

UP!

ONE OFF WEEKEND

Isaiah 40 // Will Cunningham

January 1, 2017

WILL: Will: Welcome to Mission Hills. Welcome to 2017. Yeah, clap for the New Year. Good to see you. By the way we have more kids than normal in the crowd which is perfectly fine. We're excited for that. So if you're little one welcome. We're glad you're here. If you happen to wander up here in the middle of my talk then I may use you as a sermon prop so that's okay. Did you all stay up late last night? Anybody any bleary eyed people here? What chord was that? I'm gonna tell you a story this morning if you don't mind. It's called Big Daddy means something to me.

The Buffalo River begins high in the Boston Mountains. In the Ozark Plateau it meanders from west to east. Finally empties out in the White River just over the Baxter County line in Arkansas. Between those two points, there are about 135 miles of wild Rapids quiet eddies beautiful paddling. Some people say you can find all four of the poisonous snakes found in this country right there on that river. The rattlesnake, Copperhead, cottonmouth, the shy coral snake, red and yellow killer fellow, red and black friend of Jack. Ya'll remember that. At night, if you lay on your back on the shoreline of the Buffalo River and look up, you can see a little sliver of sky because most of the buffalo is fringed on one side by giant limestone cliffs blackened with the stain of a thousand Indian camp fires lit by the Cherokee charred sky was in Kickapoos who lived in that area.

On the other side, dense forest of Sycamore and Oak. But if you look at the sky at night you can see a sliver of stars. In the middle of summer you might see the Northern Cross. Now, it is on my bucket list someday to see the Southern Cross which dwarves our northern cross, but it's too far away right now. Cygnus the swan we sometimes call it it's beautiful. If you look to the northwest you'll see Cassiopeia the Flying W. I used to tell our two sons that that was named after me which was a lie. Flying W all of us of course have spotted the Big Dipper before, the easy one. But if you follow the arc in the Big Dipper the handle you come to Arcturus the gorgeous star. Right below it is Spica in the constellation of Bootes the Shepherd. To the south if you were to look down you would see a giant red constellation wheeling up over the horizon Scorpio. The Buffalo River is beautiful.

Now, this particular morning was a hot July morning in 1969, the summer of love as some people called it. I mostly remember it as the summer I conquered my fears. There was a hot morning with the temperature of my bow seat in my canoe hovering somewhere near combustion, behind me was Flint Breckenridge. Isn't that a great name Flint Breckenridge? He's probably in Hollywood somewhere maybe he's here today. Flint Breckenridge, we were both 10 years old. He had been a camper at this camp many years. It was my first year. Interestingly in those days you went to this camp for six weeks at a pop. It's a long time to be away from home. Flint knew of my fears. We knew each other well enough that he knew of my fears and he loved to tease me. He began to tease me early that morning about Big Daddy. We would be stopping near mid-day they said. Tradition was that all the little boys on this trip were to jump off a Big Daddy. It was at least 40 feet high. I felt like it was higher though.

It was a tradition. You may substitute for that word mandatory. Every boy as a rite of passage would jump off Big Daddy into the river, and I already was dreading it. Up and down the river you heard the sounds of laughter and conversation about 90 boys ages seven to 18. We call that an insurance nightmare today. For a five night float trip. Long about noon, we arrived at the base of Big Daddy. Sun was squelching hot, blistering hot. All the boys jumped out of their canoes into the water to cool themselves off you could hear the sound of splashing and good natured joking. And I wished I could join in with them but I set my canoe staring up at Big Daddy, wondering if maybe some miracle might happen that would maybe change the plans for that day.

Eventually I felt the canoe kind of jiggle flatted swam over to it. He was hanging on the gunnels with his legs hanging down in the cool water looked up at me and he said, "You're scared aren't you?" I said, "No." which was a lie as well. But he knew me well enough. He began a little chant, "Cunningham is scared. Cunningham is scared." Eventually all the little boys caught on



kind of echo there in the hollows, "Cunningham is scared. Cunningham is scared." You can imagine how I felt. Eventually we all climbed out of the water. I out of my canoe and we started up the...we started up the path, the little trail that went up the... into the hillside, into the woods closer and closer to the top of Big Daddy. Gorgeous woods if you've never been there highly recommended. About every kind of tree you can imagine. I just learned of another one from the guy in the first service who's telling me there are actually beech trees in Missouri.

