



Sermon of August 1, 1999



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"LANDING INSTRUCTIONS"

Isaiah 40:25-31

I Corinthians 15:3-11

We were all attracted to the story of Lance Armstrong winning the Tour de France last weekend, that grueling bicycle race. It is one of the great endurance races in the world today. Lance Armstrong won it in record time, two years after undergoing surgery and then chemotherapy for cancer that spread throughout his body, including to his brain.

It is a testimony first of all to the wonderful advances that medicine has made in curing cancers, but everyone recognizes as well that it is a terrific testimony to the human spirit. It was his spirit, his will, his determination that made it possible for him to have such a miraculous recovery.

Have you noticed that when the human spirit triumphs in such a dramatic way, we turn to metaphors of flight to describe it. They are the only words we seem to find that are appropriate.

Humankind has always done that. Nothing expresses this drive to overcome adversity in our lives, or even overcome human limitation, better than metaphors of flight. It expresses our belief that there is something in each one of us that seeks the highest. There is something in us that wants to strive for greatness. Indeed there is something in us that wants to overcome human limitation. The metaphor of flight illustrates that better than anything else.

One example of that metaphor is the Old Testament lesson for this morning, the words from the prophet Isaiah.

They 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.

That is such a beautiful image. You have seen it with eagles soaring effortlessly, gracefully, and majestically. It is one of the most beautiful sights in nature. Such an appropriate metaphor for human beings, overcoming human limitation and realizing their fullest potential as creatures of God.

But it's hard. It's hard to do that. There are great risks that are involved in doing it. That's another reason why the flight metaphor is such an appropriate one, because the risk of soaring so high, as we all know, is that you can fall.

The Greeks were the ones who talked about that. One of the great myths in Greek mythology is the story of Icarus. Icarus was in prison. Which incidentally was the Greek understanding of human life. They describe a human being as a soul captured in the prison house of an earthly body, longing to escape.

That is what Icarus does. He escapes by making wax wings, putting feathers on them, and then soaring up into the sky. He climbs higher and higher, and exhilarated he begins to think that maybe he is no longer human, maybe he is a god. He climbs so high he comes close to the sun. The rays of the sun melt the wax on his wings, and he comes plummeting down to earth.

The Greeks derived a lesson from that myth. Especially those Greeks who formed the school of philosophy called "Stoicism." They said the lesson is that we are human beings, therefore we do not belong in the heights. We are limited. We are not gods. If we soar too high, then we will inevitably crash, and we will experience pain and tragedy in our life.

According to that view the practical advice for daily living was: Don't wish for very much. Don't hope for very much. Don't strive for very much. Don't love very much. Don't get outside of yourself and reach out to others too much, because if you do that, you are going to be disappointed. For the higher the spirit soars, the more we seek to achieve, the greater the disappointment.

George Faux was an Englishman living in the 19th century. He had a reputation as something of an eccentric. One day he announced that he had conquered flight, he knew how to fly. He

gathered people around to watch his demonstration of flight. He got on top of his roof, jumped off, and started beating his arms furiously, only to tumble ingloriously to the ground. When asked about this failed experiment, he said, "Actually, I'm a good flyer. I just don't land very well."

I like that. The Greeks were right. If you soar to the heights, at some time you've got to come down. So you better know how to land.

I heard about a family that had a beautiful daughter. At an early age they recognized that she had enormous talent, a gifted mind. Her parents decided that they would raise her to reach to the heights of this world, to find the fullest potential of her life. They did that by sheltering her so that she was exposed only to what is positive and good in this life. She knew nothing of the deceit, and the lying and cheating of human beings. She knew nothing of the news that you and I hear on the television, or read in the newspapers, of the evil in the world.

They raised a beautiful girl, extraordinarily bright, idealistic and optimistic and a buoyant spirit. She was ready to fly. Because she was so bright she entered college in her early teens. It was there that she had the first contact with the world as it really is. And it's true that she flew. It was like those fragile butterflies that are so beautiful, but they have only one ecstatic flight on a summer day, and then they expire.

That is what happened to her. She went through several painful experiences, and then married and divorced in a short time. At the age of twenty-three she committed suicide.

Five years after her daughter's death, her mother finally found the courage to read her meticulously written diaries. After which she concluded that her daughter was simply ill-equipped to handle the reality of this world, the real world. She had fallen from the heights of idealism, onto the hard rocks of reality.

In other words, she knew how to fly. Her parents raised her so she would soar, so she would reach the highest possible. The problem was they forgot to teach her how to land. The Greeks were right. Human life is structured in such a way that you are supposed to fly, but it is also structured that you will come down, and therefore you better have landing instructions.

For those landing instructions we turn to the Bible. That is what the Bible gives us. The Bible has the same reality about life as the Greeks. The Bible warns us that life can be tough, and there will be pain and sorrow, there will be betrayal and infidelity, and violence and hatred, all the things you and I know so well. But it says, nevertheless, you were created to fly. God created you that way, and God wants you to soar to the highest, to know the very best in your life. If the crash comes in your life, then God is there to help you get back up.

The Greeks saw human aspiration as defiance of God. The Bible sees human aspiration as the will of God. This is what we are created for. So the Greeks would say that if you soar too high, you are defying the limitations of human life. And the Bible says if you do not try to soar into the highest, then you are not fulfilling the promise of your creation.

