



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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In-Flight Refueling

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Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8:2-3)

Thirty-five years ago, when I was a young Methodist minister, the bishop assigned me to a little church on Potomac Avenue in Dormont. The building is still there, but it recently became a Buddhist temple – which I try not to think of as a reflection on my effectiveness in those early days. Actually, I think it reflects some profound changes in the religious landscape of our country, but that’s a story for another time.

I met lots of faithful people in the two years I served at Dormont, and some of them did really interesting things. A Steelers linebacker showed up in church one day, because he had been a kid in the youth group I ran for a couple years in his home church in Stamford, Connecticut, while I was a student at the Yale Divinity School. An older man in the congregation had been a photographer in World War II and he gave me a picture he took of Marines raising a flag after the battle of Iwo Jima. Not the iconic photo that was carefully arranged and became the model for a famous statue, but an informal shot of battle-weary men standing by the American flag on top of a hard-won hill.

Another man in the congregation drove a UPS truck for a living, but on weekends and for a while in the summer he was also a navigator for the military refueling planes based at the Pittsburgh airport. One day he asked if I'd like to join them for a practice refueling flight. That was an offer I couldn't refuse, so before long I found myself in the back of a KC 135 on a roundtrip flight to Iowa one sunny day.

They let me crawl into the rear of the plane, where the boom operator extends a fuel line to connect with a fighter plane 135 feet or so behind and little below. It's a tricky operation, flying hundreds of miles an hour, thousands of feet up in the air, and it's fascinating to watch. You can see the fighter pilot's face in his cockpit, and you know that everyone has to have a steady hand, even over the peaceful cornfields of the Midwest, let alone in a combat zone where hostile planes and anti-aircraft fire could be a matter of life and death.

A decade or so later, I had a similar invitation from a church member at the Army War College in Carlisle, and I flew out to watch a practice tank battle at Fort Irwin, California. Those were among some unexpected adventures in ministry, and as you might imagine, a preacher can glean all sorts of metaphors from such experiences.

This week I've been thinking about in-flight refueling as an image for what sustains each of us in the course of our everyday lives.

In church we talk about the Sabbath, and a couple weeks ago we read the Ten Commandments, the fourth of which is to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy."

Holiness on that day has to do with keeping God at the center of our lives and refraining from ordinary work on the Sabbath, by way of remembering that God is the ultimate source of every good thing – not just our own efforts, as we're so often tempted to imagine.

Nowadays, the rampant commercialism of American life makes Sunday almost indistinguishable from any other day, and many Christians have a hard time keeping any sort of Sabbath at all. Then again, the gradual shift from worshiping and serving God as the purpose of a Christian life to whatever might benefit believers has brought a corresponding shift in the purpose of a Sabbath day: from focusing on Christ to simply finding a little rest for overextended Christians.

I believe we need to take the Sabbath seriously, not only because we could all use a day of rest, but because the main point of the Sabbath is to reflect on the goodness of God; and that's hard to do when Sunday is filled, like any other day, with all our ordinary activities.

But this is not a sermon about the Sabbath. This morning's meditation is about how we can keep going all the time, no matter what day of the week it is. If, to return to Air National Guard imagery, a Sabbath day is about landing the airplane and walking away to focus more fully on God, in-flight refueling is about finding the energy we need while we're still in the air, flying whatever mission God calls us to perform.

We all know that people are busy these days. Even retired people say, "I don't know how I ever had time to

work, I'm so busy now!" And much, if not all, of our busyness has to do with worthwhile things. We're working at our jobs, raising children, taking care of family and friends, volunteering in the community and at church. There's not a lot of down time, and some of us are torn between wanting to do even more, on the one hand, and feeling the fuel drain out of our spirit, wishing we could just get away from it all for a while, on the other hand.

So what do we do? What do we do when we have some mission to accomplish and we can't land the airplane? Where do we look for the spiritual equivalent of in-flight refueling?

In our tradition, three sources of energy are always available to us – three ways the Spirit of God rises up to meet us and reaches out to refuel us, not when we're resting quietly on the ground, but even while we're flying the mission God has prepared for us.