I never saw them. They're up at Hemmed-In Hollow. But there's everything you can imagine, every kind of elm, American elm, slippery elm, and Chinese elm, winged elm, oaks of all kinds. Post oaks and chinkapin oaks, and wide oaks, and red oaks. Gorgeous. Of course by that time in the summer, all of the dogwood canyon all the dogwood trees have dropped their blossoms. Plenty of poison ivy everywhere. Of course right next to it God's remedy for poison ivy which is the touch me not.

And up and up we went through the woods, laughter, singing, excited, jubilant boys excited to jump off a Big Daddy all but me. I wished I could be excited. Perhaps you have a fear of heights yourself. That was my fear. We got to the top. I could remember some of the older boys one of whose name was Stuart Nance. I haven't said that name in years, Stuart Nance. Tall, bronzed, athletic, chiseled body. Of course when you're young at 10 years old you look up to that kind of young man. He and others ran to the lip of this limestone cliff and they flung themselves off into space, having done it many times before. I could hear him laughing on the way down till they splashed in the water. How I wished that I could join in their excitement.

Of course and all of us got in the line like lemmings. I didn't know what a lemming was at the time, but I remember later in junior high learning what a lemming was. Look it up on...or Google it kids if you wonder what it is. And so we like lemmings lined up heading towards the cliff. And one by one each boy jumped off. I of course inched my way backwards until I was the last boy in line. Hoping against hope. Again, perhaps something would avert my fate. Finally, I found myself at the very edge. I was next in a single silver tear, a big fat one appeared right there in my eyes, and began to roll down my cheek and then they all came. I couldn't stop them. Have you ever had that happen to you in public? I couldn't stop it. So there I was at the edge of Big Daddy, 10 years old, certain that my life was over.

You know, leaping off into a new year is a lot like that, isn't it? In fact we're gonna leave little Will standing right here. Can we do that for a while? We'll just leave Will here at the edge of the cliff and talk about 2017. What it's like to leap off into the New Year the unknown? Its funny people leap into new years in two different ways usually. Some leap without looking, just rushing into the New Year. Those are the ones of us that tend to come up with resolutions at light speed hardly thinking about them. I'm gonna lose a hundred pounds this year. I'm gonna memorize all of Shakespeare's works. I'm gonna...whatever. And by February what's...where are those resolutions? We all know.

Then the others of us never leap at all. Fear freezes us. We never make any changes. We start into the New Year and its status quo. We do things exactly as we've always done them. We don't grow. A couple of ways one approaches a new year and hopefully today as we talk through this passage in Isaiah 40, they'll be some encouragement to each of us as we consider leaping off into a new year. And we'll leave Will, little Will up there.

Why Isaiah? Now, you won't see this on up on the screen today for a reason. Back in dim days, when the Word of God was delivered, it was just auditory. So, I want you to use your ears today, just to hear it. Hear the sound of the words something special about that. You know if our eyes are the window to the soul or ears or something else. Some sort or other instrument. But they receive truth and beauty in a different way. Perhaps today they will sink into your hearts as we listen to them.

So why Isaiah though he was a special man, a prophet unlike any other. Lived and worked and did his prophesied about seven centuries before Jesus set foot on this earth his. His life span the lives of four different kings. His message was often harsh and hard, and it carried with it a warning for a divided nation, for an immoral nation, for an idolatrous nation. At times that sounds familiar to me. But his message was strong and clear and he delivered it faithfully. To the Northern Kingdom, he prophesied that



eventually they would go into captivity and they did at the hands of the Assyrians, and we did not hear from them for a long, long time. And then he said to the southern kingdom, he said, “You will also go into captivity at the hands of the Babylonians.” and away they went not long afterward. And I have to think that if Jesus or...excuse me, Isaiah was speaking to us today, his message might be similar. And hopefully it would call us to change. It would call us to change and into renewed living like Jesus Christ.

