



## Second Sunday after the Epiphany

January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012

*Stop, Forrest, Stop!*

**Isaiah 40: 21-31**

21 Don't you know? Haven't you heard? Wasn't it announced to you from the beginning? Haven't you understood since the earth was founded? 22 God inhabits the earth's horizon—its inhabitants are like locusts—stretches out the skies like a curtain and spreads it out like a tent for dwelling. 23 God makes dignitaries useless and the earth's judges into nothing. 24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely is their shoot rooted in the earth when God breathes on them, and they dry up; the windstorm carries them off like straw. 25 So to whom will you compare me, and who is my equal? says the holy one. 26 Look up at the sky and consider: Who created these? The one who brings out their attendants one by one, summoning each of them by name. Because of God's great strength and mighty power, not one is missing. 27 Why do you say, Jacob, and declare, Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD my God ignores my predicament"? 28 Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn't grow tired or weary. His understanding is beyond human reach, 29 giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted. 30 Youths will become tired and weary, young men will certainly stumble; 31 but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.

Imagine yourself in the position of the people and time of Isaiah 40's setting: You and other survivors of your people are in exile in the dreaded and hated country of Babylon, hundreds of miles away from home. Your king is gone. Your temple is in ruins. Jerusalem's walls are destroyed, and wild animals roam the streets. Many family members and friends are dead or missing.. Everything you hold dear is uprooted. You might be asking---where are you God? Where is God in this land of forsakenness and grieving? You might feel profoundly discouraged---you might be weary and just about ready to give up. And then....here the words from the Prophet Isaiah as the chapter opens and from our text today---"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak to their heart--- those who **wait for the Lord** shall renew their strength...they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Maybe you can see even more how this Isaiah passage is addressed to people who have been worn down. And you may more clearly see the word of hope. Even that phrase 'wait for the Lord' is not one of putting-off or foreboding time-lapse, but rather in the Hebrew is *qawah*---which unlike the English word 'waiting' means eagerly awaiting, expecting, looking for, longing for & hoping for. The noun-form of the same Hebrew root is used in Jeremiah 29: 11, where

God offers 'a future with hope'. You can find it too in Psalm 130, Romans 8: 22-30 and Titus 2: 13.

Point being that though things are not what we would like [in this case, fa-a-r from it], their confidence, our confidence in God can take hold anyway and help us to take one step after another--to carry on.

Truth is, we ourselves often find ourselves in that place of needing just to carry on---to move forward one step at a time. And when that happens, we too need to hear that God is not only able to rescue us, but is also willing to do so---

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is an everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth [That God] does not grow weary----* So that those who wait on, who rely on, the Lord will have a sustaining vigor that even than even that of the young or the naturally strong. You see, it's not about a boundless, super-human strength and attitude---but about the ability to carry on--in most any circumstance life may throw, because of the support of our loving God. That's what makes it possible to face each and every day, because exiles or not, our journey through life can be exhausting and sapping at times. There seems to be no shortage of things to wear us down---problems at work, difficulties in our relationships, worries about our children [or our parents], unwelcome interruptions in our plans and unexpected health difficulties for us and those we love are but a few. But this passage says that 'they will not be weary'---which means unweary. May not mean 'top o' the world'---but it means being able to carry on. And that means a lot when we're not sure that we can continue.

So are you, am I, an unweary runner? In 1999, Kirk Johnson, a *New York Times* reporter, ran the nation's toughest ultra-marathon, the Badwater. Unlike regular marathons, such as the 26-mile New York event where runners compete against each other, ultra-marathoners compete against the course itself. That's because ultra-marathons are set in places of extreme hardship. Thus, if you

