

Exile on Main Street

^{NRS} Isa 55:1 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.³ Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.⁴ See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.⁵ See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;⁷ let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Things were not going well for the Jews. The setting for this text is what's called the Babylonian exile. Do you remember the good ol' Babylonian exile from Sunday school? Of course you do. In the 8th century before Christ the Assyrians had wiped out the Jews in the Northern kingdom, the kingdom called Israel. But, lest their cousins in the South get too smug, the Babylonians came romping through in the late 7th and early 6th centuries laying waste to Jerusalem, destroying the temple, and actually carting off the Jews, man, woman, and child- bringing them back to Babylon. It was hard enough to lose the temple, the place where God was supposed to dwell. Worse was being torn away from their homes and the land they believed God had given to them. No, things were not going well for the Jews at all.

Anyone know days like this? OK, maybe not as dramatically as this Babylonian exile perhaps- but don't we know what it is to have all these plans and thoughts about

how life is going to go, only to see them melt away like sand castles at high tide? You bet. For some of us, our plans, our dreams get eaten away bit by bit. For others of us it can happen all at once, can't it- you wake up and suddenly everything has changed in your life. But every single one of us here knows what it is to start a day, a week, or a year out with high hopes and then watch everything turn sideways.

Well, this is where we find the Jews this morning. We're in Chapter 55- the very last chapter of what scholars call Deutero-Isaiah, or Second Isaiah. Scholars tell us the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, creatively called First Isaiah, belong together and were probably written about 700 years before Christ lived. And chapters 40-55, Second Isaiah, were written about 300 years later, when the Jews found themselves living exile in Babylon.

So, torn away from their homes, dazzled by the delights of the world class city around them, the Jews knew what it was to be strangers in a strange land- to be homeless. Now, every normal poet during this time did the sensible thing of trying to remind the Jews how great home is, and to warn them about how bad Babylon is. Jeremiah did this. Ezekiel certainly did this. The psalmist in Psalm 137 is so caught up in remembering Jerusalem he writes: "There by the waters of Babylon, there we sat and there we wept for Jerusalem."

This makes sense- and this is what we'd expect out of Isaiah here. But it's not what we get. Did you hear the first line of this chapter? It's crazy. He's not telling them how bad they have it in Babylon. He tells them just the opposite: *Ho, everyone who*

thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Everyone who thirsts, Isaiah cries out- come! There's water for everybody. This is definitely an image that's lost on people like us- people with taps with clean, running water in our own homes. This is a desert culture. This is a town hall meeting down in Klamath Falls with the Salmon guys and the farmers all in one room. Isaiah is telling them- hey, there's enough for everybody here. Stop fighting!

And food? Come and buy food- milk and wine. As much as you want. What? No money? No credit? No problem! It's free. You're surrounded by grace and it's all free. Folks, we don't always have to go running to the New Testament when we want Gospel- free, abundant grace is right here. Even in exile- even when the day and the month has gone absolutely south of the border- even here, Isaiah says, God is with us.

And there is warning- or lament at least. But it's not about how bad Babylon is- stirring the Jews up to fight a kind of 7th century culture war against their captors. No, the warning, the lament is turned against us. It's turned against us. In the midst of this absolute abundance Isaiah sees the people of God wasting their precious time and energy on thoughts and habits that doing a thing to help them. He asks them: *Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"*

And we do this, don't we? Especially on bad days. When we begin to sense things are not going to work out- when we begin to feel things slipping away from us- we start getting down on ourselves, on those around us- heck, I've even been mad at traffic lights. Is there anything more of a waste of time than to be hacked off at a traffic light that's just going to change when it's going to change, whether I'm mad or not?

Isaiah has a secret for us. Are you ready? Isaiah knows that physical exile, the lostness you and I experience as a result of all the lousy things that happen to us now and again- this is not nearly so important as spiritual exile, the lostness we experience when we begin to forget who we are, whose we are, and we forget what it is that really feeds us. Isaiah knows that physical exile is not nearly as destructive as spiritual exile.

And it's true. You know- when you know who you are, when you know what feeds you, when your spirit is settled deep within you; it almost (almost!) doesn't matter how much the world dishes out as us. We can absorb it- and roll with the punches more or less. But when we're confused about who we are, when we're hungry but unsure about what really feeds us, when our soul is in turmoil; then, it doesn't matter how great everything may appear to be in our lives- we aren't able to live into any of it. No matter how great things are- we find ourselves restless.

Isaiah knows this. He knows that even if the Jews were delivered physically that very minute, if they lost their sense of who they and whose they are- what's the point? For no matter where the Jews ended up physically- if they lived in exile from their hearts, their souls, what truly sustains them, if they find themselves in spiritual exile and cut off from themselves, why then they'd be strangers whether in Babylon or downtown Jerusalem. To borrow a line from the Rolling Stones- they'd be strangers, exiles, even on their very own Main Street.

Friends I tell you what- I don't know of any scripture in all the Bible that is more descriptive of us and our situation. We are Isaiah's community, you and I. We are also surrounded with the dazzling delights of Babylon all around us- my phone takes pictures, plays music, it even takes video if I wanted it to. Oh, and you can talk on it, too. I don't even know how to use half of the features on it. We have everything we need, more even- but we spend a lot of time so utterly confused about who it is we really are, down deep, and confused about what it is that truly feeds us and sustains our soul. And in our confusion we spend our time and energy on all kinds of things that aren't bread and sustaining- everything from cursing traffic lights to criticizing ourselves and the people we care about most, and whining about every little thing that doesn't go just right.

