring”

Rev. David Gregory

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Epiphany 5



### Readings

An Excerpt from *On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate (Psalm 145)*

by Mary Oliver

Every morning I want to kneel down on the golden  
cloth of the sand and say  
some kind of musical thanks for  
the world that is happening again—another day—  
from the shawl of wind coming out of the  
west to firm green

flesh of the melon lately sliced open and  
eaten, its chill and ample body  
flavored with mercy. I want  
to be worthy of—what? Glory? Yes, unimaginable glory.  
O Lord of melons, of mercy, though I am  
not ready, nor worthy, I am climbing toward you.

Excerpt from *Isaiah 40:28-31*

in the *New Revised Standard Version*

Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
... the Creator of the ends of the earth ...  
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.

If you're like me, you've been spending lots of time in front of your computer during the pandemic, and many of us are finding that this level of virtual engagement is bringing us a new kind of weariness. I hear people using the term "Zoomed out" to describe how they feel after a week of work that involves multiple Zoom calls each day. We've grown accustomed to our virtual gatherings, and some of them are probably here to stay. But it takes some forethought and mindfulness to manage them in a healthy way. For me this involves healthy food, getting outside for lots of walks and hikes, moving and stretching regularly, and doing plenty of yoga and meditation. I'm sure you have your own ways of doing the very same thing.

It took me a number of months to find my energetic equilibrium, and it all came to a head in September during the wildfires. Being stuck inside with the windows shut for days and weeks, I came to place of weariness unlike any other before it. It wasn't exactly the same as being physically tired, though there was a similarity of sensation. It was more of a spiritual, mental, and emotional exhaustion that installed itself as an always open drain. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophecy of the second Isaiah addresses what I think we're talking about, and though the technological aspects are not to be found, the human aspects are quite familiar.

Five centuries before Jesus, as the story is told, the Jewish people had lost pretty much everything. Their religious center was destroyed, their country was ransacked, and those who survived were forced to live as refugees in Babylon. It was a chronic situation in which the people often cried out in despair, feeling hopeless and forgotten, with little that could be done to effect any change. They were grieving all that had been lost, but without any prospect for healing. From day to day, all they knew was their overwhelming weariness. And so when a prophet came along and showed them a path to "renew their strength" and to envision a time when they would "run and not be weary," when they would "walk and not faint," it had to have been a balm for their souls—like the arrival of the first vaccine in a pandemic; like the cool, clear water poured onto the parched ground; like the arrival of a robin on an early spring day. It may not have been translated into their experience as yet, but just the appearance of this path on the horizon was enough to lighten their hearts and energize their spirits.

We all know the prolonged energetic drain that happens in times of chronic anxiety, when the brain is bathed in chemicals of fight or flight, and the body is ruled by the hormones of stress. We've actually been stuck in it for several years, and especially so in the last twelve months. But we need more than just a dot on the horizon. A small piece of hope can get us started, but it won't plug the drain. When we're physically tired, we can take a nap and recharge our bodies, but weariness keeps us from holding that charge.

Weariness is a universal phenomenon as demonstrated in the sabbath principle, written into the very nature of creation itself, by a Creator who rested. We are allowed to be weary, and more importantly, we are allowed to say so. It is not necessary, nor desirable, and not even possible to glide serenely through life without times of grief, sadness, and weariness. We were never meant to be immune to crisis, and while we can often find our ground through a return to our spiritual practices, it's not a seamless experience.

Western religion, specifically Western Christianity, has tended to offer us an Energy Source in the form of a personal deity located in a far-off heaven, well beyond the reach of any extension cord. But this God, portrayed as separate from us, isn't the one that Jesus talked about. In the incarnation, we are reminded that there is a oneness to all things. "I and my father are one," he said, and he invited his friends to become conscious of this same oneness when he prayed "make them one, as we are one."

We've then taken this same Jesus, Emmanuel, "God-with-us," and placed him in the same far-off heaven, as if to say, "God can come near, but he can't stay." The idea of the Holy Spirit is that Divine Presence hasn't come and gone. It was always here. It is here now, and it will always be here.

Divine Energy isn't something that we have to fly off to heaven to plug into. It is here . . . in everything we see, hear, taste, touch, feel, and yes, intuit. This would explain the affinity we share with Mary Oliver, our patron saint, who so fully and completely found her divine charge in wild geese, in trees, in water, and in a sandy beach. It was kneeling on the "golden cloth of the sand," or feasting on a piece of fresh melon "flavored with mercy" that gave her the sense of contact with the Divine. We, on the other hand, have constructed elaborate systems of theology to try to climb our way toward God, when we might have saved ourselves the trouble. We could instead have found the divine where the divine has always been—around us, above us, below us, within us, within all people and all things. Embedded in an ancient Hebrew song are these words:

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;  
God will help her when the morning dawns.*

There is an antidote to weariness, and it comes to us in the form of the fresh, flowing river which gladdens the city. We are that city, and we needn't search high and low for something that already dwells within us. If you've ever looked for your glasses only to find them on the top of your head, you'll get what I'm saying.

When Mary Oliver desired to soar with the eagles, she started by kneeling in the sand. It might seem counter-intuitive, but it isn't really. For centuries, preachers everywhere have been deathly afraid that people would find God in places beyond the church walls, and so we became self-appointed mediators, the priests of an institutional order meant to contain, to control, and to compel. The fact is, a church is a fine place to plug into divine presence, a good place for kneeling and soaring. But as the pandemic itself has taught us, we do not have a corner on the market. And instead of perceiving that as a threat to our existence, we should all breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that it's so much easier than we thought it was.

