

“Mount up with wings like eagles”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 40:21-31 and Mark 1:29-39

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I remember, as a Scout, being lined up by patrol in our church basement, feeling significant in our uniforms, sitting through merit badge classes, and how afterward, my Dad would take me to get a milkshake. I remember hiking in the woods, a compass in my hand, camping in the snow, s'mores on the fire. I remember service projects of mapping new trails, building footbridges, cleaning up streets, and collecting food for the hungry. I remember the sound of the bugle at dawn, swimming in the lake, leading my troop in prayer, making great pots of stew and chili and scrambled eggs. I remember learning to orient myself in the pitch dark of night and playing capture the flag beneath the stars, taunting the other team with quotes from Sun Tzu's *Art of War* (I was a weird kid). I remember faces, so many boys with kindness and curiosity. I remember all of this with love.

But I am mindful that there are some whose memories of Scouting are not so loving. There were the Scouts and leaders who were excluded on the basis of their sexuality or gender identity. There were the Scouts and leaders who never internalized the moral responsibilities of Scouting, who thought it was all guns and arrows and power, the Scouts (and yes, I remember this too) who while at camp threw rocks at animals and laughed. Nowadays, it's hard to get anyone to join any organization that asks you to serve something higher than yourself. But that's especially hard when an organization that prides itself on its morality has to file for bankruptcy due to lawsuits, accusing leaders of the most heinous evil (many of those accusations tragically true). It makes you wonder: Is Scouting really worth saving?

I know. I know. The answer is obvious to those of us who love Scouting, but it's not obvious to everyone, and so we need to ask it.

Of course, this question is being asked of almost every organization these days, from the Freemasons to community service groups. Everybody is worrying about relevance. And at the top of that list is the church—also mired in scandals of abuse, fears of decline, patterns of exclusion, and complicity with oppression and political corruption. Many are asking: Is the church worth saving?

I suppose there is comfort in knowing that we are not the first to ask this question.

The prophet Isaiah, in our Scripture this morning, speaks to a people who allowed their kingdom to become proud and decadent, who neglected the poor and the vulnerable, who turned to idols and other gods. They saw their kingdom destroyed, their temple flattened, their people taken off into exile in a foreign land. And after all this, they wonder: Is their faith worth preserving? Isaiah responds by saying that all things change—kings and temples and nations and even the institutions of religion, they all pass away. What remains is God. Faith, then, is the one thing worth preserving, because it is the one thing that gives us strength to “run and not be weary... [to] walk and not faint.”

When we meet Jesus in the Gospel of Mark today, he faces a similar predicament. His people eek out an impoverished existence beneath the iron foot of Rome. He says that they “neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matt. 23:23). They have forgotten who they are, who

God is. But far from destroying their faith, Jesus has come to save it. He offers a new vision of faith, one that loves without condition, heals the sick, and casts out all powers that seek to hurt and control us, casting out death itself.

Yes, Jesus and the prophets say, it is worth saving. But it is also worth changing, evolving, growing. It is worth saving only if it is willing to “mount up with wings like eagles,” to leave behind past wrongs and become something new, something better. That’s true for our faith, and I think it’s true for Scouting. Four reasons come to mind.

First, Scouting is one of the few opportunities new generations have to experience nature. I don’t mean reading about it in a book or going for a walk through a park. I mean really being present in the wild, learning how it sounds and tastes, befriending it. There are in nature truths of God and of self that cannot be discerned elsewhere. There is a plethora of research revealing that free, unscripted play in nature is vital to the formation of imagination, critical thinking, compassion, and independence. Moreover, as humanity faces its greatest threat in climate change, Scouting is equipping our children with the love and the knowledge necessary to fight this threat.

Second, Scouting is about character. You heard it today in the Scout Law: trustworthiness, kindness, bravery, reverence. So much emphasis is made these days on the accumulation of information, skills, power, and wealth, that we have forgotten the need to shape our children—and indeed ourselves—in morality. Here, in this age of misinformation and hate, is a group devoted to integrity and truth. Here are children learning to serve principles higher than themselves, more important than their pleasure or their privilege.

Third, Scouting tells every child: you matter. When I became a Scout I was so shy that my Mom and Grandmother had to force me to try it. I was a fearful, nerdy, awkward kid with a speech impediment and bullies and a determined silence. And it’s not that Scouting suddenly made all that better. But Scouting gave me people who believed in me, challenged me, saw something in me. It made me an Eagle Scout; it made me a pastor. When we look at the hurts of the world, how many of them come down to people who are hurting and afraid and use that to hurt others? If we really want to save the world, we should build up people’s internal sense of worth.

Fourth, Scouting is about teamwork. Scouting teaches collaboration, provides community, reveals that there are some things, often the best things, that can only be achieved together. Scouting is about—and this sounds very Jesus-like—putting the interests and needs of others first. Almost all of the points of the Scout Law are about how you treat others: with honesty, with loyalty, with kindness. In a world of me-me-me, we need more of the servant’s heart; we need more of this [grip hands together tightly] and less of this [ball up hands into separate fists].

Look, I don’t care if the organizations survive—BSA, Girl Scouts, whatever—any more than I care whether the Presbyterian Church or the Roman Catholic Church survive. These are but institutions, and they must be held accountable. What I think we cannot afford to lose is Scouting itself, no less than faith itself.

We must save it, and we must change it. Already, Scouting is becoming more inclusive and implementing safeguards and protocols to ensure the accountability of our leaders and the safety of our children. Already, Scouting is changing. It looks different. Good! It should. It should mount up with wings like eagles, and be transformed. Only then is it worth saving. **Amen.**