

“Remembering Our Way out of Babylon”

Text: Isaiah 40:21-31

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Atlanta, GA

February 8, 2009

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Isaiah 40:21a

Do the verses that we just heard from Isaiah leave you wanting to stand and cheer for God? The prophet's introduction of God sounds a lot like an enthusiastic sportscaster—if this was college basketball it would be Dick Vitale. Isaiah walks onto the scene like Michael Buffer in a boxing ring—“for the thousands in attendance and the millions watching around the world”, and the dramatic portrayal begins. In this corner the God of the universe, the one who sits above the earth, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, whose might and majesty reduce human rulers to grasshoppers. Isaiah describes the creator God as incomparable, immovable, unmatched, and unailing. Here is a God in whom we can trust, the one who created and sustains all that exists, who is so sovereign as to need no consultants or advisors. Only God could do this. Here is a God whose promises are sure and whose reign is secure.

Which is precisely what makes the context of these words so puzzling. Isaiah is writing to a people held captive in the land of Babylon. His dramatic language and imagery of God's supreme power fly in the face of the experiences of his audience. Exiled, deported, displaced, forced to live as refugees in a foreign land. The original hearers of these stirring lyrics were prisoners, living under the absolute dominion of the Babylonian Empire. The prophet Isaiah wrote and spoke to his people during a time of almost unbearable grief and overpowering despair. The familiar, haunting words of Psalm 137 paint the picture well: “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps... how could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:1-2, 4).

And into the silence of harps hung out of hopelessness, Isaiah's prophetic words ring out, filling the void with rhetorical questions that call the people back to their memory of God.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? (Well, of course you have!)

Has it not been told you from the beginning? (Yes, of course it was!)

Isaiah's poetic pronouncement is meant to wake the people from the numbness of exile. The questions are reprimands. Of course you remember God, the one who created the world, who continues tirelessly the work of creation. Who does not slumber or sleep. You remember the one!

To those who had been captive in Babylon for decades, whose memory of Jerusalem had grown dim and whose children had never seen the holy city, Isaiah is uncompromising in his defense of the Holy One of Israel. He repeats the complaints of the people: “my way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God.” They had every reason to believe it was true. The Babylonian gods seemed much more powerful, and their captors certainly had more sway over them than the outdated God of their ancestors. The Israelites were suffering from theological amnesia. To provoke their memory, the prophet goes back to creation itself, praising the singularity of God.

But Isaiah’s words are much more than eloquent theology. To a people in Exile, they are also pastoral wisdom and determined defiance. The chapter from which we read begins with these words: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term” (Isaiah 40:1). Exile is coming to an end. The people must begin to imagine their lives outside of Babylon, an act of courage that begins in memory. Remembering God’s faithfulness in the past, they can step into future. But first they must remember.

The Israelites in Babylon were surrounded by a religious, economic, and political system that mocked the Holy One of Israel. They were tempted to abandon hope and faith. They were living in a culture completely unlike their own; perhaps they were beginning to believe concession was best. Maybe they had started to attend services at the local Babylonian temple. Maybe they had contemplated bowing down to the King and integrating themselves fully into the life of the Babylonian culture. To these temptations and desires, the prophet Isaiah responds with firm resolve and pastoral sensitivity. Remember who you are, he urges the people, remember that your God rules over the entire world. Remember that you have been called to stand apart and live differently than those who surround you.

Twenty years ago, Duke University theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon wrote a book titled, “Resident Aliens.” In it they described how, in the middle of the 20th Century, something dramatically changed in American Christianity. The era of Christian dominance ended. We could no longer assume a shared set of stories or a common faith. Christians, they argued, now live as resident aliens in American culture. We share something in common with the Israelites, who had to find a way to keep faith and hope alive in the midst of oppression in Egypt and captivity in Babylon. To do this, they told stories, they remembered together God’s past faithfulness, and these stories gave them strength to hold fast and firm. The authors conclude, “story is the fundamental (human) means of talking about and listening to God.”ⁱ

But are these stories any match for the pain and isolation of exile?

This week, a friend sent me an article about the far-reaching implications of the global economic recession. The author explains that, while the financial and material concerns are both valid and even terrifying, she is most concerned about the loss of social capital in our society. She describes her own desire, in these tough times, “to hunker down, to become more self-sufficient, even to withdraw.”ⁱⁱ In difficult times we are more prone to

cocoon, and find ourselves in a kind of social recession. It is no coincidence that forgetfulness and isolation are hallmarks of exile.

