

Isaiah 55:10-13 Pastor Bill Uetricht 7/12/20 6 Pentecost

I think most of you would agree that we are living in wearisome days. We start to think that there is a sign of the proverbial “light at the end of the tunnel,” and then it feels like the light is that of an on-coming train. These are days when hope seems distant, at least from an initial glance.

I suspect that the author of Second Isaiah, the section of Isaiah out of which our first reading comes, could relate to our times. He is addressing a community that had been devastated by the Babylonians through a brutal invasion and war. This community’s holy city and their sacred temple had been flattened. And perhaps worst of all, some of their brightest and best had been sent off into exile. Like every oppressive regime throughout history and every destructive political leadership team, the Babylonians didn’t last forever. They gave way to another regime, a gentler power, the Persians. The result of this new governing regime was an invitation to the exiles to come home, to get back to Jerusalem.

Well, some came back, and many didn’t. And those who did come back returned to a devastated town. Home wasn’t what they thought it was going to be.

Many of you can relate to this, I am sure. One of our staff members recently told me about her visit to the beach here in West Michigan where she spent a great deal of time in her growing up years. The beach wasn’t anything like what she remembered. What a deep disappointment! And that was just a beach. What if your whole town were destroyed? What if the religious infrastructure that you visited and that framed your whole life were no longer there? What if the people who were the support structure for everything you did were absent? What if you thought that coming home was like the light of an on-coming train?

This is the data, the situation on the ground, that the prophet must address. His task is to speak hope to a people for whom hope seems lost. My wife, after speaking to her sister the other day and urging her and her family not to visit us this summer, said to me: “I’m just tired of being sad.” It seems these days that we experience one loss after another. And it’s hard to see the end of the sadness. Hope feels lost. It’s to people like us that Second Isaiah speaks.

This prophet is a master of articulating hope. “Comfort, O comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” These words from an earlier part of Second Isaiah represent prophetic imagination, as Walter Brueggemann calls it. This is an imagination that confronts the data, is honest about it, but says that the data is not the final word, says that what we are seeing and experiencing is not the only, nor the ultimate, truth about life.

Hope is matter of resistant resilience. Hope trusts a word that is counter to the words of the world, the words of the oppressive forces in our lives, the words of the present situation. Hope trusts something more than the data.

For Second Isaiah, that something is discovered in what he calls the word of the Lord, which is not the Bible, but rather the action and promises of God. That word, he says, is reliable, just as rain and snow are reliable. “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty.”

The word of God, the promise of God is larger than the data. That promise invites exiles “to go out in joy, and be led back in peace.” And according to the poetry of Isaiah, creation itself will join in the joy of

the exiles. The mountains shall burst out in song. The trees of the fields shall clap their hands. Instead of the prickly thorn, the cypress tree will appear. Instead of the ugly brier shall come up the more beautiful myrtle. Creation will know and embody the promise of God.

On Tuesday, a group of us watched a marvelous sermon from the New York Times columnist David Brooks. In the starkly empty Washington cathedral, Brooks spoke of the beauty in the storm. He rightfully identified that we are living in the midst of a very stormy time. The pandemic is challenging almost everything we have known and experienced, revealing to us great disparities in our land in health care and wealth. Our streets have been filled with violence, sometimes perpetrated by folks who are in charge. Racism is clearly not a thing of the past. We all seem so fragmented, divided from one another, calling each other names, going our little narcissistic ways. The data is not good.

Brooks in the sermon pointed out that the time of Jesus was no idyllic time either. It was a chaotic, violent, fragmented time, too. The data of despair was omni-present. But Jesus stood tall. He came announcing a different reality. He came embodying a whole new way of living. That different reality, that whole new way, he called the kingdom of God. It represented/represents something very different from the ways of the Romans, the ways of the crabby religious leaders, the ways of self-preoccupied political leaders, the ways of one party and faction after another. The ways of the world are often not the ways of God. The ways of God, the kingdom of God are often rejected and resisted, not simply by the oppressive political powers but also by those who speak so readily and easily of religion, using it for their own purposes.

But Jesus stood tall. Jesus trusted something other than the data he could see with his eyes. He trusted something other than the

oppression that the Romans were imposing on people. He trusted the promise and the word of God. He was convinced that God is like a farmer who sows seed everywhere, even in those places that any right-minded farmer would not sow seed. For him, God sows seed on rocky ground and thorny ground, and yes, on good soil. God, in other words, is extravagant in his sowing the word, the promise of love, grace, and compassion.

Love, grace, and compassion are the signs of hope in our midst. They are what Brooks says is the beauty in the storm. Oh, the sadness is real. The losses are real. The oppression is real. They are a part of the real data in front of our faces. But people of hope are resilient. People of hope resist the forces that tear the joy out of life. People of hope look to something larger than the obvious data. And when they do so, such beauty emerges, even if that beauty starts in a small way through something as insignificant as a seed.

Some of you might recall the story of Vedran Smailovic, the cellist of Sarajevo. During the Bosnian civil war in the 1990s and after twenty-two people were killed in downtown Sarajevo while they were waiting for food, Smailovic played his cello for 22 days in the midst of a bombed-out downtown square. He played for funerals and for anyone who would listen, which eventually became the world. He, a small insignificant figure in light of the larger brutal civil war, often played during the threat of sniper fire. Smailovic knew something other than the data of destruction. He resisted that data. He made music. He brought beauty in the midst of the storm. He planted seeds of hope on rocky ground.

That's what our God does. The beauty often evades us these days. But it's there, for the "word that goes out from the mouth of God shall not return to God empty."

