

Encourage one Another

Isaiah 41:8-13

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A colleague of mine was sharing a story the other day about his fear of flying. For some of us, the limitations of the pandemic have made us look longingly at the rows of mothballed aircraft, wistfully dreaming about the unfilled potential of vacations and destinations to be explored. For my colleague, those dormant planes represented relief. The best place for an aircraft is on the ground.

However, there are times when he needs to fly, and so, he musters up his courage, and is perhaps the only person on the plane to pay close attention to the safety briefing. He secures his lap belt as tight as possible. And then he prays.

So far, he is good on the only statistic that really matters in flying – the number of landings has equalled the number of takeoffs. That is a good thing.

But he recalled one flight where the plane encountered very rough turbulence. He looked out the window to see the wings flapping, the plane would shoot up, only to drop, and then rise suddenly again. He proceeded to leave his grip in the arms of his chair.

At that moment, just as he was about to commit his spirit into the hands of Jesus, he looked at the flight staff. They were calmly sitting in their seats, belted in to hold them secure, but chatting and simply waiting out the turbulence. Their experience told them that this was nothing out of the ordinary, and their body language filled my colleague with trust and confidence in the aircraft. He was going to survive, and live another day.

He was given the courage to face his fear without failure. He was, in short, encouraged.

We hear a lot of encouragement these last few months. Every week, Dr. Hinshaw and Jason Kenny are at the podium encouraging people to get vaccinated, wear masks, and stay home when sick. We are encouraged to shop local! We are encouraged to pick up the dog and cat poop that our pets leave behind. Every day, we are encouraged to do any one of a hundred socially desirable things.

I've always thought that encouragement was to help someone feel better. So, to encourage someone is similar to empathy, or sympathy. Encouragement is to shore up their confidence, their self-image, their joyfulness. There is a lot of this in the bible. The story of Ruth is full of this kind of encouragement, as is the book of Acts.

But the vast majority of encouraging in scripture is much more along the lines of incitement, and enablement. The book of Judges and Kings are full of prophets trying to encourage people

to righteousness, and kings and leaders encouraging them the other way – inciting rebellion and sin.

Encouragement in the bible is about stoking the fires of endurance and perseverance. It is the camaraderie of team, of partnership, of unity.

What does the word encourage mean?

The word encourage breaks down to simply mean “to pour courage into another.” It is the act of imparting “valor, a state of mind that enables someone to meet danger or trouble without fear.”¹

So, when we read the words of Boaz in Ruth 2:8-9, we read about encouragement. “So Boaz said to Ruth, ‘My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.’”

Her reply shows us the result of encouragement. Ruth 2:13, “‘May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord,’ she said. ‘You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant – even though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.’”

Ruth left her home, her people, and any familiarity or security she had to follow her mother-in-law to Israel. When Boaz ensured that Ruth had enough food to glean from his fields at harvest time, it enabled her to eat, and to face being a stranger in a new land with different religion, customs, and practices than her own. She would not starve, and so could spend her energy on other concerns.

In Acts chapter 15, we read about another situation that was causing a lot of distress. The church was divided by a debate about how people should behave – did they need to follow the Old Testament Law, and be circumcised? Were Gentile believers actually Christian? In order to reassure and encourage these Gentile churches, the leaders of the Jerusalem church sent out the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/encourage>

what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

Again, we read that the letter, and the personal envoy, had the intended effect. “So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.”

The gentile church was given the peace of mind that they were included, and valued by the church leaders in Jerusalem through the letter and the presence of representatives, so that they could refute the badgering presence of those who would manipulate them. They became confident in their understanding of the truth.

Finally, one more passage that I want to look at is the one that Lucy read for us, out of Isaiah 41.

In this story, Israel finds herself in a bad situation. She is surrounded by global powers, all contending for the right to be in charge. Assyria is the current top dog, and she takes tribute in both wealth and people from those she conquers. Slowly but relentlessly, Israel is bleeding her wealth and her cultural identity out into the generic sameness of the Assyrian empire. Another superpower is rising, though, Babylon, from the East. All of the nations, including Israel, are afraid, because the only one who can destroy a powerful nation is a more powerful one. How can a smaller people survive?

The other small nations have their answer. Their craftsmen get to work, repairing and crafting new idols. They encourage each other, even though their efforts follow a futile hope.

But Israel is different. They don't get idols and chariots, allies and military genius. They get God. Read again with me the amazing promises of God in the face of absolute and certain destruction:

“But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
you descendants of Abraham my friend,
⁹I took you from the ends of the earth,
from its farthest corners I called you.
I said, ‘You are my servant’;

I have chosen you and have not rejected you.
¹⁰ So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

¹¹ “All who rage against you
will surely be ashamed and disgraced;
those who oppose you
will be as nothing and perish.

¹² Though you search for your enemies,
you will not find them.
Those who wage war against you
will be as nothing at all.

¹³ For I am the Lord your God
who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you, Do not fear;
I will help you.”

These are the words that are offered to Israel, a people on the literal brink of destruction, and already past the point of utter despair. They are exiles. They are about to see yet another war. And God reassures them with this promise: I am with you.

These are not empty words, nor trite hallmark wishes. This is the promise that the One who called creation into being, the one who defeated death on a cross by rising to life, the one who has guided history on its grand march to fulfillment on his purpose and will, that One is with you. You are not alone.

When isolated, uncertain, and afraid, when the plane is going through turbulence such that you despair of survival, the Lord your God sees you, is with you, and is for you. Not even death can break you free from his loving protection. Spend every moment you can breathing in this truth, so that when trouble comes on you, this is the bedrock of your perspective.

And it is more than that. God has seen fit to put flight staff on the plane with you. We, the church, are there, full of experience, many having come through hard times, trouble, and pain. Ours are stories of sorrow, wounding, and even loss. Yet miraculously, we still worship. We still give God glory, because we have seen the hand of God, his presence, in our lives. Just like in Acts, we encourage those in the middle of their own story that we understand, we are with you, and this is not the end of the story. God is here. This is our truth, and this is what fills us with the courage to endure. Share your stories with each other.

Finally, God has also seen fit to supply us with practical, material resources sufficient to not just our needs, but the needs of our community. Just like the seatbelts and the oxygen masks on a flight, God has given us the resources to act, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the

homeless, and heal the sick. From what we have been given, we give, and so encourage and sustain each other, for another day.

We are never given the promise that God will remove us from suffering. The war came to Israel, Ruth's husband died, the church of Acts was brutally oppressed by Temple and state. Suffering is real, and it must be faced.

Yet, in it all, we can face it, because:

I am the Lord your God
who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you, Do not fear;
I will help you.”

Benediction

The Lord knows that we need encouragement as a society right now. We need to be hearing, and telling, our truth, encouraging each other, and filling up one another with resolve to face trouble and danger, together. So, in closing, this is our benediction, from 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13:

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.