

Strangers In A Strange Land
Isaiah 55:1-9
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Sometimes it seems the Old Testament is all law, with little or no room for grace. That is, in the Old Testament we're given our marching orders, but there's little said about God helping us reach our destination. Instead, like a prosecuting attorney, God uses the Chosen People's unfaithfulness as Exhibit A, making the case we're unworthy to call ourselves his children. The God of the Old Testament is all about judgment, not at all like the merciful Christ of the New Testament.

Of course this perception is entirely false. Sure, there are Old Testament writings revealing God's wrath and warnings of dire consequences, but there're equal amounts of passages exposing God's deep love for the world through his people and today's passage from Isaiah is one of them.

*Ho, (Pay attention!) everyone who thirsts.
Come to the waters;
And you that have no money,
Come, buy, eat! (Isaiah 55:1)*

This particular passage was written for the Jews exiled in Babylon 50 years after Jerusalem was conquered and the House of David overthrown.

We can't begin to imagine what effect this devastating event had on the Jews. They formerly told themselves they were the fortunate few, the Chosen People and God's covenant with King David guaranteed his descendants would rule forever. But now, Jerusalem was in ruins and their national identity shattered. What were they supposed to believe in now? And where, by the way, was God, did he abandon them? Was this the end, with the Jews uprooted and scattered throughout the Babylonian Empire?

One of these Jewish exiles neatly summed up their collective angst in Psalm 137:

*“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when
we remembered Zion.
On the willows we hung up our harps
For there our captors asked us for songs
and our tormentors asked us
for mirth saying,
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’
How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?”* (Psalm 137:1-4)

Exile is one of the consistent biblical themes and over the generations mystics and saints have struggled with being strangers in a strange land, alienated and far from home because they made either the wrong or ironically even the right choices.

For instance, the Babylonian Exile was the result of bad choices. Early and often God raised up numerous prophets to speak the truth in love, but no one listened, so the nation suffered the consequences. But exile also came to those obedient prophets because society couldn’t handle their truth and so punished the messengers. Did these righteous exiles at least have the satisfaction of knowing they did the right thing? Probably not.

Today you and I are faced with a variation on the same theme: to one degree or another we’ve been exiled from home because we are, after all, the sons and daughters of Adam, still exiled from the Garden of Eden, longing for that call to come home.

*So, it’s to our exile as well the prophet speaks Good News:
Ho, (Pay attention!) everyone who thirsts.
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy, eat!
Come buy milk and wine without price.
Why do you spend your money
for that which is not bread
and your labor for that which
does not satisfy?*

Imagine going to your favorite supermarket and being told, “Fill up your cart, and another one too, and today you don’t have to settle for generic brands! Oh, and did I tell you, it’s all free! You just have to come and pick it up. You don’t even have to worry about long lines at the check out, so hurry up, come and get it!”

If it sounds too good to be true, you're right, at least as far as your favorite supermarket is concerned. But in God's supermarket it's all true.

Of course the food Isaiah offers won't fill your stomach, but it will fill your soul, and not just for a short time, but forever. God offers the bread and wine that satisfies the hungry heart and quenches the deepest thirst.

Unfortunately we settle for food and drink that can't satisfy our souls, spending our money on junk food and working hard for things that never quite satisfy. And even though we hate being in exile, that is unhappy, unfulfilled and just plain frustrated, oddly enough we still choose to be exiled because we've gotten used to it.

Unlike the 400 years their ancestors spent enslaved in Egypt, the Jews' 50 year exile in Babylon was both comfortable and prosperous. Even though they were captives, they were still encouraged to participate in the "Babylonian Dream." They could buy and sell property, make their fortunes, enjoy the good life, and most of them did. But apparently they were having too much prosperity because when told after 50 years, "If you want you can go home now," most of them chose to stay. The call to return to the Promised Land was trumped by their new found affluent lifestyles. So ironically their captivity continued, but this time, not against their wills. Deep down they must have known they were still strangers in a strange land, but sadly they gave up on ever really going to where they really belonged.

But not all of them. There were some, a faithful remnant, who answered the call and began the hard work of returning to the Promised Land to resume being the People of the Covenant, called to be that City on a hill, and a light to all the nations of the earth.

Listen again to Isaiah's prophesy to that remnant who'd soon return to Jerusalem:

*"See, you shall call nations that
you do not know
and nations that do not know
you shall run to you
because of the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you." (Isaiah 55:5)*

Even though it was often either ignored or misunderstood by the majority, God chose the Jews, not for privilege but for service. The Old Testament prophets and poets were totally upfront about this. God expected Israel to lead all the nations back home to God and this same vision continues through Christ and his Church. (That's you and me.)

On this third Sunday in Lent and first Sunday of the month, Christ is calling all who are weary, burdened, hungry and thirsty to stop whatever we're doing and come home to buy bread and wine at no cost to you, but a terrible cost to him. Remember? "Take and eat, this is my body, broken for you...Take and drink, this is my blood shed for you..."

This morning, as the Communion liturgy is read, but especially during that quiet time when the elements are distributed, let me suggest for your meditations two things:

First, we are exiles, far from home. We are strangers in our own Babylon, longing for inner peace and that eternal purpose that promises to complete our lives as we love and serve God through Christ. But at the same time, we are also captives in Babylon, tormented by appetites and anxieties that can only be tamed by submitting to Christ and trusting our lives to him.

Second, Christ died to save us from these same obsessions that keep us locked down. He came to make our homecoming not just possible, but guaranteed.

Listen to the Good News, our days of wandering and exile are numbered, because the God of both Isaiah and Christ has visited his people, found us wanting, and moved by the deepest possible love, decided to do something about it: bring us back home, whatever the cost, and what a terrible cost he paid.

And where is this home? Within you, because Christ has chosen to make his home in your soul. So near and yet so far, but nearer than we think.

So, come back home and take your seat at the table, be fed and be satisfied. Taste and see the Lord is good and never be hungry or thirsty again.