Go back to that passage in Isaiah, "They shall mount up with wings like eagles." That came at

the worst time in Israel's history, a time called the Babylonian Exile. The historians of Israel all agree, this was the low point in all of Israel's history. They had been so high--the creation of a nation, the beautiful city Jerusalem, recognition as one of the powers of the world--then the Babylonians attacked, and carried off most of the population to Babylon, and they plunged into the depths of despair.

You read the literature of the Exile, and you see that it is a literature of despair. But then Isaiah wrote to them. He doesn't tell them that their situation is caused by soaring too high. He does say that their situation is punishment for sin, for moral wrong-doing. Which means that they are being punished not for soaring too high, but stooping so low.

But that is past. The crash has come. They are in bondage now. In other words, they are where you would be if you had just experienced a great loss in your life, if your world had crashed in upon you, if you had lost your job, or lost a loved one, or had heard some terrible news. If that is your situation, then you are like Israel when Isaiah said to Israel:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God...
He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he
increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they 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.

Those are landing instructions. Isaiah is saying to those who have crashed, who are wounded, who are tired, or disillusioned and in despair, God will renew your strength, so once again you can "mount up with wings like eagles," and be the kind of persons that God created you to be.

So the effect of biblical faith upon our life should be that we never give up. But if we crash, if we experience defeat, or sorrow, we get back up again, and prepare for life to take us back up to the heights.

But we should be realistic about the risks we take when we try to find the best that life can offer. The best way to avoid being disillusioned about life is to have no illusions about life to begin with, so be realistic. If you strive for the highest, if you trust others, you may be disappointed. If you seek the best for your life, you may be rejected. You may come crashing down. But listen to the 139th Psalm.

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
If I make my bed in Sheol [if my life is like hell], thou art there!

If I ascend to the highest, thou art there to bless me. If I descend into the lowest, into despair, thou art there to comfort and strengthen me. God wants us to keep trying, not give up, and to soar as high as we can.

I remember reading about the Rolls Royce Company, the maker, probably, of the world's best car. They strive for perfection in making cars. In that article someone asked the president if a Rolls Royce car ever breaks down. He said, "A Rolls Royce car never breaks down, although it may fail temporarily to proceed."

I like that. That's the spirit of those who know that God does not resent our aspirations, as the Greeks believed. But if we ascend to the highest, God is there to rejoice with us. If we descend into the lowest, God is there to comfort us and to encourage us.

Which leads to the New Testament lesson, Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and this verse, "I worked hard. I worked harder than anybody else, yet it was not I, but the grace of God working with me." Which means, God isn't going to do anything for you until you do something for yourself.

That's got a name. It is called "synergy." You're not supposed to use technical, theological words in sermons, but that word was stolen by the secular world from the theological lexicon, so it is familiar to all of you. The word "synergy" means "working together." Specifically it means, "two entities working together to accomplish something that could not be done by one of them alone."

That is what Paul is talking about. He says, "I worked hard. I did it myself. Yet it was not I, but the grace of God working with me."

St. Augustine put it this way. "Without God we cannot. Without us God will not."

So if you crash, or if you haven't tried to soar because you are afraid to, afraid to assert yourself, afraid of what might happen, afraid you might be rejected, or you might not succeed. Or you've tried before, and it hurts too much to try again, you don't want to go through that again, then you need to hear this. The Bible says you should have expected that.

You read the Bible, the Bible is about people who have been knocked down, trampled upon, abused, forgotten, oppressed, crucified, abandoned, exiled. And in every single instance, without exception, they say God was there with me, giving me wings to fly again. Just like the Jews in Babylon, saying, "You shall mount up with wings as eagles." You shall have life restored to you. Everyone of them can say the same thing without exception. "I did it. I got up by myself. It's been hard, but it's been my own effort. Yet I can look back now, and I have to say it was not I, but the grace of God working with me."

It is like this. David Mazel is a wonderful writer. He wrote an essay once about shopping malls, like the one we have across the freeway. He doesn't like them. He thinks they are too big, too cold, too impersonal. He contrasts them with the old department stores, the kind he had in his town, where there would be a floorwalker, walking the aisles and giving instructions to people, showing them where to find things.

The floorwalker in the department store in his hometown was named Mr. Rosen. He used to walk through the aisles with his hands clasped behind his back, looking more professorial than mercantile. In fact, he was very scholarly. He would go home from work every night and read books. People would ask him, "Where do I find the pajamas?" or "Where do I find the utensils?" whatever question they had, and he would always answer them politely. They said that he made people feel like they were important. So Mr. Rosen became something of a legend in that town.

One of the answer that he gave to a customer was remembered. It became a famous quote in that town. A woman came up to Mr. Rosen and expressed her failure to find a dress that she was looking for. She said, "It will take me a miracle to find it. Do you believe in miracles?" Mr. Rosen smiled, and said, "No. But I rely on them all the time."

That's it. We make our way. We do it ourselves. We take the initiative. We may never, ever think about divine guidance. And I am sure most of us are that way. We would say there was none. I didn't ask for it. I didn't get it. I was on my own. I worked hard. I did it.

And yet, if we are sensitive at all, if we are perceptive at all, if we are reflective at all, if we were to sit back and look upon our life, where we have been, we would see that there is a power at work in our lives that we rely on all the time. We may not believe it, but we rely on it.

So we can say with Paul, "I did it. I worked hard, though it was not I, but the grace of God working with me."

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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