

Roots and Wings
Isaiah 40:28-31; Hebrew 11:32-12:3
January 28, 2018
Pastor Steve Richards

Five months ago, we adopted a puppy from the Humane Society, and at the time all we knew about him was that he was about 8 weeks old, from Oklahoma, and cute. There was no indication of breed or who his parents were – but on cuteness alone, we brought him home. And he's been growing ever since. For Christmas, we were given a DNA test to check his background and a few days ago we got the results. He's a little bit Labrador Retriever, a little bit Siberian Husky, a little bit Australian Cattle dog, and a little bit American Staffordshire Terrier, and a whole lot of other breeds too small to measure. Here's what his family tree looks like. You don't have to be able to read the fine print to know it's complicated. Mostly it tells us he's about half the size he's going to be and he is going to require more energy from the two of us than we imagined when we first saw him. It's going to quite a future for the three of us! And his past tells us a lot about the kind of dog we're experiencing – why he enjoys laying in the snow even on the cold winter days, why he runs and runs and runs, and why every time we take him outside, he picks up a stick no matter how large it is and proudly carries it back inside. His ancestry helps us know why he does these things, and what kinds of joys and challenges we have ahead.

The past matters. I think I told you that in the days following my Dad's death last year, we found an autobiography that he had written. He wrote about his childhood and experiences with his father who died before I was born. It gave me a deeper understanding and insight into ways my grandfather who I never met has influenced me. The past matters – not just to understand our own genetic composition or childhood influences. But in the words of James Baldwin: **“The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.”** We have roots, whether we want them or not or pay attention to them or not - roots that began long before we were born.

I find roots to be a helpful image. Roots are what ground us, providing a system of support that also brings nourishment as we grow. We need roots of faith, and we also need wings. Wings are those appendages that enable us to unhook from the grasp of the earth and to soar free from the earth – to experience things in new ways, to dream and explore, to fly. Roots and Wings – we need them both.

In this morning's scripture, the writer of Hebrews provides two things in chapter 11 – a description of faith itself. **Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.** (Hebrews 11:1) Faith is the product that we offer here that will change lives. And the second thing the author of this chapter offers is a history of what this work has looked like through history. Faith changes lives, and if you read the entire chapter he provides a list. There was Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, and all those who put their lives on the line because they were sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they could not see. And the writer says faith empower us to be an active part of God's great plan so that our names are added to list we find in Hebrews. Whether we know it, or not, what we do here is tomorrow's history.

150 years ago, there was a beginning in this part of the world. Four young brothers with the last name of Parker left Scarboro, Maine in 1854 to seek a better life in the new frontier. So glowing were their letters of what they found here that a fifth brother also joined them and the following

year his wife, daughter and parents joined them. His father, the Rev James Parker was a Methodist minister and circuit rider. And they all settled on the shore of what we now know as Parker's Lake. Six years after the Parkers cut through the dense hardwood forest to make one of the first settlements in this area, the family donated land on the north side of the lake and pitched in to build a church and James Parker became its pastor until his death at the age of 85. That first church was destroyed by fire in 1877 to be replaced in 1889 by this building which was dedicated as Parker's Lake Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1947, the church was once again consumed by fire. A new church completed in 1953. But I think you know what was happening by this time. A small rural community was fast becoming a suburb of Minneapolis. Wanting to welcome the increasing number of people moving into this area, the church purchased five acres in this location, building the first and later adding three more additions until we have what we see today. It has been 150 years of change: from dense forest to farms to large suburban city; from a small country church of 12 members to a large church of 900. A church that has changed in size and location and name. Founded by pioneers who provided a heritage of faith even in extremely difficult times, caring for each other and serving the community. That part has not changed. That part, the faith-part, not the buildings – that's where we find our roots.

Do you even need faith when life is easy – no pain, no suffering, no misfortune, no uncertainty, no stress? But I have yet to meet that person! The reality is life is messy. The unexpected happens. We can do all the right things for all the right reasons and still end up bruised and broken. Faith says, what we see is not all there is, and God can redeem what we see for a greater purpose. We don't just learn that from the past, it is what we have to carry within us – into the future. To be able to stand on the rubble of the unexpected, unexplainable challenges of life and say there is more – there is a future. **Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.** (Hebrews 12:1-2)

There's this moment in Isaiah 40. We find God's people living in exile – refugees forced from their homes and fifty years later, a whole generation is gone. But they never let go of faith – a faith that the God who gave them life and once upon a time brought them into a Promised Land would not give up on them. God was not finished. And the prophet Isaiah announces that God: **gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak... Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles** (Isaiah 40:29,31) Roots and wings, we need them both.

