

“Able and Willing” *Isaiah 40:21–31 Epiphany5B 2-4-2018*

Later today, many football fans will go to Sunday night worship. Not in their churches, but on their couches, recliners, in the sports bars and in Minnesota to watch Super Bowl in person. The Philadelphia Eagles take on the defending champions, the New England Patriots. One of the gods worshiped tonight will be Patriot’s QB Tom Brady. Now 41, well past the age most players retire, he is playing as good as he ever has. At least the results prove that, with his come from behind victories against the Falcons in the last Super Bowl and against the Jaguars to get to this one. He is mortal, but in sports, as close to immortality as it gets.

I mention this not because his ability and willingness to work are impressive, but to contrast the praise he receives from many fans with the lack of trust in the real God. When the Patriots are behind, it’s easier for some to still believe that Brady will pull them through to victory, than it is to believe that God is both able and willing to rescue His people in trouble.

Some doubt God’s ability when things are bad. Isaiah is prophetically encouraging the Israelites that within the next 100 years their city and temple walls will be destroyed by the Babylonians. They who worship false gods will overcome and carry into exile those who worship the one true God. They may doubt whether their God really is powerful and able to save them from the false god of stone and wood.

But Isaiah gently chides them, “Haven’t you been paying attention all these centuries, ever since the world began? Don’t you know that God stretched out the sky, brings the mighty of this earth to nothing with the breath of his mouth? Don’t you remember the victories He won for you, the armies He defeated, or the needs He provided for you? He has never grown weary or fainted from the challenges that He has brought you through. Why do you doubt by His ability to save?”

What about you? Have you had times where you wondered in fear if God could deliver you? Yes, with your mind you said, God can do anything, but in your heart you still harbor fear and uncertainty. You still worried about the future because you were not sure God was up for it. At least

not for your needs.

And that brings up the second source of doubt: Not that God is able, but that God is willing. That takes even more faith, because that has to do with what we believe God thinks of us. The Israelites certainly had every reason to doubt God’s willingness to rescue them. Not because God gave them reasons to doubt, but because they provided reasons of their own.

Why would God be willing to rescue them after all those years of idol worship, mistreatment of the poor and sojourner in their midst, the rejection and stoning of the prophets, the perfunctory worship that simply went through the motions.

Why would God do that? Because He is not human like us. He doesn’t count offenses against him and finally say, OK, that’s enough. My patience has run out. It did seem to run out, but not in vengeful, punitive way. God brought Babylon against the Israelites not so they would know his ability to punish, but his willingness to correct, restore, and forgive. He dealt with their sins, not as a judge, but as a savior.

In doing so he foreshadowed the savior He sent hundreds of years later in Bethlehem. In Christ, God gave his ultimate sign that he was not only able, but also willing to rescue and redeem His people. He is full of mercy, which means that has pity on us in our weakness. He is full of grace, which means that he forgives our sins. He was able to keep the law in our place. He was willing to take sin’s punishment in our place.

When we realize that God is able and willing to help us, we are encouraged. The God who does not faint or grow weary enables us to wait in faith for his strength. Isaiah says that those who wait will renew their strength. A more literal rendering is that they will exchange their own strength for one that is better—a new strength, not from within, but from God.

Then as easily as an eagle’s wings lift into the sky, so will those waiting on the Lord be lifted up. So we will not grow weary or become fainthearted in our daily labors or in our sorrows. We will not be crushed under the burden of guilt for our sins. The good news is that God in Christ, was

able to save through the cross. Even better news is that He was willing to. The best news is that He did save us. Knowing this we not only can endure, we can soar. Amen.