

**You Are Called to Worry Less**  
**Series – “Eight Encouraging Words”**  
**Isaiah 40:27-31**  
**September 1, 2024**  
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A favorite bird of the great naturalist, John Muir, was the water ouzel. Have you heard of it? The water ouzel isn't much to look at, just a plain, chubby gray bird. It often perches along the ledge above a mountain stream. Muir studied the ouzel while it was hunting for food, plunging into a cascading stream and disappearing into the froth. It went under the icy-cold torrent for nearing a minute, and then burst out of the water upstream. And with a shake of its feathers, it landed on the ledge as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

Muir was especially captivated by the ouzel's sweet song: *zeet, zeet, zeet*. Unlike my poor limitation, Muir wrote about the song in glowing terms: “The ouzel sings through all the seasons and every kind of storm. However dark and boisterous the weather – cloudy, blowing, snowing – all the same it sings, and never with a note of sadness. Its mellow, fluffy voice is ever tuned to downright gladness.”

Mind you, we don't know if birds are capable of gladness. But an interesting question comes of this: Why does the ouzel seem glad to us? John Muir suggests it's because the bird finds a way to sing even in the face of adversity.

I like that thought! I like it especially because we seem to have plenty of adversity these days and not nearly enough gladness. Muir's description implies a release. It comes after a difficult math test; or when facing the harvest after a challenging year of weather; or when finally sitting down to a conversation you've been avoiding for a long time. To be glad is to be relieved, to be sprung free from anxiety. It doesn't come because of the absence of problems. It comes because we find a way through those problems, sometimes even a way to overcome them. Gladness is the ability *to sing even in the face of adversity*.

Our passage from Isaiah comes out of Babylon. God's people are in exile and they're trying to learn how to sing. They've been there for a very long time – 50 years or more. One day a prophet in the line of Isaiah comes on the scene – let's call him Second Isaiah. He comes breathing new life into Isaiah's words of old. He starts preaching on things the exiles hadn't thought about in a long

time. He says they've suffered long enough. He suggests that God has a plan to give them a future with hope, and get this, it might mean a chance to go home.

Believe it or not, Second Isaiah doesn't get very far with the exiles, at least not at first. The Israelites are surrounded by the shiny, powerful gods of Babylon. The people have grave doubts that their god Yahweh will lift a finger to help them. They feel all but forgotten.

Still, the prophet keeps preaching. We preachers can be a stubborn bunch. He cries out: "O Israel, why do you say that my way is hidden from the Lord? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth."

Isn't it interesting that the prophet doesn't start his sermon with history – the exodus from Egypt, the entrance into the Promised Land, the building of Solomon's magnificent temple. No, I'm sure many of those events seem long ago and far away. Instead, the prophet starts with nature – *This is my Father's world*. And he makes a bold claim, holding up Yahweh as the creator of the ends of the earth. You can almost hear John Muir waxing poetically about that chubby, gray ouzel, who somehow manages to sing in every season of life, even when facing adversity.

There's a word for this kind of persistent singing. It's called *perseverance*. Perseverance can be defined in any number of ways, but essentially it involves "hanging in there." It's the ability to keep on doing something despite a feeling of difficulty, or delay, or even failure.

It's not hard to find examples. It's Thomas Edison going back to the drawing board again and again as he worked on the lightbulb. It's researchers working to develop vaccines to combat the numerous viruses we have these days. It's family members who keep encouraging a loved one to get into treatment for an addiction.

So, what do you think, will the exiles be able to leave their worries behind and trust in Yahweh again? *We don't know*. Will they come to believe that those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength? *We don't know*. Will they someday mount up with wings like an eagle? *We don't know*. Oh, perseverance can be incredibly elusive, especially because of life's uncertainty.

A century ago, Norman Vincent Peale, a Protestant pastor, took on life's uncertainties. Peale had come to believe in the power of positive thinking. Living through two World Wars and the Great Depression, he held up the importance of leaving worry behind and holding on to hope – no matter what! Hope is powerful, he said, because in it lies the power of the human soul to live as if God's promises are going to come true. Some think of hope as an emotion, said Peale, but I see it more as a discipline, a determination to believe in God's possibilities, even when the world around us is crashing down.

According to Peale, hope is at the center of perseverance! It flies in the face of calamity, saying, "The world can do its worst to me, but I'm not giving up. I will keep on hoping! I will keep on singing!"

Solomon Northrup was trying to sing. Perhaps you've watched the movie *12 Years a Slave*. It tells the real-life story of a man who suffers a terrible ordeal. The story begins in 1841. Solomon is a black man who's living with his wife and two children in Saratoga Springs, New York. He's a free man, earning a living as a carpenter and a fiddle player.

One day Solomon is lured by a couple of hucksters into earning extra money touring with a circus. In the process, he gets kidnapped and sold into slavery. He's forced to work on two separate plantations. Life is unbearably hard. And it stings greatly when the plantation owners justify slavery by quoting scripture. Solomon is forced to do a variety of jobs. When it's time to harvest the cotton, everyone is expected to pick at least 200 pounds a day, or else get beaten. Clearly, picking cotton is a matter of life and death.

Solomon is ordered not to tell anyone he once was a free man. He's told to pretend he can't read or write, because he's a slave. By the skin of his teeth, Solomon manages to get by, but he doesn't feel much like a living, breathing human being.

Will Solomon be able to sing? It's a underlying theme of the movie. There are many spirituals that are sung throughout the story. Curiously, Solomon never joins in. He refuses. We're not sure why. Maybe he thinks spirituals are for slaves, and to sing them would be to admit that he is a slave again. But one day a friend of his dies in the field while picking cotton. They carry his body to the cemetery. Profound sadness grips the procession.

Someone begins to sing, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. The mournful words come from deep inside: “Roll, Jordan, roll. I want to get to heaven when I die. My brother, you ought to be there now. Brother, you ought to be there. Brother, you ought to be there. To hear ol’ Jordan roll.”

In the middle of the song, we see tears streaming down Solomon’s cheeks, and he finally begins to sing. There’s despair in his voice, and world-weariness, but there’s also a stubborn perseverance. It’s as if to say: “I don’t want to just survive. I don’t want to just go to heaven when I die. I want to live. I want to live now. I want to see my family again. Roll, Jordan, roll.”

Solomon is longing for a better tomorrow. He’s daring to sing in the face of adversity. Thankfully, it won’t be too much longer before Solomon is set free and he’s back home with his family. But it comes after 12 long years of weariness.

Friends, have you been able to sing lately? Lord knows, we have our own share of world-weariness: as a new school year begins, we’re crossing our fingers, saying our prayers, and hoping our children and grandchildren will be mentally and emotionally strong; as we look around at area churches, we’re aware that we are gathering with a lot fewer people than we did a generation ago; as we face an upcoming election season, we shudder at the thought of it because it promises to be as mean-spirited as they come. Truth be told, it’s hard not to be weary and worried these days. Perseverance is harder still. And finding a way to sing with gladness can seem nigh unto impossible.

In a world of uncertainty, we need to learn how to sing all over again. Like the water ouzel, we strive to sing through all the seasons and every kind of storm. Like the exiles in Babylon, and Norman Vincent Peale, and Solomon Northrup, and so many others, we lift our voices with all the gladness we can muster.

The song of Second Isaiah calls us to worry less and trust more. His is an old and encouraging refrain. Listen: “Those who wait upon 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.”

Friends, this is a song meant to be sung in the face of adversity. It’s a song that we may need now more than ever! Amen.