

“The Stubborn Ounces of Our Weight”
Isaiah 40:27-31; Galatians 6:7-10
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Key verse: So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. Galatians 6:9

Unless your name is Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, you will likely acknowledge along with me that 2006 has not been the greatest year we've ever had. Scandals and wars have been front and center. The execution on Friday of Saddam Hussein was a grim reminder of the carnage that continues daily in Iraq. Saturday's news brought word that a giant ice shelf has snapped free from an island south of the North Pole. When the year ends tonight at midnight, the year 2006 will join the list of the ten warmest years on record, nine out of ten of which have been between the years 1995 and 2005. It has not been a good year for the planet Earth.

As a nation, we are grieving the death of our 38th President and wondering where the dignity and honor of our nation have escaped to in recent months. For many, President Ford exemplified what a good person entrusted with leadership can do when that he acts in accordance with conscience and walks humbly before his God.

2006 has been a challenging year in so many respects. An epidemic of Type 2 diabetes, caused by overeating and lack of exercise, continues to compromise the health of a growing number of Americans, while at the same time malnutrition is stalking great areas of the world. In sub-Saharan Africa, 33 million children under the age of five are living with malnutrition.

I don't buy the magazine often any more, but I was interested in whom *Time Magazine* chose to be Person of the Year. Do you know whom they chose? You. That's right. You. The cover was made out of that mirror-like material called Mylar. The point of the editors was that you and I now control the Information Age. We are in charge of what we pay attention to and what we do not pay attention to. We are free to blog and

look at YouTube to our heart's content and never leave our computer screens. Columnist Frank Rich writes of *Time Magazine*'s choice, "As our country sinks deeper into a quagmire seemingly unable to do anything about the war [or much of anything else,] we the people find ourselves seeking any escape hatch we can find." (*The New York Times*, 12/24/06) If this 2006 trend toward escapism, apathy, and self-absorption continues, we can look forward to a year that will hold even less promise than the one that ends today.

I read about a village in Italy that has an interesting way of observing the New Year. Instead of finding a party to attend in the evening, people begin to head home as midnight approaches. When the hour strikes, the windows of all the houses in the town open, and people begin throwing things out of the windows and down on to the streets: broken pieces of furniture, chipped glasses, photographs of former sweethearts, old shoes, cracked plates. Whatever isn't working for the people anymore, they throw out. What a great New Year's tradition! Heaven help those who might be walking innocently by on the sidewalk, of course. (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, Dec.25, 2006)

Wouldn't it be wonderful if this New Year's Eve, millions of people decided to throw out their indifference and replaced it with a renewed resolve to become involved with the things that make for life for ourselves, for other people, and for the planet entrusted to our care?

Let a scripture from Isaiah help us think about what we might want to hold onto and what is not working for us anymore. The 40th chapter of the Book of Isaiah contains some of the most reassuring words in all of scripture. The prophet writes of God's unfailing love for the people of Israel as they suffer through difficult times, the end of which they cannot see. Interestingly, their exile is about to come to an end but they do not know it. They endure it. In order to give them strength and to remind them of the source of their strength, the prophet asks them this rhetorical question:

Have you not known; have you not heard? Our God is an everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary. God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths shall faint and be weary and the young will fall exhausted, but those who wait on 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.

Take that promise with you into the New Year, and throw your lack of trust in God out the window! The prophet does not promise that in some magical way, your problems and my problems and the world's problems will disappear. That is not the promise. The promise is that God will sustain the people, so that the people will be able to persevere, no matter what happens. And who knows what will happen? We cannot predict what our life will be like tomorrow, much less six weeks from now, or ten months from now. What we ought to discard is the naïve assumption that everyday will be filled with bliss. What we ought to replace that naïveté with is a sure confidence that whatever happens, there will be enough strength from God for us to endure.

Many of you are familiar with Rick Warren, author of the popular book, *The Purpose Driven Life* and pastor of the huge Saddleback Church in California. Regardless of what you think of mega-churches or positive thinking theology, Rick Warren has spiritual depth. In an interview he gave recently, he said this: "Life is a series of problems. Either you are in one now, you are just coming out of one, or you are getting ready to go into another one. . . Yes, we can be reasonable happy here on earth, but happiness is not the goal of life. . . The goal of life is to grow in character, in Christ-likeness.

"This past year has been the greatest year of my life," Rick Warren says, "but it has also been the hardest, with my wife Kay getting cancer. I used to think that life was hills and valleys. You go through a dark time, and then you go up on the mountaintop, and then you come back down again, then you go back up. I don't think that anymore. Rather than hills and valleys, I believe that life is more like this – it's like the two rails on a railroad track, and at all times you have something good and hopeful going on, and at the very same time you have something daunting and heartbreaking, and frightening going on. You can focus on your problems but if you do that you are going to get into self-centeredness: my problems, my issues, my pain." (This is the other version of that *Time Magazine* syndrome of seeing yourself as the center of the universe. It's all about YOU all the time.)

“One of the easiest ways to get rid of pain is to take the focus off yourself and on to God and on to other people. We discovered that in spite of the prayers of thousands, God was not going to heal Kay of her cancer. Neither was God going to make it easy for her. It’s HARD, and yet God has strengthened her character, given her a ministry of helping others, and drawn her closer to God and to other people.”