finish within the established timeframe, you have won. It's a personal contest---it's the worst of the ultra-marathons. It's run across Death Valley in — get this — *July*. The footrace begins at Badwater, which at 282 feet below sea level is the lowest and hottest spot in the Western Hemisphere. The race goes 135 miles from there to the trailhead of Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the lower 48 states. The trailhead is at 8,360 feet. Runners, who must have a support team accompanying them, have to complete the race within 60 hours. They encounter temperatures of 120 degrees and higher, 40-mph headwinds and lightning storms. Johnson was 41 years old and of average athletic ability when he learned about the race from a woman who'd done it. His decision to run it himself came after his older brother, without warning or hint of trouble, and without explanation, committed suicide. Struggling to comprehend his brother's surrender of life, Johnson gradually determined to run the race. The run proved to be every bit the grueling ordeal Johnson expected. During the dark hours of the second night, he hallucinated from exhaustion. Still, he finished. Forty-two runners started but nine dropped out, including some younger than Johnson. He came in second to last, but, of course, speed was never the issue. Johnson ended with something far beyond an evening face, but Badwater became the medium through which the inner struggle with his brother's suicide resolved. Johnson later wrote:

*Running Badwater isn't about limits and boundaries at all, as I'd once thought, but rather about going on and never giving up. For all its imagery of death and the severity of its climate, Death Valley and Badwater are about choosing life. And when I figured that out, I finally understood that I hadn't entered the race to get closer to my brother ... or to honor him at all, as I'd imagined at one time, but rather for totally opposite reasons — to put some distance between us, and to refute the terror and uncertainty that his death had introduced into my life. Badwater exposed that fact — brutally and honestly and with no gauzy sentimentality. I go on.*

It is NOT a negative statement to say that we GO ON. It is not a compromise of triumph or a lack of sentiment. It is real life. And it is good. We too can become an 'unweary runner'. We may end up at the end of some days with a long face and a tired body and soul, but by waiting on the Lord, with hope intact and always at the ready, we can be unweary runners and people with the resources for dealing with what comes our way. I believe too that we will end our very life's journey with the energy to continue on into God's great eternity. In the movie *Forrest Gump*, Forrest decides after his mother's death to just RUN. He says, *I just felt like runnin'*. And in the movie, he runs across the country and back and again. Finally, he just stops---dead in his tracks. Those who have chosen to follow him along and follow in his steps look on in expectation as he says, *I'm pretty tired---think I'll go home now.* And just like that, the narration of his voice says, *my runnin' days was over.* He continues in explanation---*My mamma always said, 'you got to put the past behind you, before you can move on'. I think that's what my runnin' was all about. I had run for 3 years, 6 months, 14 days and 16 hours.* It was time for 'Run, Forrest, Run!' to become 'Stop, Forrest, Stop!'. He had run his whole life—ran away from bullies; ran away from football tacklers; runs from Viet Nam snipers with his buddies on his shoulders; runs across the country to escape bad memories.

**“Stop Forrest Stop”** is the is the opposite. For most adversities we face in our lives, we should probably take that tact. Rather than *Run*, simply *Stop* and face adversity directly. Are we courageous enough---do we have faith enough to know that we will be able to not only survive but thrive when we stop and rest in God? Our text today says that it will work for us if we do. God is there. The poet Annie Johnson Flint died in 1932. Born in Vineland, New Jersey, she was orphaned at age 6 and severely afflicted with arthritis in her teens, so that before reaching adulthood, she was unable even to walk. She had wanted to be a composer and concert pianist, but when illness deprived her of the ability to the play the piano, she turned to poetry instead, pounding out the words on a typewriter with her knuckles after the disease rendered her unable to open her hands. She

eventually came to see poetry as her calling from God. Here's her witness in one of her poems:

listen to it from several voices---

**He giveth more grace as our burdens grow greater**

**He sendeth more strength as our labors increase**

**To added afflictions He addeth His mercy, to multiplied trials he multiplies peace.**

**When we have exhausted our store of endurance, When our strength has failed ere the day is  
half-done, When we reach the end of our hoarded resources**

**Our Father's full giving is only begun**

**His love has no limits, His grace has no measure; His power no boundary known unto men;**

**For out of His infinite riches in Jesus He giveth**

**And giveth, and giveth again.**

Carry on. AMEN