So I think his message is super important. But why I say a 40? That will be our text today the whole thing. Why Isaiah 40? The fall is right in the middle basically of this book, this hard hearted, harsh book of warnings, and it begins this message of comfort which is kind of strange particularly coming from the lips of Isaiah. Comfort, comfort from Isaiah, a man who eventually was sawn in half at the hands of Manasseh with a wood saw. Comfort and he comforted the people of God as they journeyed forward. His words are super comforting for us today as we stand on the brink of 2017, about to start a new year. It begins like this, “Comfort, oh comfort my people says your God. Speak kindly to Jerusalem. Call out to that her, call out to her that our warfare is ended, that her iniquities have been removed and that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voices crying in the wilderness clear the way for the Lord. Make smoother than the desert a highway for God. Let every valley be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low, that the rough ground become a plain and the rugged terrain a broad valley. Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh will see it together. “

This is our first encouragement from this book. It’s really a picture of humility. If I had to put words to it, it would be, Isaiah saying to me and to you, “Hush up, get quiet. Humble yourself so that you might hear me.” John picked up on this message, John the Baptist centuries later when he called himself a voice crying in the wilderness. He was a simple man, John the Baptist’s. Not much to look at, dressed in weird clothes, ate weird things and eventually was beheaded. Not unlike Isaiah’s demise. He called himself a voice crying in the wilderness and eventually of him Jesus said, “He’s the greatest man that ever lived.” We can hardly escape the word great nowadays can we? This is not a political statement. It really isn’t. But the message is all over the airwaves being great being great again, you being great, me being great. What is great? In the eyes of Jesus greatness was John the Baptist, the man who decreased so that Christ could increase. The man who got out of the way. The man who was content to be the little minnow in the stream rather than the big well.

The first encouragement is get quiet as you head into 2017. Hush up. Listen. Listen to see what God might say to you as you start off on your new year. Let every valley be lifted up because he will when we humble ourselves. Humility always wins. That every valley be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low. Then the glory of the Lord will be reveal. Interestingly, what is it mean to give glory to God? How do you give something to someone who already has all of it? You ever thought of that? Really what it means to give glory to God is to raise someone else’s opinion of God. To raise the world’s opinion of God by the way you live your life, by the way I live my life, and it begins with humility. Hush up. Then Isaiah would say this to us, not long after that as we meander down through Isaiah 40. It says this, “Get yourself up on a high mountain oh Zion bearer of good news. Lift up your voice mightily. Oh Jerusalem bearer of good news. Lift it up do not fear. Call out. Say to the cities of Judah, here is your God. Speak up.” Too often in life we don’t speak up. There’s a famous saying that says preach the God...preach the Gospel continuously, use words if necessary and that’s a beautiful statement. It really is. Our lives should be Gospels by the way we live. Unfortunately it’s also an excuse at times for us not to open our mouth. We’re afraid. People sometimes tease me and they say, “Why do you tell so many stories about yourself?” And I tell them as Henry David Thoreau once said, “I would not talk so much about myself if there was anyone else I knew half as well.” The same is true for you. You have a story. There will never be another Aaron. With his DNA, his background, his circle of influence, he is meant to use his story to let people know what God is like. That’s important.

Speak up in 2017 in some way. Someone needs to hear. What God has done in your life or what God is like from your perspective. Speak up. Then, Isaiah begins to talk beautifully and he goes on for several verses about the glory of God. Comfort me in the people of God with some comments about what Jesus is like, what God is like. Who has measured the waters of the earth in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens by the span and calculated the dust by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance and the hills in a pair of scales.



