

Comfort Ye

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It is difficult being a church leader these days, making the hard decisions about how and when to be together in person. It's difficult, I can well imagine, being a school principal, a teacher, a parent. It's just so hard being a responsible human being these days, with so many hard decisions. Can you imagine being a journalist in these times? Taking in, processing, and reporting on the news... the multiple pandemics and crisis, every day... how hard....

But even though the church zoom meetings of this past week were often hard, there are also great privileges in this work of mine. Like this past week, I was able to spend a great deal of time studying our sacred text. I got to dwell in the words of Isaiah, words about exile and the return, to dwell in this utterance until it dwelt in me. This is a great privilege.

In this library we call our Bible, there are a few meta-narratives. Our most important stories. Everything else is rooted in them. Refers to them.... Like Exodus, Exile, Resurrection or the Jesus story doesn't end.. (The fixation on the rapture and on sin and salvation-in-the-after-life are marginal... these are not central metaphors in this library of our faith at all. Unfortunately, in the last century, some have made them more central than they deserve.) These most important stories *are* connected to historical events, yes, but they have become universal, true, deeply imprinted in our collective memory and psyche. (This is why Faith Formation is so important—to help imprint these stories into our children) These deep symbols—exodus, exile, resurrection- shape our souls and our consciousness, our way of perceiving reality and so how we shape reality. As we say so often, I don't know if it actually happened this way but I know that the story is true.

So, on this Sabbath day, I say to you journalists, principals, teachers, parents, doctors, nurses, bus drivers, mail carriers, and more: Take a break from your work world! A sabbath break from your daily and necessary preoccupations. And look at this! I want to show you something! Listen to this! This is something that has fed our ancestors in the faith for centuries and centuries; that has helped carry them through hard periods of history, and harder still, unimaginably hard. Look at this. Dwell in this with me for a spell until it dwells in you... The story of exile and the return....

But first I want to acknowledge that other peoples of different religions and indigenous peoples are kept alive by bread and stories too. The last great Chief of the Crow nation was named Plenty Coups. His people went into a kind of existential exile when their land was stolen and the buffalo went away. "The hearts of my people fell to the ground and they could not lift them up again." He said. There was little singing anywhere. The nation had lost its sense of life, meaning, and energy. Then Chief Plenty Coups went up a mountain to do a vision quest and there he had a dream. It was a dream about his people and their traditional way of life coming to an end and that his people must do what they can to open their imagination to a radically different set of possibilities; and that they must preserve some integrity across this discontinuity; and that they *can* have reason to hope for a dignified passage across the abyss; and ultimately this-- that they *shall* get the good back because God is good. Is this one of the most important stories the Crowe people know?, about the dream of Chief Plenty Coups?. But that's *their* story. (Brueggemann, Reality, Grief, Hope)

This is ours... It comes from long ago.... the 6th century BCE... the time of exile.

It can't be overstated the devastating effects of what happened to them in 586 BCE when the temple, the center of their life, was destroyed and they were forced to leave their homeland and go live in Babylon. **(Do you remember that fateful week mid March of 2020 when we left our life as we knew it, those of us who could, and went home and lived in great isolation? Was that when we were first forced into exile? Is Covid our Babylon??)**

They didn't just move, the ancient Israelites, take their lives with them. No everything was shaken apart. Destabilized. It affected everything. Multiple crises germinated and spread in this time of disorientation.... Some of the shaking up was good. They had grown decadent in Jerusalem and the old patterns of privilege needed a good shake up. But there was also a profound and disorienting dislocation; a weakening, alienation, fatigue, a great shriveling up of the spirit of the people, and perhaps worst of all a separation from their center of meaning. Their ground of being fell away. They lost their feeling for God. Life in exile, this is... Not just a period of depression or recession but utter dislocation. Exile: it feels like the end of the world.

But it's not the end of the world. Children still play. People still fall in love, bake bread, make a living. The wise ones, those fortunate enough to have basic necessities met, take this time to listen and learn and read about what went wrong and what needs to change, while others lash out with rage, or stock pile more money. There is still kindness though. There is resilience and roses. But... it's EXILE. It's not the life the creator intends. And the people are at risk of becoming so despondent not even caring anymore about what God intends for their lives, for their souls....

And that's when it happens.... When the people are by the river of Babylon washing their clothes and weeping, despondently.... That's when the unheard of happens. That's when the unheard of is heard. We don't know the details... when exactly, who exactly, how much the prophet knows about Persia, the new empire sweeping the land... It doesn't really matter.... What matters is that the prophet's words are heard and break through to the despondent fellow exiles.... Did it feel at first to them like false hope?, spin?, The la-la land of fairy tales? No, somehow it felt true... and they released a giant exilic sigh.... And ever since, during times of exile, their descendants would also hear the words and know their truth.....these new words breaking into their collective consciousness... new words from God... a serious source of life energy, that awakens them, arouses them, unsettles them (you are not going to settle for life in exile...)and that prepares them for their eventual return...

The people will return. But they are not the same. They've been forever changed by life in exile. Scarred.... maimed.. and will need to heal from the trauma. They won't go back to exactly the way it was, back to "normal". The rebuilt temple will be smaller, beautiful but in a simple way. They've shed the decadence that had been growing before exile and they reimagine how to set things up in the future so that everyone can thrive. They know now in a deeper way than they've ever known before how interconnected everyone is, each to one another and to the earth. They bury "it's all about me" in the ground before the return journey. They hear, I mean really hear the words, I mean really, really really hear the words: behold I am doing a new thing, ...This new thing, this new thought, this new collection of words uttered by the prophet "is a massive miracle that transforms all of life for them..."

Oh...and the spirit of that people?, well!! it stops shriveling and it begins to expand again, as they imagine returning home.

Do not miss this. What I'm trying to communicate this morning. Let us not underestimate what this meant! This prophetic oracle of hope in the midst of exile in the 6th century BCE, one scholar says "is one of the most remarkable eruptions ever in thought and speech". (Brueggemann) And our ancestors dared to hear these words. In ancient times and ever since, during times of massive upheaval and despair, 100 years ago as the last pandemic was winding down, they heard these words.... telling them that they will not live in exile forever....

Do you hear these ancient/ new words? Or are you protecting your heart from false hopes? I get it. But what happens if it's true?... that the time of our collective suffering will soon be over. That this pandemic will not rule our lives forever, but that the valuable lessons learned will change our lives forever. Could it be that we will learn to live with Covid and not be dominated or terrorized by it as fewer and fewer die from it? That it will become endemic, much like the flu, which can still be serious but we've learned to manage it... could it be that a change is coming? Could it be that we will not live in this exile for much longer?

"Comfort ye. Comfort ye, my people.... Sayeth your God."

Benediction

Are we readying ourselves for the return? Sooner rather than later? What shall we pack for the return? What shall we leave behind?

May we be ever gentle with ourselves and one another as we embark on this journey of return... our souls have been maimed...

May we remain be open and flexible in the forever future for the sake of public health...

May we be bold to make ever lasting changes in our common life..

Abolishing the billionaire class

Eradicating white supremacy

Ending fossil fuel use

Moving more and more towards Gods' dream of justice.

Could it be that our exile is coming to an end?

May it be so!!

Sources

Borg, Marcus:

[Reading the Bible Again For the First Time](#) (scripture reading came from this text)

[Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time](#)

[Convictions](#)

Brueggemann, Walter:

Reality, Grief, Hope, Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks

Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope

The Prophetic Imagination

Isaiah 40-66 (Westminster Bible Companion)

The New York Times, Sunday through Saturday