

Sermon for Sunday, February 5, 2012 Isaiah 40:21-31 "Steady"

For his fiftieth birthday, my husband indulged himself in a midlife crisis. He, with his brother and other friends, decided to bicycle across the United States as part of a four-man team in something called "The Race Across America." This was not a leisurely jaunt from B&B to B&B. No, this was hard-core. Not for nothing does the Race Across America – also called RAAM - bill itself as the world's toughest bike race. Some member of the team was on his bike at all times, riding day and night, from San Diego to Annapolis. While one person was riding the others were either in the van following the rider or in the RV sleeping or eating. It took a total of 8 and a half days, a remarkable accomplishment given that one of the riders was injured about halfway across the country and the rest of the team had to work that much harder, riding longer each day, until they reached Annapolis.

The remarkable thing about this accomplishment, outside of the fact that four middle-aged desk jockeys like Doug, Chuck, Mike and Majd actually finished, was that they rarely rode very fast. Their pace was respectable, but it wasn't as fast as Lance Armstrong or the other elite bicycle racers. No, to do RAAM and survive, you've got to find a pace that works for you and stick with it. Sometimes, when they had to reach check-in points by a certain time, they stepped up the pace, but mostly it was steady as she goes, day and night, hour by hour, across the country.

Steadiness. That's not a virtue that you hear about very often in today's world. No, it's always about being the fastest or the strongest or the biggest. At the Super Bowl this afternoon, no one is going to laud a running back for his steadiness. In that contest, it's all about speed.

And yet steadiness is one of the things that gets us through.

It is steadiness that Isaiah is talking about in the Old Testament reading today. He is chiding the people of Israel who are exiled in Babylon. They complain "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God." They feel that their time of trial is abandonment by God.

They whine and complain, and Isaiah responds as sharply as if he had slapped them. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you from the beginning?"

He launches into an ecstatic recounting of God's history with his people, of God's power and creative force, all the things that God has given them, God's never-failing attention to them. He says they are in the grip of what William Carl calls "theological amnesia."

They have forgotten who God is, because they have been so busy ignoring God and tending to their own needs...and look where it has gotten them, in the hands of foreigners, living in a strange land. He cries out to them: "Remember! Remember your God. He has not abandoned you. You have forgotten HIM! Look around and see God's presence in everything and everyone you see and touch and use."

He says that if they go back to the beginning of their understanding of God, if they steady themselves and rebuild that relationship, they will no longer feel like God has abandoned them. They will see and feel his presence even in their times of trouble.

Even more important, Isaiah reminds these broken people that God not only has not gone away, but that he is there to give them exactly what they need to soldier on, if they look for it: "...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." In other words, be steady in faithfulness, and God will supply the strength you need to survive whatever you must endure.

If you are running around yelling and complaining and struggling, how can you feel God's presence? It is when you stop, stay still for a second, that you can regain that steadiness and calm that allows you to hear him, to feel him, with you.

I found myself thinking of this passage on Friday, when my colleague at Immanuel, Old Church would be presiding at the Memorial Service for the three year old twin girls who were murdered. How could the family of those beautiful little girls carry on with the awful burden of grief? How could they live with the worry that they should have seen something in the girls' father's behavior that would have been a clue to what he planned? How could they stop themselves from imagining, over and over again, how the girls might have suffered before they died?

It would not surprise me if the family said, like the Israelites, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God." "I feel like God has abandoned me, and abandoned my girls, and I feel utterly lost and alone."

Isaiah says that God is with us, even in the times when we are most broken, most betrayed by the world around us, most lost and in pain. If we turn to the Lord, if we remember his power and his love for all of that which he created, then we know that even in the most difficult times, we are not alone. This God loves us. This God remembers us, each one of us, by name. This God gives us the strength we need. All we need to do is to be steady, to pedal our bikes at an even pace, to be faithful, and he will be there giving us what we need, whatever the world does to us. Those who wait for the Lord, steady despite the insanity around them, shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not be faint, because the Lord will give them what they need to endure.

Amen.