I'm not much of a do it yourself guy. I admire men that are fixers. They can fix things. I admire women that can fix things. The God just didn't make me that way. I've fixed a few things in my life and my wife and I always rejoice when they actually work after I fix them. But then more often than not we have to just throw the thing away and buy...start over and buy something new. I've see some heads nodding out there. I'm just not a handy guy. Listen, how handy God is, who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens by the span. What is a span? It's half a cubit. Its nine inches is what it is. Perhaps if you've ever gone to fix something and you forgot your tape measure or your ruler got to use your hand, and maybe you've marked it off before like this men and women. You can do like that and then you do like that you go, "Okay. That's about four hands worth." We've all done that in a pinch. It's funny how all of our hands are about the same. Put them just like that. Isn't that amazing? About nine inches just like that. Now, you're a little younger so it may not quite be there but it's getting close. It's called a span. It's a span.

He has marked off the heavens by the span. Does that not amaze you? It's a picture of God from corner to corner if we can even say that the heaven has a corner to it. Marking it off by the span, that's so intimately and intricately God knows His creation. He is great. Today if you're sitting in our midst and you don't know God yet, you're wondering what he's like or maybe you're lost and you know you're lost, just know this, any God that knows the heavens every nine inch of it by the span knows you. The Bible says in the New Testament, not a single bird falls from the sky that he's unaware of it. He cares that much for birds. How much more does he care for human beings.

The third encouragement is reach up. Like a little child, like children that are with us here today. You remember how your children sometimes reach out for you and they don't even look. They just know you're there and they kind of put their arms up like this and you grab them and you reach you take them up and you hold them. Just as in the side. I did mention this. I had that happen to me not long ago in a mall with a child that wasn't mine. She thought I was standing next somehow in the crowd, she thought I was her dad. She just put her hands like, you know. We reach up to that which we believe is great. And we trust that He can hold us and therefore we reach out. The scriptures go on this. Who has directed the spirit of the Lord or as his counsellor has informed him and who gave him understanding, and who taught him in the path of justice and taught and knowledge and informed him in the way of understanding? It's beautiful. Behold the nations are like a drop from a bucket and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales. Behold He lifts them, lifts up the islands like fine dust, the islands like fine dust. All the nations are as nothing before Him. They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless." That's how big He is, less than nothing and meaningless. To whom will you compare God and what likeness will you compare with Him. As for the idol, a craftsman casts it, a goldsmith plates it with gold, and the silversmith fashions chains of silver. He who is too impoverished for such an offering selects for Himself a tree that does not rot. He seeks out for Himself, a skilled craftsman to prepare an idol that will not totter.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth? It is He who sits above the circle of the earth and all its inhabitants are grasshoppers, grasshoppers. Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. He it is who reduces rulers to nothing, and who makes the judges of the earth meaningless scarcely have they been sown, scarcely have they been planted, scarcely has their stock taken root in the ground but he merely blows on them and they wither and the storm carries them away like stubble. This is how majestic God is. How great he is. We can reach up with full confidence in 2017 that he can carry the load. Reach up, hush up, speak up, reach out.

And then, Isaiah direct our eyes up. Finally he says, "Look up. Lift up your eyes on high and see the one who has created these stars, the one who leads forth their host by number. He calls them all by name. Because of the greatness of his might and the strength of his power, not one of them is missing." You know, we spend our lives looking down so much of it more and more so as the days go on. This is our posture. So wonder any of our necks still work. "Look up" he says. "See the one who has created these stars." Will you look up in 2017? It'll make all the difference. Look up. See what he's like, it will make all the difference. Finally Isaiah says this and it's a beautiful message. He says, "Though youths grow weary and tired and the vigorous young men



stumble badly, yet those who wait upon the Lord will mount up with wings. They will gain new strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run and not get tired. They will walk and not become weary.”

Something about waiting on God that is phenomenal. Waiting in general is hard. We rush do we not? We rush ahead of Him all the time. But if I will wait on God as I head into 2017, I cannot fail. I cannot fail. Wait upon God. Hush up. Then speak up, then reach up, then look up, and then wait up and eventually you will mount up with wings like eagles. Your perspective will be eagles perspective. An Eagles perspective, it will change the way you see things.

