

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

Isaiah 59: 1-9

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, February 28, 2016

I was a freshman in college and I had to take a religion course. It was requirement and I resented having to take it. I was in a Presbyterian school and having attended Catholic Sunday school classes from the time I was in first grade until I graduated from high school, I thought I knew everything I had to know about God and religion.

This required course was a survey of the Old and New Testaments. I remember saying to the professor on the first day of class, I understood why Christians should study the New Testament but I couldn't understand why we should study the Old Testament. After all, Jesus made the Old Testament obsolete. The Old Testament was for Jews, not Christians. I had a lot to learn.

Sometimes it appears the Old Testament is all about law and judgment with very little room for gospel and grace. In the Old Testament, we find pages of laws regarding what God's people can and cannot do. It's restrictive, if not oppressive. God comes across more like a prosecuting attorney, punishing us for not living up to his impossible standards. It also seems the Old Testament God is all about vengeance, not at all like the merciful God of the New Testament.

Of course that perception is false. Yes, there are passages in the Old Testament revealing God's wrath and warnings of terrible consequences for our disobedience but there're also passages revealing God's love for the world through his people, the Children of Israel.

Today's reading, taken from the prophet Isaiah is one of these passages.

Ho, (pay attention!) everyone who thirst.
Come to waters;
And you have no money,
Come buy, eat! (Isaiah55:1)

This particular passage was written for the Jews when they were living in exile fifty years after the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. We can't imagine the devastating effects this had on them. Before, they could tell themselves they were the fortunate few, singled out to be the Chosen People. God's covenant with Abraham guaranteed his descendents would be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. Later, God' covenant with King David guaranteed his house would rule forever. But now, after the Babylonians left Jerusalem and their identity in ruins, everything they knew and loved was gone forever, or so they thought.

In their misery they wondered “Who are we?” and “Is our God really God?” Was everything they were taught from childhood a fantasy? Was this the end of them, destined to be strangers in a strange land?

One of these unfortunate Jewish exiles summed up the peoples 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 your songs of Zion!”
How can we sing the Lord song
in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)

Exile and abandonment is one of the consistent biblical themes and over the generations God’s people had to struggle with being strangers in a strange land, alienated and far away from home because of making wrong choices, or ironically the right choices.

For example, The Babylonian exile was definitely the result of bad choices. Early and often God raised up numerous prophets to speak the truth but no one who mattered ever listened. The Kings, their high officials, even the priests in the temple rejected these prophets because they were being told what they didn’t want to hear. They were going in the wrong direction. They lost their sense of purpose. They became no different than their pagan neighbors. As a result, they lost everything God gave them.

Ironically, exile and abandonment also came to those obedient prophets who bravely spoke truth to power. They’d declare in the marketplace and at the gates of the Temple, “Thus saith the Lord...” These prophets were mocked and in Jeremiah’s case, thrown into prison. Did these righteous exiles at least have the satisfaction of knowing they did the right thing for God? You have to wonder.

Today, we’re faced with a variation on the same theme. To one degree or another, we live in exile too because we are the sons and daughters of Adam, exiled from the Garden of Eden, longing to be invited back home to Paradise. Adam and Eve are stand-ins for you and me. Like them, we eat the forbidden fruit, if only because we’re told not to. And like them, we must live with the consequences

So, Isaiah spoke not only to the prophets exiled in ancient Babylon but also to us, exiled in modern-day Babylon. At the same time Isaiah also comes proclaiming good news.

Ho, everyone who thirsts;
Come to the waters;
You may have no money,

But come, buy, eat!
Come buy milk and wine without price.
Why do you spend her money for that which is not bread and your labor
for that which does not satisfy?

Imagine going to Wegmans or Grauls and the manager comes to tell you, "Fill up your cart and another one too! 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 checkout, so hurry up, come and get it!"

It sounds too good to be true, and it is, 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 does feed your soul and not just for a short time but for all time. God offers spiritual food that satisfies the hungry heart and quenches the deepest thirst.

Unfortunately, a lot of times we settled on junk food and aim for things that never really satisfy. Why? Because we've gotten use to it.

Unlike the 400 years of slavery in Egypt, the fifty year exile in Babylon was both comfortable and prosperous. Even though they were captives, they were encouraged to participate in the "Babylonian Dream." They could buy and sell property, make their fortunes and enjoy the good life. Since most of them we're from the upper classes in Jerusalem, they already knew how to make a buck.

But apparently, they enjoyed their prosperity too much because when they were finally told, "you can go home now," most of them chose to stay. Their captivity continued indefinitely but this time it wasn't against their will.

Sadly they decided not to return to Jerusalem. They abdicated their heritage as Abraham's descendants who were given the Promised Land so they could be that city on the hill and a light to all nations of the earth.

But not all of them stayed. A remnant return to pick up where their forefathers left off and this time they were determined to get right. They embraced their identity as God's chosen people. They rebuilt the temple and gathered together in the local synagogues to keep the covenant alive.

Listen again to Isaiah's prophecy to that remnant who would soon return to Jerusalem:
See, you shall call nations that
You do not know
And nations that do not know
Shall run to you
Because of the Lord your god,
The holy God of Israel,

For he has glorify you. (Isaiah 55:5)

When you read the Old Testament, especially the books of the prophets, it becomes clear that the majority of God's people either ignored or misunderstood that they were chosen not for privilege but for service.

It's easy for us today to fall into the same trap.

Last week I mentioned the televangelists preach a gospel of prosperity. If you trust in God you'll be blessed with material wealth and the good life. God wants you to have it all. When you think about it, that sounds really crass. But that's what we human beings usually do. We take what God gives us and turn it into something that God would never recognize.

Isaiah invites us to God's supermarket to take what we need for the journey. God gives us the gift of hope and the ability to love and care for people, especially people not of our own tribe. God gives us opportunities to experience the satisfaction of making an impact by increasing the quality of someone's life in this world.

That's really what Jesus meant when he said, "be in the world but not of it." Be a giver and the doer not a taker and the faker. By that I mean, saying you're Christian but not taking up your cross, your purpose in life, to love and serve when the opportunity arises.

Let's be clear, we are exiles, far from home, far from where we should be. Being in the world, we're strangers in Babylon, longing for that inner peace and purpose promising to complete our lives. But peace only comes when we take up our crosses instead of indulging our appetites that come from living in Babylon.

If there was ever a stranger in a strange land it was Jesus. He didn't belong here but he chose to live here of his own free will. Every day he was tempted to be contaminated by the Babylonian Dream but he always resisted, for our sakes. He remained pure and innocent to the last so he could finally fulfill his purpose to be the Lamb of God takes away the sins of world.

What should our response be? The Bible makes clear, accept your God-given purpose to become like Jesus. Enter into the struggle to become Christ-like. Place your trust in Christ and ask for his help to lead a holy life, a life not influenced by the temptations of Babylon but a life committed to pleasing God through Christ our Lord.

You'll still be a stranger in a strange land but by embracing this identity you learn who you really are, a child of God created in the image of God and redeemed by Christ himself.