

“Carried Out”

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³Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; ⁴even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save...

⁸Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors, ⁹remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, ¹⁰declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention,” ¹¹calling a bird of prey from the east, the man for my purpose from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it.

¹²Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from deliverance: ¹³I bring near my deliverance, it is not far off, and my salvation will not tarry... (Isaiah 46:3-4, 8-13)

Some of you might recall that, a few months after I arrived here in Larchmont, in the fall of 2021, I preached about a time when I found myself in a “rhododendron hell.” Where I’m from, that’s what they call the deep thickets of gnarled rhododendron bushes that grow on mountainsides. Underneath the green canopy of their leaves, those plants get so twisted and jumbled together that it seems virtually impossible to walk through them. But that’s what a friend of mine and I had to do.

We had both just taken the bar exam, and both of us had jobs that started a few months later. We both like the outdoors so we decided to plan a week-long backpacking trip along a stretch of the Appalachian Trail in Virginia. We had looked at the local forecast, and it looked OK, so we packed up and hit the trail on a sunny and pleasant September afternoon. The first night it drizzled a little, and we packed up the next morning in a light mist. The second day the rain got harder, and the next morning, we set out in a steady rain. About mid-afternoon, when we passed a low-roofed Adirondack shelter, we decided to modify our itinerary and stop there for the night. It seemed like a good spot to dry out and wait for the rain to pass. We figured it wouldn’t take long.

But we were so wrong. We quickly realized that we were riding out a big storm. What we didn't know was that the storm we were riding out was Hurricane Fran, which had made landfall in North Carolina the day after we left. As Fran moved inland, the storm took an unexpected right turn and headed straight north right up the Shenandoah Valley, where it dropped thirteen inches of rain right on our heads. We stayed in that shelter for fourteen hours – wind howling, trees falling, and more rain than we had ever seen.

In that first sermon, I shared what we had to do when we found that the trail was completely blocked by a raging river. A few days before, it would have been a creek we could have hopped over with a few steps from rock to rock. But now, it was a whitewater rapid with raging waterfalls 10 to 20 feet high. Unable to go across, we had to go around. On our map -- remember when we used to have those -- we saw that if we turned off the trail to the right and bushwhacked for a few miles we would come out on a state road. From there, we would figure out a way home. It wasn’t long before we encountered that “rhododendron hell.” We slowed down considerably as we labored to get ourselves and our heavily laden backpacks through the tangled mess.



The tale of that aspect of our trek fit well for a sermon on Jeremiah, but there was a lot more that I could have told. "Someday," I said back then, "I will tell you the whole story." Well, someday is today. If that first sermon helped to illustrate Jeremiah's point about crooked things becoming straight, my hope is that this one will help us understand the Easter promise that God makes through the prophet Isaiah – the promise that, wherever we are... whatever we may have done... whatever peril we may be experiencing... the living God knows our pain, hears our cries, and stands ready to save us. "You have been borne by me since your birth," God says. "I have carried you from the womb... and even when you turn gray, I will always carry you."

So, for part two, I have to take us back to the shelter, which happened to be on a mountain known as "The Priest." [You can't make this stuff up.] I didn't share this detail before, but my friend and I were not alone in the shelter. There were two other waterlogged hikers stranded on The Priest – a young man and his big, furry, grayish dog. Actually, the man said that his companion was only part dog. The other half was gray wolf. I have forgotten the man's name, but I will never forget the dog's name, because it was Damien. Damien the half-wolf. [I told you... you can't make this stuff up.]

Anyway, during our 14-hour stay in the shelter, my friend Don and I played cards most of the time. We were Boy Scouts, after all. Damien and his owner, however, occupied themselves with frequent burning of some dried, green, organic material from a plastic Ziplock bag. No judgment – in the midst of the storm... you do what you have to do.

When we finally left the shelter and realized we were going to have to leave the path and bushwhack, Damien and his owner were nimble and traveling light, so they got through the rhododendron thicket much more quickly. When Don and I finally made it to the road, we looked left, and looked right, and couldn't see anything. We flipped a mental coin and went right. That was lucky, because about a mile up the road we came to a little general store, where a small group of stragglers had gathered. The power was out, but the phone was working, so we called home to let our families know we were alright. But we also learned from the owner that we were still stranded. The heavy rain had swollen the Tye River well over its banks, and the flood was flowing over the road to the east and the west. Some trucks could still pass slowly, but the water was rising, and pretty soon no one would be coming in or out.

At that exact moment, Damien and his owner came running around the corner of the store. "Come on guys," he says, "I've found us a ride."