The first source of refueling is the word of God. We Christians believe that the Bible is, or contains, God's written word, but the written word points to the living Word, who is Jesus Christ. Christ is the one "in whom we live and move and have our being," as the scripture says. He's the one through whom and for whom all things were made. Christ is the power, the energy, behind all things, and he is the Logos, the logic that orders and guides creation.

If that's true, then the Spirit of Christ is what fuels our own spirits, because we were made in his likeness. The celebration of The Lord's Supper, where we talk about receiving the body and blood of Christ, reminds us

sacramentally how our souls are fed by the power of God’s living Word. That’s why we say in communion that we “feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.”

We need to spend time in the Bible, because the Bible reminds us how the living Word works in the life of believers. The words we remember from scripture help us find courage and strength and hope for all that we have to do. And the Bible shows us with stories how God’s people have always been energized and sustained – as in the Exodus, where manna from heaven refuels the people on their long journey out of slavery toward the Promised Land. Moses tells the people that this manna, this stuff that feeds them day by day, is also a symbol of God’s sustaining power, because a person “does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Jesus quotes the same words, of course, many centuries later when he himself is tempted in the wilderness. For us Christians, the written word points to the living Word, and our prayer, our communion with Christ in the Holy Spirit, refreshes us all throughout the journey of life.

A second source of refueling comes through the church itself, the community of faith. We were talking about this at our staff Bible study on Tuesday, and two related images came to mind. Jason mentioned that he and some others ride long distances together on their bicycles, and practice what they call “drafting.” That’s where one rider follows close behind another and finds it easier to go faster in the draft behind the rider in front of him. After a while they change places, so that the first rider can take it easier while the one who had been in back moves forward for a time, to

face the stronger resistance from the air and the wind. It's the same thing flocks of geese do on their long migrations in flight. They take turns doing the harder work in front to create a draft for those who follow, dropping back for a while to let others take their turn at the head of the flight.

The community of faith works like that too. Some of us do the harder work of leading in parts of our life together to make it easier for others, while they do the hard work to make it easier for us in other ways. In church, people use their gifts in different ways for the good of the body as a whole. And when someone is sick or hurting, the community comes alongside or in front of them to offer refueling in the form of encouragement and support and care for practical matters when they need it the most.

The word of God and the support of community are two of the things that sustain us for whatever mission God has given us in this life. And a third source of energy, for many of us, comes from doing the work itself.

In a familiar story from John's gospel, Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman at a well while his disciples wander off in search of lunch. They come back and find their master alone after the woman has left, and they want to know whether he's had anything to eat. As he so often does, Jesus takes their question as a teaching opportunity and he turns metaphorical. He says, "I have food to eat that you don't know about," and while the disciples wonder how somebody could have delivered a take-out lunch to him here, outside of town, Jesus goes on to say, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work."

Some of us know what Jesus means when he talks like that. If we have a calling – a vocation, which literally means a calling, or an avocation where we volunteer time and talent beyond our regular job – we know that doing what we were made to do is fulfilling in its own right. It becomes a kind of food for us, to do the will of the one who sent us, to share in some small part of God’s redeeming work in this world.

Doing what we were made to do is satisfying, even though it can also be tiring. The work is easier, and often more enjoyable, when we share it with other people. That’s why going on mission trips – either little half-day trips to package food or supplies nearby, or longer trips to care for people farther from home – can be so satisfying. Not only do we get to do some good for other people, which is what God calls us to do, but we share the work with others, and that becomes another source of satisfaction and joy.

If we’re spiritually tired all the time, it’s probably because we’re not drawing upon the resources we need to refuel. We still need to try to take a Sabbath day off, not only because we need the rest, but because we need to focus more fully on God, who is the source of both our strength and our rest.

But in the meantime, we all have some sort of work to do, even if we’re retired from our old employment, and we need to find refueling in the midst of whatever our mission happens to be. If we’re doing what God wants us to do, we’ll find energy in the satisfaction that comes from the work itself; and if we’re not finding any satisfaction in our work,

maybe that's a sign that we need to ask God to help us find a new calling, or at least a new avocation.

Whatever else we're doing, we can find energy in the community of faith, sharing our work with one another. And most especially we'll find the energy we need by drawing upon the word of God: the written word that reminds us of God's love and care, and the living Word who is Christ himself, the one in whom we live and move and have our being.



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