

Sermon: God's Timing
Scripture: Isaiah 40:21-31
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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This beautiful passage from Isaiah is written to refugees, to a people who had been violently forced from their homeland and exiled to live in a foreign land. When the Psalmist writes the heart-rending song – “beside the streams of Babylon we sat ourselves and wept remembering the land we loved and all the hope it kept; on willow trees we hung our harps while adding to their wrongs, our captors smirked a cruel request, sing one of Zion’s songs....” he or she was writing about this particular time in their people’s history, called the Babylonian exile, when Israel was defeated by Babylon; their hope in a future Zion of union and fulfillment was dashed and they were forcibly scattered out and away from the Promised Land to the furthest ends of Mesopotamia.

This happened in the 6th century BCE not long after Israel had recovered from being sacked and ruined by Assyria a century earlier. Israel was on a sweet piece of land on the Mediterranean, a true land of milk and honey, and as a result was often steam-rolled by larger and more aggressive kingdoms who wanted to access to the land and trade routes. It’s been part and parcel of the experience of the Hebrew people long before the horrors of the holocaust, the nightmares of other kingdoms having their way with the Holy Land and threatening to wipe them off the map. It’s one reason why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is so intractable because the Israeli’s are unwilling to loosen their grip on the land at all for fear of once again being run over and removed from the land they love and, from their perspective, the land they were

granted. Being the chosen people of God, apparently is no picnic as history has shown. Just as Jesus was the chosen one of God and crucified for it, so too have the Jews known in their chosen status ongoing crucifixions as a people as well. To claim God as sovereign in a world of ego-maniacal *human* sovereigns is to put yourself in a tenuous situation to say the least.

So Isaiah writes to his brutalized and homesick people, exiled in a foreign land where they don't belong and where they are not wanted, and he reminds them that God is still sovereign, despite the overwhelming nature of the Babylonian Empire and the hopelessness of their captivity therein and the distance to the Promised Land, he asks them to remember. He says, "Have you not heard? Have you not known? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth." The Astral Cults of the Babylonians worshipped the sun and the moon and the stars as entities that could make or break your life, but Isaiah reminds the Hebrew people that the celestial bodies are God's creation, nothing more, nothing less and God is still sovereign and master and God's designs and purposes still hold sway. No matter how unlikely it seems, God is holding all of this mess of a situation and disarray of a world and weaving it for the good. Don't forget, Isaiah cries, don't forget. And the Psalmist sings: "How shall we ever sing God's song in such a foreign land? If I my birthplace dare forget, let strength desert my hand. "

Isaiah assures his people – Egypt comes and Egypt goes, Assyria rises and Assyria falls, Babylon ascended and Babylon will be brought down but God's promise of faithfulness to creation and to his people remains true, strong and constant. To jump a head a couple thousand

years, the Apostle Paul will eventually speak the same promise in this way - "for I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, not the past nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God known in Jesus Christ our Lord." Romans 8:38.

And that I would suggest is a difficult thing to get our heads around, that our outer circumstances, especially when they are difficult and trying and for a long time, is not an indication of God's disfavor or absence, but rather God's presence is mercy and love remaining constant and God's deeper purpose for our lives remains true. Believe it. Trust it. The Hebrew people, exiled in Babylon were doubting it, they were losing touch, were turning to other assurances, were forgetting the promises of God to them, were forgetting themselves as a people with a center in God, symbolically and literally understood to be Jerusalem, which is why the Psalmist sang: "And let my tongue stick in my mouth if ever I forget Jerusalem, which far above all other joys I set."

Eventually Babylon would fall and their exile would end and they would return to the Promised Land and rebuild Jerusalem and their temple. But always it's in God's timing, which is rarely if ever aligned to our own timing, for there is much unseen and unknown to our tiny human minds that must be woven for God's purposes to be fulfilled. The discipline is to wait, to wait upon the Lord. Isaiah cries, wait for the Lord, for strength will be granted, sustenance will be offered, uplift will come. Wait with an utter trust in the presence and purposes of God.

We are a doing and accomplishing people who don't take well to being told to wait, wouldn't you agree? My nephew is in Morocco right now doing a semester abroad and he says one of the most striking

cultural differences he's seen is how he has to wait for things to happen. He said he ordered a coffee and waited 20 minutes for it to come. He was on time for some event and waited an hour for it to begin. He ate his meal and waited an hour and half for everyone else to finish. He's been aware suddenly of how he's habitually getting through the now to get to somewhere else and in that culture, the American drive and pace almost feels like a disease. He said he was struck above all else by how much more relational their existence is there. For us, it seems always to be more about some other end and we do not like to be kept waiting as we work to accomplish that end, but for them the waiting is life and allows space for the relating and simply being with one another is a high, high premium.

Waiting for the Lord and the subsequent renewal of strength that comes could be in large part about being fully present to where we are and being truly *with* who we are with and it's there, in the love of one another where our strength and sustenance emerges, because God has made us to be that way. We don't have to make everything happen ourselves. It all will happen despite us. Haven't we heard? Haven't we known? All we *must* do is show up with one another, remembering we are with God, and allow the unfolding to do it's work in God's time. Praise be!

May God be a bright flame before you,
A guiding star above you,
A smooth path below you,
A kindly shepherd behind you,
Today, tonight and forever.

- St. Columba

Invitation to Communion

We come to this welcome table and receive the sign of God's grace and love. The past is present here as we remember Jesus Christ's sacrifice, the way he gave his body and blood out of love for us. And the future is present here as we rehearse for the end of time when the Great Feast will be spread before all and all will be welcomed and healed and all will be well.

So come now in this present moment and be present with one another and in God's Spirit knowing that God and God's love surrounds each of us and all of us as God's beloved people.

Wherever you are on life's journey, however strong or weak you consider your faith to be, however clear or unclear your understanding of God may be, there is nothing that you must do or figure out or accomplish to be here – this is something that God in Jesus Christ has already accomplished for us and we only must gather and receive the grace offered here.

Let us pray....