Those who wait on the Lord, that is trust in God, will find their strength renewed. It is unrealistic to expect only health, wealth and happiness. Forget it! But you and I have every right to expect that God will give us the tools, the strength we need to endure what needs to be endured, to repair what can be repaired, and the wisdom to know the difference between the two.

I have mentioned before my friend John Claypool, who died last year. In his classic book, *The Tracks of a Fellow Stranger*, he wrote of his young daughter’s valiant but ultimately losing battle with leukemia. He says that he grounded his whole life during those difficult months on the words of Isaiah and the promise of strength. “Three kinds of strength God gives,” Claypool suggests. To mount up with wings as eagles, that’s the kind in which we experience ecstasy and exuberance, and certainly there are times when God gives us that kind of strength. Our spirits soar, our hearts sing; we laugh until our sides hurt. (One of the reasons so many people are grieving James Brown’s death is that he took us to a good place, where simply, our hearts could sing and be in rhythm with the essence of the universe.)

But there are other times, challenging times, when exuberant strength is far away. What we need is the second kind of strength, the strength that enables us to do what has to be done to make things better. We can run and not be weary. Sometimes, we soar like wings of eagles; sometimes the best we can do is run and not be weary.

I think of my own mother, who got up early and stayed up late and worked as a teacher and kept our household going through some terrible times, and yet was always there, seven days a week, to keep her children going through whatever had to be gotten through. To use Paul’s expression in his Letter to the Galatians, “She never wearied with well-doing.”

I think of the long-time conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim, an Israeli, who along with his friend, Edward Said, a Palestinian, founded an orchestra seven years ago composed of Israeli and Palestinian musicians. They play together around the world. Mr. Barenboim makes no claims that the orchestra will bring about peace in the Middle East. He simply says, “We are an orchestra against ignorance.”

When you can't fix it, you do what you can day after day to bear witness to the possibility of moving to higher ground.

They shall run and not be weary- those who do what they can to lessen the enmity between peoples and nations; those who keep reminding us that we are to be stewards of the earth and not its exploiters; those who will not hush up about hunger and homelessness; those who care about the dying day after day; those who get up out of their chairs in front of their computer screens and get involved... in saving the park down the street, or in saving the polar bears in the North Pole. God does not grow weary in doing what is right, and neither should we.

I love this little poem by a man named Bonaro Overstreet.

You say the little efforts that I make
Will do no good:
They never will prevail
To tip the hovering scale where
Justice swings in the balance.
I do not think I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
In favor of my right
To choose which side shall feel
The stubborn ounces of my weight.

I am all for slimming down in 2007. As I once heard Monica Pearson, néé Kaufmann say, “A second on your lips, a lifetime on your hips.” But I am more concerned that people of good will and certainly all people who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ not squander the stubborn ounces of our weight, but use them to change the things that can be changed. As Karl Barth expressed it in a New Year’s sermon decades ago, “God gives us power, the know-how, the freedom, and the skill to

DO something.” Out of God’s very own being, God’s power comes to us.

Surely one of the reasons the American people are so full of gratitude to Gerald Ford is that he chose to direct the full weight of his presidential office to the purposes of healing the nation when so many were urging him to do otherwise. It was a costly choice, but God gave him the strength to make it, and Ford stood behind his choice until the day he died.

A reporter asked President Ford if Richard Nixon had ever thanked him for the pardon.

“No,” he answered.

“Never?” the incredulous reporter asked.

“No,” Ford said, “he never mentioned it to me.” The lack of gratitude notwithstanding, Gerald Ford did not grow weary in doing what was right for the country.

But then, there come times when there is really nothing that CAN be done. Claypool wrote of the helplessness he felt as his daughter’s illness became worse. He had no occasion to soar in ecstasy, and there was no use in activism. All he could do was trudge, step by step.” In other words, walk and not faint. “To understand there is a Help that will enable you not to fall is good news indeed.” When your own energy supply gives out, it is comforting to know that God’s energy is inexhaustible.

The years that lie behind us are proof of God’s sovereign, merciful and everlasting care. I take heart in the fact that since its creation, God has cared for the world. I take comfort in the fact that since our nation was founded, God has led us through difficult times and showed us the way to higher ground. I take comfort in the fact that since the day you and I were born, in spite of the mistakes we have made, the losses we have suffered, the sins we have committed, the hopelessness that has often filled our hearts, God has brought us safe thus far. We are still here, aren’t we? Everything is possible from this moment on through the grace of God who in Christ Jesus, that baby born in Bethlehem’s manger, became bound in love to us forever.

Yet, “be not deceived,” Paul wrote. “God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.” This is a sobering word for the New Year and one that we must hear afresh. As good and deep as the grace of God is, we ought not to expect God to cancel the laws of cause and effect. If we do not take care of ourselves, our bodies will come to betray us. If we neglect the needs of the least and the aliens in our midst, the soul of our society will suffer. If we return evil for evil, we will descend in a downward spiral of destruction. If we become apathetic and live as if all that matters to us is us, there will be no one left who cares about anybody, and that will be the end of all of us. Let us not be weary with well-doing.

I close with this thought. One of the silliest things we do at New Year’s, aside from wearing funny hats and making a lot of noise, is telling ourselves that on January 1, we will be able to morph immediately into something that we are not. Let us not forget the promise of God to be our source of strength and transformation, not all at once, but day by day. Through the grace of God, may each day that lies ahead be filled with possibility for you.