Here’s how I live my life unfortunately at times. I’m gonna need a couple of volunteers you sir. Thanks for raising your hand and you as well come on up. Yeah, yeah, we’ve not rehearsed this before have we?

FRED: No, we haven’t.

WILL: Okay. I’m Will. What’s your name?

FRED: Fred.

WILL: Fred, come on up pal.

MARK: Mark.

Will: Mark. Come on help me on this. I just don’t want to die. Why don’t you stand right here and Mark if you’ll do this, you just got to do this and Fred you’ll do the same thing over there and make sure that everyone lives through this. We’ve met before.

Fred: I hope so.

Will: Yeah, we have. Yeah, good to see you. All right. Here’s how I often live my life. God tells me to hush up and listen and instead I get loud. I go up to this one. I get loud and I wanna be the big cheese. I want my voice to be heard. Other times he says, “Will speak up on my behalf.” and I get quiet, because I’m embarrassed. I think if I still speak up about God people think I’m a weirdo. And I am. Other times he says, “Will reach out to me. Reach out because I can carry the load. I really can. Trust that I can carry the load.” But instead I kind of go my own way. I try to carry the load on my own trusting in me more than him. Then he says, “Will, if you would just look up get your eyes off yourself, get off the end of your own nose, things might go better for you.” but instead I look down. And you can see the terrible precarious situation that is happening to me. Can you not? He says, “Will, would you just wait up?” and instead...this is gonna get a little tough. Keep lean in there Fred. We may have to do this, you know. He says, “Will, would you just...would you just wait up for me?” and instead I rush on ahead. It’s crazy that we would live our lives like this. Look how split I am now. No one wants to live like this. I don’t. And I know you don’t either.

Fred, Mark, thanks for your help. You’re free to go. Give them a hand. What’s that first step, it’s a good one. Let’s close down. We’re about done here. Now, look where we find ourselves again the top Big Daddy. Little Will’s been here since 1969. Hopeful you can relate. If you hearken back to a time in your own life when you felt incredible fear, maybe you’re there now. A new year started you’re going, “I’m not ready for New Year the last one about did me in.” It’s interesting I can still remember it. It was my turn to jump. Face just wet with tears, heart pounding. Certain that my reputation had been ruined for life as all my peers watch me cry. And I felt a hand on my shoulder. And I looked at, you know what I saw Stuart Nance, tall, bronze, chisel smiling. He said, “Will, it’s all gonna be okay because you’re jumping with me today.” So he took me by my hand and before I could change my mind, off we went. The green of the trees rocketing past me, the water rushing up to greet us and smack we hit it. I came up smiling, looking straight into his eyes, the first thing he said was, “Welcome to courage.”

Many ways it changed my life. I’ve been off Big Daddy many times since then, mostly doing backflips. It’s actually less scary



for me than going forward. Taught my son's to do it. We've all been off it. My wife keeps saying, "Will, you're gonna have to stop doing that." No more fear. What will it be like for you in 2017? Will you jump alone? Perhaps you're like one that's already rushed ahead of God with your resolutions. I would encourage you to slow down. See what he might say to you as you head into 2017. Some of you are frozen with fear, afraid to leap at all. But you put your hand in his hand when you leap with God everything changes, everything changes. Leap every day with God into this New Year. You all been wonderful. I'm gonna close this in prayer and then I think that we got one more song will be done for the day. Let's pray. Father, thank you so much for your presence in our lives. We get quietly for you. We hush up so that we might hear you. We vow to speak up to open our mouths in some way this year to give glory to you, so that people's opinion would be raised about God not lowered. And we reach up to you because we fully trust that you can bear the load. You're majestic if you know the stars, how much more do you know us? And now we look up. We Choose to look right in your face, see what you're like. We'll be alert, keeping our eyes open as we go through each day to see you in your creation. And we will wait for you rather than rushing. You're wonderful and great. We give you praise in Jesus name amen.