We are living at a time of great change but a very different kind of change than what brought a small country church to what we see today. There was a time when persons would move into this area and seek out the closest Methodist Church. They were a Methodist family. And that still happens, just not very often anymore. How many of you have attended something other than a Methodist Church before attending here? And today, most people entering this community are not even looking for a church. Most are not even interested in faith – not because they don't need it; they just don't know that's what this place is all about.

Let me share three things – three things that I'm calling our BIG emphases for the next year. 1. Build relationships. Our vision statement says; Go, build relationships, transforming lives through deep meaningful connections with others. It's all about relationships. So let's build healthy relationships right here – in faith groups, ministry areas, families. How well do we know each other? Let's be the place that develops the skills to listen and communicate in a deeply divided world. And let's form new relationships in our neighborhoods and schools, with other faith communities, because we are all about enriching the lives of all. Faith empowers us to do that. 2. Impact the community. To borrow the words of JFK: it's not what the community can do for us but what we can do for the community. 18 years ago, this church launched something that

had never been done before – open a child care center for families that could not afford child care and along the way, we’ve discovered the children at Bloom reach Kindergarten ready to learn and to thrive and we’ve also learned there are more children in this community that need what Bloom can provide – but there is no more space to expand in this building. So we will be adding a second location at Plymouth Presbyterian Church. In 2018, we will be raising the funds to make this possible, so the second location can be opened in 2019. I call this impacting the community. And we can do this in other ways, by inviting the community into opportunities to serve and to discover this is the place that launches people into service. And three – Grow in Ministry with children and youth. Every adult was once a child, and sometimes we forget that and how short and critical that stage in life really is. Let’s make 2018 the year we surround our children and youth with prayer and build relationships with them. Let’s get to know our children. There is no reason why every adult could not know the name of at least one child and every child know the name of at least one adult. Last week, I spoke with Marlene Eyres about what she’s experienced by teaching Sunday School. [video] Here’s what I’m asking today. I am seeking 100 adults who will pray for a child – this week and next week and every week in 2018 – and allow that child to pray for you. Would you be one of the 100? Surely, there are at least 100 adults who would like to know and be known by a child. On your prayer card, simply write Prayer Partner and we will follow up with you. I don’t know that I would be here today, if it weren’t for the older adults when I was a child who took an interest in me and prayed for me.

In coming weeks, we will create goals and action plans around these three emphases: Build relationships, Impact the community, Grow in ministry with children and youth. Taking the roots of faith and soaring like eagles...

I remember a story that Bishop McConnell told about a Montana rancher that he met when he was bishop in that area. One day, the rancher was on horseback looking for any cattle that wandered off. He did not find any cattle, but instead he found a young eagle with a broken wing and unable to fly. The rancher loved eagles and knew this eagle could not survive through the winter, so he decided to catch the eagle and take it home so the wing could heal. He finally caught the eagle, got it home, called the vet who was able to repair the wing, and then because the eagle didn’t know what it was to fly, he put the eagle in the chicken yard. The eagle experienced a wonderful winter in the chicken yard. It learned how to be a chicken. Being a chicken is easy – you wait for your food to be brought to you and then you scratch and peck, and that winter, the eagle became the best chicken. But when spring came, the rancher went out to the eagle and said, “My friend, you may think you’re a chicken but you’re an eagle.” And he picked up the eagle and threw it in the air saying: “You are an eagle and you were born to fly.” And the eagle with its wings closed to its side fell to the ground. The eagle had forgotten. He didn’t know what his wings were all about. So for the next 2-3 weeks, he would take the eagle and move his wings, and he brought out a fan so the eagle could feel the breeze and experience what it meant to lift. And then one day he took the eagle into the barn, up to the top of the hay mound and opened the door and said, “My friend, you are an eagle and you were born to fly.” And he threw the eagle out the door. The eagle spread his wings and flapped around and discovered he really could stay up in the air, but then he spotted his friends the chickens and he flew down to where they were. It’s easier to be a chicken. The rancher repeated this for about a week until the eagle began to discover he was an eagle. Finally, the day came when the rancher took the eagle way out to the place where the eagle was found. When they reached the spot, the eagle cocked it’s head, listening, looking; somehow he knew this was a familiar world to him. The rancher set the eagle on a boulder and when he saw two other eagles overhead, he said: “You are an eagle, and you were born to fly.” The eagle sat there and looked and finally took off. He flew out, came back, landed, looked at the rancher. Then he flew out farther, circled back, looked down, went out again and then with a great cry of

joy and excitement, he took off into the sun, claiming his real heritage – using his wings. He was an eagle and an eagle belongs to the sky.

