

East Hartford
29 Ord 2013

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Jer 31:27-34, Psa 121, Lk 18:1-8

Promise and Persistence

If we look at the history of this nation, the outstanding event, that has shaped this country was the Revolutionary War and the subsequent writing of our Constitution. If we look at the history of Israel, we find two such formative events. One the Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, and two, the Exile into Babylon and subsequent restoration to the land of Israel, some 75 years, some three generations later.

While exile was long and literal for Israel, exile has become a metaphor for those times in our own lives when we find ourselves living as strangers in a strange land, compelled to live in that strange land when life's circumstances have swirled far beyond our abilities to manage let alone control.

Parenthood periodically sends us into strange lands, just ask those among us who currently are raising teenagers. I've just spent a few days with our daughter, son in law and their infant son. There are no questions about who is in charge - when Lincoln Robert speaks, the family listens and his every need is immediately attended to by his loving parents, dotting grandparents, as well as any number of aunts and uncles waiting in the wings, eager, ready to be of service. All are living as strangers in a strange land, the difference of course, is that our strange land is one born out of love, full of hope, and dedicated to the care of those most vulnerable in the family neighborhood.

Other life circumstances create times of exile for us - those new seasons that come to various us at various times; new jobs, retirement, marriage, parenthood. Relocation. All those times of loss; divorce or widowhood, the death of a parent or child. Incarceration, or release. Physical or mental illness. Addiction and recovery. Strange times, living in strange lands - times of exile that are very real even if we are not forcibly marched into Babylon by a conquering army.

Now while I do not want to equate our current situational exiles with the gravity of Israel's defeat, destruction and forced deportation, I do believe that God's promise to Jeremiah is also God's promise to us.

Jeremiah is popularly known as the prophet of doom and gloom, but in today's lesson, God speaks consolation to the people in exile. God promises to restore the fortunes of Judah and Israel. ... God's promise booms forth, "You shall be my people, I will be your God. . . . your children shall come back to their own country. . .

Twice in today's lesson we hear, "the days are surely coming when God will replant, restock, and replenish Israel and Judah. The days are surely coming when God will make a new covenant. I will put my law within them and inscribe it on their hearts, and I will be their God and they will be my people. They shall all know me from the least to the greatest, because I will forgive and I will not even remember their sin." Just as the new mother forgets the pain of her labor, God will forget our sin.

God promises to put the word so deeply within us, that we will know God with that same deep intimate faithful love that binds one spouse to another for life.

I read this again and again, and I felt the questions rising within my heart. I can almost hear myself saying, "Excuse me for even asking but, - Holy God, Gracious, beloved holy God, are you nuts? Have you lost your holy mind? God, you know that 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again all the while expecting different results.'

God, are you doing the same thing over again, expecting different results? What makes you even suspect that placing your word in our hearts might change our ability to love? What makes you think that we will so trust you that we will wage peace instead of war? That we will better care for the most vulnerable with tenderness and generosity?

When you made this new covenant, did you really think that over the ensuing centuries people would be different, that we would surrender our foolish ways? That we would forsake idolatry? That we would faithfully love you with all our hearts minds souls, strength? That we would so truly love our neighbors as ourselves, that hunger and war would be no more? That we might so love you and your creation that we would lovingly care for it, rather than rape and poison the earth?

Did you really think such things, O God? I wondered. I pondered. The questions would neither leave, nor give me peace. I contemplated God's apparent insanity.

Or? Or? Am I just maybe, just possibly, missing the point altogether?

It's not about us. It's about God.

"This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" and the house of First Church, and the house of the followers of Moses, and the house of the followers of Mohammed, "says the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." Thus says the Lord.

Friends, God is still making a new covenant, not a new and improved edition of human beings. This is God's idea and God is still making it happen. We shall all know God, from the least to the greatest among us, for God not only forgives us, but God puts all our sins down then forgets where they lie. You have done that haven't you; put something down, then forgotten where you left it?

"I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." Thus says the Lord. That is the new covenant. That, my friends is the promise, the sacred promise of God. That is the promise we can take into all the times of exile in our lives. That is the promise upon which we can walk - and in those times when we have no strength for walking, that is the promise, the covenant of the One who will persist, the one who will carry us through our forevers. Promise and Persistence.