You all know that expression that you shouldn't point your finger at anyone, because at least three of them are pointing back at you? Well, this expression is especially true this morning when I think about me preaching about whining. I think it's fair to say while I may not have raised whining to the level of an art form- whining is something I do quite a bit. It's even, to be more honest than I'd like to be- something I enjoy, something I find comforting.

Last week, many of you know I went out of town. Well, I took off Wednesday on the red eye through Seattle, through Washington DC, eventually ending up, very much red eyed in Richmond, VA. I serve on the board of the Presbyterian Outlook, basically a newspaper of the Presbyterian church. The conversations and emails filling up my in box in the weeks prior to this meeting let me know this probably wasn't going to be the most fun meeting we would ever have- we were looking at deep structural challenges that were

effecting the staff. Not easy stuff. Before I left, I hit a committee on ministry meeting- COM is kind of the part of Presbytery that examines, receives, cares for, and disciplines pastors. We're kind of like good cop, bad cop, all rolled into one. That had not been a particularly soothing meeting.

So I was basically whiny. I was whiny about how much I had bitten off. Whiny about the silly personalities getting in such a huff over what didn't seem like amazingly important issues to me. Whiny about my sleep being interrupted by two, noisy airports.

So I was whiny when I went to Richmond- but not have as whiny as when I left. As I shared with many of you, storms hit Chicago and Boston on Friday, the day I was traveling back. The weather was great in Richmond, DC, and Portland- but our plane taking us East-West was coming in from Chicago. It was basically delayed all day. I was supposed to get home to Portland early in the evening in Friday- we got into Seattle a little after 2 in the morning. I then got to wake up a few hours later to get on an early flight to Portland.

I was now much more tired, and, you guessed it- even more whiny.

To be absolutely honest- the auction on Saturday night was about the last place I wanted to be. After doing church stuff all week and all weekend- believe me the Outlook board meeting is like one massive Session meeting extended over the period of a few days, about the last place I wanted to be last Sunday was in the sanctuary.

But you know what I've realized in the last few days? For all my whining, all of my sniveling- the board meeting turned out to be fantastic. We went in as a conflicted board and staff- and came out with a great plan to move forward and the feeling we were on a team. And the auction. The auction was one of the most fun nights I've had in a

long, long time. I had no idea a pie in the face could be THAT funny. (Of course, maybe it's the fact it was a pie in *Scott's* face.) And Sunday- obviously I was not at my best on Sunday. But you know what- Philip was. Kris was. The choir was. Turns out they're all pulling practical jokes on each other before church even gets going. And you were. You were gracious and kind and forgiving.

I have no idea how much good food I missed- gorging myself on my own complaints, and wasting all that work and effort whining about things that really weren't that big of a deal.

You know it's Lent- amazingly we've just got a few more weeks left. Now, I don't know if you've given something up for Lent. But instead of the usual things, things in the sex, drugs, rock-and roll, and chocolate categories- maybe this week, just for a week, you might consider giving up the habits, the thoughts, the acts you know aren't really sustaining you, but just leave you feeling cheap and more hungry than before. Maybe it's whining, like it is for me- how about a week without complaining. Can you imagine that? Our office staff wouldn't know what to do if I tried that one on for size. Melis wouldn't know what to do- she'd probably call the doctor. Maybe for you it's criticism. What it would it be like to go a week without criticizing anyone, including yourself? Or maybe it's just to let go of things that aren't that important- not getting to angry and fighting so hard over things that really don't matter that much in the big scheme of things.

If you decide to give something like whining or criticism up this week- give it up not to go without, not to suffer- but just to create some room in your life for something

better. For overflowing water- living water. For wine and milk without price. For adjusting to life even when things aren't going your way- maybe learning to thankful what is, rather than only pining for what isn't.

I'll leave you with a poem by Billy Collins- former poet laureate of the United States. For a poet laureate, Collins is one of the funniest people I've ever heard- certainly the funniest poet. This poem, "Consolation", he wrote when he and his wife were scheduled to go to Italy for three months and at the last minute, were not able to travel. Three months, and then nothing. I can't even imagine the frustration:

"Consolation"

How agreeable it is not to be touring Italy this summer,
wandering her cities and ascending her torrid hilltowns.
How much better to cruise these local, familiar streets,
fully grasping the meaning of every roadsign and billboard
and all the sudden hand gestures of my compatriots.

There are no abbeys here, no crumbling frescoes or famous
domes and there is no need to memorize a succession
of kings or tour the dripping corners of a dungeon.
No need to stand around a sarcophagus, see Napoleon's
little bed on Elba, or view the bones of a saint under glass.

How much better to command the simple precinct of home
than be dwarfed by pillar, arch, and basilica.
Why hide my head in phrase books and wrinkled maps?
Why feed scenery into a hungry, one-eyes camera
eager to eat the world one monument at a time?

Instead of slouching in a café ignorant of the word for ice,
I will head down to the coffee shop and visit the waitress
known as Dot. I will slide into the flow of the morning
paper, all language barriers down,
rivers of idiom running freely, eggs over easy on the way.

And after breakfast, I will not have to find someone
willing to photograph me with my arm around the owner.

I will not puzzle over the bill or record in a journal
what I had to eat and how the sun came in the window.
It is enough to climb back into the car

as if it were the great car of English itself
and sounding my loud vernacular horn, speed off
down a road that will never lead to Rome, not even Bologna.

Friends, for all the small things that will go right this week, for the pies in the face, the
tiny kindnesses we will show one another, for the hundred 'Dots' in the hundred coffee
shops we will meet this week- let us be thankful. Let us be thankful. **Amen.**