Roots and wings. We need them both. The roots of faith that keep us grounded and anchored. And the wings of faith that allow us to soar boldly into a future that will become tomorrow's roots. Lord, give us roots and give us wings. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of January 28, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Gracious God, we pray for the Holy Spirit to break through and renew Messiah Church, unleashing a fearless, Spirit-led congregation! Empower our pastors, leaders, and everyone who walks through our doors with the contagious, miraculous, saving message of Jesus. Boldly use each of us, without limits, to reach new people and heal a broken world. Create in us a joyful heart for all that You are doing in and through us to change lives and transform the world. We pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus. Amen.

Monday, January 29 - Day 22: Prayer Fleece

Scripture: Judges 6:33-40

Some time later, all the Midianites, Amalekites, and other easterners joined together, came over, and set up camp in the Jezreel Valley. Then the LORD's spirit came over Gideon, and he sounded the horn and summoned the Abiezrites to follow him. He sent messengers into all of Manasseh, and they were also summoned to follow him. Then he sent messengers into Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali too, and they marched up to meet them. But then Gideon said to God, "To see if you really intend to rescue Israel through me as you have declared, I'm now putting a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece but all the ground is dry, then I'll know that you are going to rescue Israel through me, as you have declared." And that is what happened. When he got up early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung out enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, "Don't be angry with me, but let me speak just one more time. Please let me make just one more test with the fleece: now let only the fleece be dry and let dew be on all the ground."⁴⁰ And God did so that night. Only the fleece was dry, but there was dew on all the ground.

Observation: When God called Gideon to be a judge (judges were tribal leaders), Gideon was filled with uncertainty. He thought God was making a mistake, but God promised to be with Gideon. However, Gideon needed confirmation, so he devised a test. He put a fleece before God not once but twice, and God patiently reassured Gideon.

Application: Be careful about putting fleeces before God. Signs don't generally precede our steps of faith but follow it. Sometimes God has already provided an answer, we simply need to look for that answer in the Bible. But when we ask, ask with a humble heart and a desire to honor God and accept whatever answer you receive.

Prayer: Patient and ever-present God, hear the desires of my heart and give me some reassurance that you are near. I ask, not so that I might boast, but so I might serve you with my life. Amen.

Tuesday, January 30 - Day 23: Not Now

Scripture: Acts 1:1-4

Theophilus, the first scroll I wrote concerned everything Jesus did and taught from the beginning, right up to the day when he was taken up into heaven. Before he was taken up, working in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus instructed the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed them that he was alive with many convincing proofs. He appeared to them over a period of forty days, speaking to them about God's kingdom. While they were eating together, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised.

Observation: In the weeks following Jesus' resurrection, Luke (the author of Acts) tells us that Jesus appeared to many people in a way that convinced them that he was risen. He spoke to them about the activity of God on earth. After Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:9), the disciples didn't immediately "go into all the world." Why? Because Jesus left explicit instruction: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised."

Application: That gift would come ten days later on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit would break through in a way greater than anyone would have imagined. When God says no to a prayer, it doesn't always mean *no*; sometimes it means *not yet*. How long are you willing to wait? Would you wait ALAT (as long as it takes)?

Prayer: Lord God, give me the patience and the perseverance to pray without ceasing, knowing that the answer will come. Amen.

Wednesday, January 31 - Day 24: Find Your Voice

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:1-8

These are the words of Jeremiah, Hilkiah's son, who was one of the priests from Anathoth in the land of Benjamin. The LORD's word came to Jeremiah in the thirteenth year of Judah's King Josiah, Amon's son, and throughout the rule of Judah's King Jehoiakim, Josiah's son, until the fifth month of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah, Josiah's son, when the people of Jerusalem were taken into exile.

The LORD's word came to me: "Before I created you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart; I made you a prophet to the nations." "Ah, LORD God," I said, "I don't know how to speak because I'm only a child." The LORD responded, "Don't say, 'I'm only a child.' Where I send you, you must go; what I tell you, you must say. Don't be afraid of them, because I'm with you to rescue you," declares the LORD.