Looking back, we should have asked some questions. After all, my friend and I had literally just graduated from law school – you would think we would have done at least a little due diligence. But we were just so relieved to have a ride. So we followed Damien over to a pickup truck that looked like it was being held together by duct tape and rust. And the two guys in the cab of the truck didn't look much better. But beggars can't be choosers, right? So when Damien the Wonder Wolf leapt up into the bed of the pickup, we flung our backpacks over the side and jumped in with him. Damien's Owner sat up in front with the other humans; we figured he had earned it.

As we pulled away from the store, the conversation up front confirmed that our ride had been purchased with contraband from the aforementioned Ziplock bag. [Like I said... you can't make this stuff up.] Fine, we had not known this when we accepted the offer, so

we figured we had at least a reasonably rational defense, because, as I said, we had just graduated from law school.

But it was what we overheard next that ended up being the most interesting data point. The flood, these guys said, was worse than we had thought. We slowed down as we approached a line of cars that had stopped. Those drivers had determined that it was far too dangerous to risk the current of the substantial river that was now cruising at high speed across the road. Oh well, we thought, it was a good try. I guess we'll just wait it out with these well-trained defensive drivers.

And that's when the yelling started. The first hoots and hollers came out of the cab of our own vehicle as we pulled left over into the passing lane. As we picked up speed, the audience in the parked cars chimed in. ***"Hey look, y'all! They're goin' for it!"***

A few seconds later, water started spraying up around us. We had reached the edge of the floodwaters. That's when our driver and his companion started tossing Budweiser cans out of the truck windows. Why, I have no idea, except that it was the grandest and most poetic "Hold my Beer" moment the world had ever seen.

Now, I can attest that, when my panicked brain finally arrived at the thought, "Well, I guess this is how I go... in a flood... in the back of a pickup truck... with Damien the Wolf," an odd kind of calm came over me, because, at that point, there was absolutely nothing I could do. It was too late for debate or action; whatever was going to happen was going to happen. I can actually still picture what I saw when the calm resignation washed over me. Looking up from the cab of the truck, the sky was remarkably blue with light fluffy clouds. It was the calm after the storm. And then the spray stopped, because we had gone too deep into the floodwaters to make any spray.

When Isaiah penned this scripture, the prophet was writing to a conquered, exiled, and suffering people. Carted off to Babylon, they lamented the loss of their homes, their families, their temple, and their way of life. "By the rivers of Babylon," they wrote in the psalms, "there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." "On the willows there we hung up our harps," they continued. They had once loved to play and sing, but their oppressors had turned that into a cruel taunt. "Sing us a song of Zion," they would chide. But even if they had wanted to sing, they could not muster a sound. "How could we?" the psalmist cried. "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"¹

But Isaiah had an important message for these beleaguered people. They were worried that God had abandoned them, but Isaiah brought a word of divine reassurance. "Comfort, O comfort my people," God says. "Get ready, because I am coming to find you. Prepare the way, and prepare yourselves, because the rocky places are about to be made smooth, and the dark valleys you have been walking are about to be raised up into the light. Like a shepherd seeks a lost sheep, I am coming for you."

And for those people who were wondering, "How will I ever get out of here? How can I ever escape this prison of exile?" Isaiah brings the word that we have read together this morning. *"Listen to me, " God says, "I have carried you your whole life. Whether you realize it or not, I have always held you up. And though it may be hard to see it now, I will keep carrying you... until you are old and grey, I will carry you. This is the word I have*

¹ Psalm 137:1-4.

spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it. Know that I am coming to carry you out... and bring you home."

When the spray stopped, everything got muffled and quiet. There was just this calm stillness. Blue sky. Fluffy clouds. Peace. And then, the faint sound of a little spray... and then a little more... and a little more. I still couldn't see anything but sky, but I slowly realized that we had made it. By some miracle, that truck had made it through the flood and carried us out to the other side. There may have been honks and shouts from the cars on the other side, but I don't remember them. The next thing I knew, we were pulling into some random Exxon station, where my friend's fiancé had come to pick us up and take us home.

I could not think of a better message for this Easter Sunday – this prophetic message that, no matter who you are, no matter where you have been, no matter what you have done, no matter what kind of a fix you have gotten yourself into, the living God not only knows right where you are, but that God is right there with you... in the midst of your storm... in the danger of the flood.

There are a lot of very accomplished people in this room... people who have worked hard and found success... people who have relied on their wits and their strengths. But each of us needs to know that, when it comes to our ultimate salvation... when we gaze up at heaven and hope that we might find it someday... we cannot plan our way, think our way, work our way, or even believe our way into it. At the end of the day, there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn it.

And when we get to that place, we will feel an odd sense of calm, because that, Easter people, is where God shows up. Actually, it is the place where God has been all along. And that is the place where the God of heaven and earth whispers to you this message, which is both ancient and new: *"I have held you in my arms since before you were born, and I am not going to stop now. Fear not, for I am coming -- to bear you up and carry you out."*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**