

**Exile and Homecoming**

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Let me begin with a word of celebration as we mark the 25<sup>th</sup> ordination anniversary for the Rev. Cindy Reynolds as well as the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Paul's Congregational Church. How wonderful it is to celebrate these highmark in the life of this community.

Today's sermon invites us to listen to a couple of conversations. The first one we have already heard. The dialogue between Jeremiah and the Psalmist who are wrestling with the new world they find themselves in as people of faith. The second is an ongoing conversation between Rev. Ann Rolasky, minister of my home church, First Congregational, Montclair and myself as we wrestle with the new world we find ourselves in as people of faith.

Let us begin with the scriptures.

Jeremiah and the Psalmist are caught in a tension, that like a rubber band pulled to the snapping point, is ready to tear the faith community apart. The twin poles which stretch their faith is life before and after exile. We are aware of before and afters. Life before and after marriage, before and after a move, before and after starting a new job, before and after kids at home. Between these two poles of before and after are stretched the lives of the Jerusalem exiles now in the capital of their bitterly hatted enemy.

These folks are struggling with the the shock of a forced exile, of a culture that doesn't honor them, of wondering if God cared anymore. Psalm 137 sums of their longing and mourning and despair:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down,  
and we wept when we remembered Zion.  
We hung our harps in the midst of the willow branches.  
For there our captors, who carried us away, demanded that we sing;  
They that laid waste to our homes, required joy,  
saying, "Sing to us one of your fabled songs of Zion!"

Yet, how can we sing the songs of our God in a strange land? (vv. 1-4)

Later the Psalmist, lost in despair cries out, “You want us happy and filled with joy? Happiness will come when Babylon is destroyed. Happiness will come when you children’s heads are beaten against rocks” (vv. 8-9). This is the depth of the tension, the taught energy of the before and after in which God speaks.

You and I are there my friends, in this very same tension. Only about twenty or so years ago we lived in our Jerusalem. America was a “christian” nation. Not necessarily in the sense that we mirrored the teaching and life of Jesus, but in the sense that Christianity was the civil religion of our culture. Which means if you weren’t in church on Sunday people looked down on you. The greatest external motivation to become religious is to fit in.

Now we are in exile. In the waning decades of the 20th century and the opening chapter of the 21st century Christianity lost its magical perch as America’s civil religion. Now without the external motivation to fit in, we realize that a lot of people find us pretty irrelevant to their lives. Cindy has watched this shift take place during her time in ministry. It tells us something about Cindy’s spirit that she has remained in ministry even as others trained in the time before exile have retired from ministry.

We can debate how good or bad our forced exile is. I for one am happy that we can finally demarcate between a christianized civil religion and the way of Jesus. When a person running for senator compares his molestation of teenage girls to the pregnancy of Mary, that is civil religion, for the way of Jesus teaches us to honor the child in our midst. When folks deny the validity of God given scientific facts and hide behind the bible as science instead of a testament of faith, that is civil religion, for the way of Jesus teaches us to observe the lilies and the birds and to learn from them.

However, I know post-Christian exile is a bitter pill to swallow so closely on the close of “Christian America.” My home church pastor, Ann Rolasky puts it this way, “In

churches across the country pews are emptying, denominations are fracturing, and polls tell us that, when asked what religion they affiliate with, most millennials (and those are the ones all of us are after) say 'none.' Those 'nones' – and lapsed Catholics – are the fastest growing spiritual group in the country.” The rubber band is stretched my friends, for we are in the midst of exile.

Now the choice is ours. We can, like the Psalmist, give ourselves over to despair. Demand that we be treated to the level we were accustomed too, and then pray that God will dash the millennials' children's head against rocks. By the way, I really don't suggest this as an evangelistic approach. But I know those churches that have embraced this attitude.

Or, we can heed the voice of God through the prophet Jeremiah. Bless where we are, continue planning for the future, seeking to touch lives living in the post-Christian culture we now find ourselves in, and celebrate God's presence and love in the midst of this strange land.

Again I turn to Ann Rolasky, “Old paradigms are not holding, old messages are not preaching, but NEW ones are breaking through. This is an AMAZING time to lead the church because the possibilities for how God can speak to us in this new era of upheaval and renewal are limitless. It's true that people are not coming to church the way they used to, but the hunger for God in their lives is as strong as ever. We human beings long for stories that connect us and communities that strengthen us and sacred experiences that inspire us. We long to make MEANING out of the joys and sorrows – and ordinary moments -- of our lives. Deep within us, woven within our divinely given DNA, we know that our small, fragile stories are indeed connected to a larger, eternal and transcendent story. God's story. And folks are longing for places to share it.”

As opposed to the Psalmist, Jeremiah says to his people in the after of exile, “Sing the songs of Zion, teach them to you children, make the new city a place for God, even as the old city was a place for God.” We may not know exactly how we'll be

morphed and shaped in this new land, but we know where we have come from and where we come from there is a God who has already blessed us.

One last time let me quote the Rev. Rolasky, "We, as the church, we as the Body of Christ, have a ... story to tell. One that says every human being is made in the image of God – no exceptions. (A story) that says that power is found in compassion and vulnerability and justice and forgiveness. That our wealth is found in the grace we receive and the grace we extend, and the willingness we have to lay down our lives for each other.

"It's a story that says, despite all the ways we get it wrong, God loves us so recklessly, so extravagantly, so outrageously, that (God) sent (the) beloved Child to share his life with us, to GIVE his life for us, to show us that nothing – not hatred or violence or fear – can ever separate us from God's unconditional love."

And that is what Jeremiah is telling us in the despair and tension of our own exile. God is still with us. So let us be about being the children of God in this new land, and let us then become God's blessing in exile.

Amen