Observation: Jeremiah heard the voice of God, calling him to be God's messenger (prophet). Jeremiah received an answer to a question he had not even asked, and he did not want to be God's messenger. However, God gave his assurance that Jeremiah would be strong and courageous.

Application: How do we hear the voice of God? The first thing to do is open your Bible. When you open your Bible, God opens His mouth. The surest way to get a word from the Lord is by getting into God's Word. God will speak to you, then God will speak through you.

Prayer: God, sometimes I fear that in asking for your direction you might give me an answer that I do not want. Help me to trust that you have my very best interest at heart, and you will never lead me away from you. Amen.

Thursday, February 1 - Day 25: A Prophetic Voice

Scripture: Numbers 11:24-29

So Moses went out and told the people the LORD's words. He assembled seventy men from the people's elders and placed them around the tent. The LORD descended in a cloud, spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and placed it on the seventy elders. When the spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but only this once. Two men had remained in the camp, one named Eldad and the second named Medad, and the spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they hadn't gone out to the tent, so they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." Joshua, Nun's son and Moses' assistant since his youth, responded, "My master Moses, stop them!" Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? If only all the LORD's people were prophets with the LORD placing his spirit on them!"

Observation: Moses is leading the people in the wilderness. He is leading people who have not known what it is to be a community. Moses reaches a point of exhaustion, admitting that he cannot lead the people by himself. God appoints 70 leaders to share the responsibility. Now, suddenly, others are speaking with authority. What does this mean for Moses? Has he lost his authority? Is he jealous? Rather than being threatened, Moses desires that all God's people might be prophets.

Application: According to 1 Corinthians 14:3, a prophet speaks words of comfort and encouragement as prompted by the Holy Spirit. Prophets come in all shapes and sizes. But the common denominator is prophetic insight that is the byproduct of prayer. The more we pray, the more prophetic we will become. Prayer is the way we recognize potential in others.

Prayer: Gracious God, you give life and you hold me close. In my efforts to be independent and to decide for myself, let me hear your voice, calling me to be what you want me to be for the work of your kingdom. Amen.

Friday, February 2 - Day 26: Game with Minutes

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Observation: Among the apostle Paul's final words in his letter to the Thessalonians is this instruction to connect with God always and give thanks. That's joy! The key to praying without ceasing is to turn everything into a prayer. It usually starts with the big things like problems and dreams. Then it graduates to little things like chores and routines. And eventually, your entire life becomes continuous prayer. Every thought. Every action. Every moment.

Application: God is only a prayer away. You don't have to get on your knees or bow your head or fold your hands or close your eyes to be heard. The best prayers may not even involve words at all. The best prayer is a life well-lived, every day. Turn your prayer life into a game. Try experimenting with a new posture like walking or kneeling. Try fasting from a meal or watching television and pray instead. Try different times. Try writing your prayers. If you want God to do something new in your life, you cannot keep doing the same old thing.

Prayer: Thank you, God, that you are as close and as important to me as the breath that I take. With each breath, I invite you in and I share with you the deepest desires of my heart. Thank you, God, that you are waiting for me. Amen.

Saturday, February 3 - Day 27: Double Circle

Scripture: Matthew 17: 14-21

When they came to the crowd, a man met Jesus. He knelt before him, saying, "Lord, show mercy to my son. He is epileptic and suffers terribly, for he often falls into the fire or the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they couldn't heal him." Jesus answered, "You faithless and crooked generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." Then Jesus spoke harshly to the demon. And it came out of the child, who was healed from that time on. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and said, "Why couldn't we throw the demon out?" "Because you have little faith," he said. "I assure you that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Go from here to there,' and it will go. There will be nothing that you can't do."

Observation: Many translations of Matthew 17 omit verse 21, thinking it was a later addition to the story by someone who wanted Matthew's version of the story to match Mark's version. Verse 21: "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." There is an essential truth in these words. Sometimes prayer alone is not enough. We need prayer and fasting. To fast is to sacrifice our dependence on the material world and seek the heart of God.

Application: When we work out, we break down our muscle fibers so they can be built back up even stronger. In much the same way, fasting breaks down our pride, our bondage, our will. It helps us break bad habits and build good habits. Fasting is the way we break down our spiritual calluses and regain sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. Maybe there is something you have been praying for that you need to start fasting for.

Prayer: Good and loving God, I turn to you once again today. Empower me to be all that you want me to be. Boldly use me, without limits, to reach new people and heal a broken world. I owe my life to you. Amen.