

THE CROSSROADS
Isaiah 40:21-31
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 5, 2012

The Jews really are a resilient and remarkable people, keeping their unique identity and faith all these centuries despite their endless trials and tribulations. How can you explain their staying power apart from the grace of God?

Did you ever wonder why God called Abraham, 4,000 years ago, to leave what is now modern day Iraq and take that long journey to the Promised Land? I mean, why couldn't Abraham just stay put and be fruitful and multiply in his own home town? Why go to a far away country only to face hostile natives understandably resentful towards a new wave of illegal immigrants?

Carefully look at a map of the Middle East and you'll find the answer. The Promised Land was a strategic piece of real estate at the crossroad of the ancient world. To the southeast was Egypt, to the northwest was Assyria, Babylonia and Persia and due east the Mediterranean Sea, the gateway to the world.

When Israel was united and strong under Kings David and Solomon, the Jews could hold their own. But, when civil war broke out, after Solomon's death roughly a thousand years before Christ, Israel divided into the northern kingdom, Israel and the southern kingdom, Judea. Since a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, first Israel and later Judea were conquered.

Here's my point: God intentionally led Abraham to what became the Promised Land precisely because of its location. Instead of being out of harms way, God led Abraham into the crosshairs of the ancient world where the Assyrians, then the Babylonians and Persians and later the Greeks and Romans successively fought and defeated each other to possess the crossroads to the world.

What explains the Jews humiliating defeats, exile and occupations by these Gentile nations? The ruling classes and religious establishment consistently rejected the prophets' dire warnings and predictions. Instead of submitting to God, they hedged their bets by entering into unreliable alliances, with foreign powers, and flirted with their neighbors' gods. No longer a holy people, distinct and set apart to glorify God, Judea slowly blended in and lost her way.

But even if Judea was conquered, God was not. Working out his purposes God seamlessly switched to Plan B still bringing salvation to the world through Israel, but with or without her cooperation.

Let that be a lesson to us. When you reject God's will, God circumvents your disobedience, turning it upside down and inside out before enfolding it into his divine

plan. Case in point: Good Friday. The religious leaders rejected Jesus and condemned him to death, but God used their disobedience to complete Jesus' mission to die for the sins of the world. On Easter morning God snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. We may give God our worst, but turning it to his advantage, God gives back his best. We may crucify God's will, but God resurrects it for our own good.

So the long and lamentable history of Israel isn't about God easily working out his purposes with the steadfast and loyal support of Israel, it's really all about God working out his purpose in spite of Israel's willful disobedience and failure.

The Old Testament record also shows it was in defeat and exile the Jews were finally ready to find their way back to God. Apparently it's when we're at our weakest and only then that we're ready and willing to be humbled, wait for God to save us from ourselves and then move us into the future prepared for us before the beginning of time.

And that's the place we find the Jews in today's reading from the Prophet Isaiah. Try to put yourself in their shoes. The House of David was no more, Solomon's grand temple as well as all of Jerusalem was in ruins. To add insult to injury, Gentile squatters moved in and took possession of their land. Helpless and hopeless the Jews were strangers in a strange land, completely disconnected from that strategic piece of real estate promised to Abraham and his descendants. Without a homeland, they were in danger of losing their national identity, not in a patriotic sense, but spiritually as God's children. Chastened and demoralized, the Jews yearned to reestablish their covenant with God and be given a second chance to resume their calling in the Promised Land.

And so, after sixty years in exile, plenty of time for reflection and renewal, the Jews were finally ready to listen to Isaiah speaking words of encouragement and hope before taking the long journey home.

*Have you not known? Have you
not heard?*

*Has it not been told you from the
beginning?*

*It is he (God) who sits above the circle
of the earth,*

*and its inhabitants are like
grasshoppers...*

*who bring princes to naught
and makes the rulers of the
earth as nothing.*

(Isaiah 40:21-23)

Isaiah began by reminding the Jews that their God is God. In comparison, their conquerors are mere grasshoppers. The King of Babylon, who thinks he's in charge, is only fooling himself.

*To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? Says the*

Holy One.

Isaiah, after making God's case then asks who can challenge God. How long can these grasshoppers pretend to be God's equal? Isaiah then goes on to assure the exiles their ultimate fate isn't in Babylonian hands, but in God's.

*Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host
and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing. (Isaiah 40:26)*

Again, Isaiah reasserts God's sovereignty. Not even their gods, which were the stars in the night sky the Babylonians worshipped, have authority over God's people. Therefore, Israel can't be kept in exile against God's will.

And to the exiles who think their pleas for deliverance have fallen on deaf ears, Isaiah answers their charge by reminding them God hasn't forgotten them and always hears their cries.

*Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the Lord...?",
Have you not known? Have you
not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God...
his understanding is
unsearchable.*

Finally Isaiah connects the dots between God's power and God's people.

*He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord
shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with
wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

Here Isaiah is preaching the gospel. We are weak but God is strong. Wait for the Lord, trust his promises made and always kept. Even though God's people must endure the consequences of their disobedience, when the time is right the faint and weary will be

lifted up and soar as high as God takes them. They will be reempowered to return to the Promised Land and resume their calling to be the light to the Gentiles.

Eventually, the Jews did return to Judea, they rebuilt their temple and reestablished their covenant with God. Though temple worship was still important, in the next five hundred years before Christ's birth, the synagogue emerged, separate congregations established in each neighborhood and village which decentralized and transformed Jewish life and faith. Also during this time of rebirth a new progressive lay movement was born to serve as a bulwark against the encroaching Greek and Roman culture and simultaneously strengthen the covenant between God and the Jews. This movement started out with the best of intentions, but in time instead of becoming the solution it became part of the problem. Perhaps you've heard of the followers of this movement? They called themselves the Pharisees.

The Pharisees advocated separating themselves not only from Gentiles, but any and all "sinners." Knowing Israel was at the crossroads of the world, the Pharisees' endless, non negotiable laws and traditions hermetically sealed off Israel from the rest of humanity, lest she be contaminated and ruined.

Then Jesus came on the scene. Wanting Israel to engage and serve the Gentiles, Jesus ignored any tradition or practice that excluded outsiders and insulated insiders. Instead of seeing Israel's strategic location as a negative, Jesus took advantage of the Promised Land being at the crossroads of the world by inviting and including Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, male and female, even prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners as equals in the emerging Kingdom of God.

What life lessons can we take from today's scriptures? How about this: Just as God called Abraham to take possession of the Promised Land, we too are called to put ourselves out there in the world. Despite the rampant materialism and secularization of society, this is not a time to hide and separate ourselves from the problems of the world. If we see the Church as the alternative to the culture instead of the venue to reach out and bring Christ to the culture, we'll go the way of the Pharisees.

Like Abraham, we are called to the crossroads of the world to live in the Promised Land where God waits for you to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger in the name of Jesus.

Never forget and always remember Jesus who calls us to be with him at the crossroads where we always find people in need and opportunities to serve. God called Abraham and his descendants to be a light and blessing to the world. Through Christ we are the descendants and through Christ, if we cooperate with God, together we will overcome the world one life at a time.