What is the role of the community of faith in these times of exile? Are we not the designated storytellers? Called to tell the stories that weave the fabric of community back together where it has been torn. To tell the stories that call to memory experiences of hope and possibility. To a community in exile, Isaiah insisted that the story be told. Perhaps we should do the same.

When I was a senior in college, I served one semester as a chaplain intern at Duke University Hospital. My only responsibility was to shadow the chaplain during the late-night hours each Thursday. One Thursday, I arrived to find the chaplain standing in the office doorway, coat on and bag in her hand—a family emergency, she would be back as soon as she could. In the meantime, here's the pager. You'll know what to do. Thirty relatively quiet minutes later, the pager lit up. I made the call. A man had just died and the family was asking for a chaplain. After deciding that it wouldn't work to say I had the wrong number, I gathered my strength and walked toward the elevator. I remember the feeling of fear and inadequacy that overwhelmed me. What would I say to these family members who had just lost a father, a husband, a grandfather? What were the magic words that they needed to hear? What could I do to comfort them? I arrived outside the intensive care unit and found six family members gathered. After introducing myself, I froze. What to say next? The man standing next to me said, "he was a good man and a great father. He worked so hard but always had time for us. Another family member chimed in with a story about a family vacation: "Do you remember when", and the stories kept coming. Two hours later, the family thanked me for coming. As I walked out of the waiting room, I promised to myself that I would never forget the power of stories to recreate, comfort, and give hope—even in the most difficult of times.

It would be easy for people of faith in our day to conclude that the creator God is irrelevant in a contemporary system that seems to be set in stone. Exiled in our own time, we may begin to believe that concession is best. Perhaps it is time to integrate ourselves fully into the dominant culture. But Isaiah stops us in our tracks. We have a story to tell, and we must raise our voices to tell it.

One of the most useful and important projects I know about in this era of social recession is Story Corps, a traveling sound-booth that allows people to record conversations and interviews with loved ones and archives them. The recordings are often breathtaking in depth and beauty.

My favorite is a 2005 recording with Studs Terkel, age 93, which is titled "what has happened to the human voice?" Terkel describes being in the Atlanta airport and riding the train from one concourse to another. The train full of people, no one speaking, all focused on their baggage or children or cell phones. Then a voice comes over the loudspeaker above. Terkel explains that this voice used to be a human voice, but now talks like a machine. Just as the train is about to depart, a young couple pushes the doors open and enters the train. Without missing a beat, the mechanical voice chimes in, "Because of late entry, we are delayed thirty seconds." Terkel describes the looks

they received from the crowd, as if, he says, they had committed mass murder. Never a fan of silence, Terkel shouts out in the train, “George Orwell, your time has come and gone,” expecting laughter or response of some type. Dead silence, everyone looking at Studs Terkel and the delinquent couple. Finally, Terkel turns to a baby lying in a stroller. “Sir or Madam,” he asks, “what is your opinion of the human species?” The baby giggles. “Thank God,” he concludes, “the sound of a human voice.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you from the beginning?

If the answer is yes, then you must speak. You must tell your story from memory.

In times of exile, when hope seems far away and faith is impossible to find, we rely on the memory of God’s presence in our lives. We recall those moments of clarity and beauty, and we give thanks to God for them. We rely on others in the community of faith whose vision is clearer and whose memory is longer than ours. We remember God’s track record of faithfulness in the past that extends beyond the reach of our personal memory and is attested to in the words of scripture and the traditions of the church. We remember, and we tell our common stories.

Because if we do not; if we do not proclaim how God has come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to show us how to be human and how to live out the will of God, if the church forgets to remember to tell the stories of our faith, if you and I fail to repeat them to the next generation, then an indispensable voice of hope and love will be silenced; our harps hung on willows of forgetfulness.

But we have heard. We have experienced the grace of God in our lives. Because of this, weary and discouraged though we may be, we raise our voices. Remember when... We remember our way out of Babylon and into the future where God is already waiting.

As you speak, you may find your strength renewed and as if you are being carried on eagle’s wings. You may run without fatigue and walk without exhaustion. You may be recreated by the Creator of all new life.

Maybe you remember the old hymn, “I Love to Tell the Story”. The refrain was, “I love to tell the story, ‘twill be my theme in glory, to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.” So clear your throats. The time has come. It is our turn, to tell the old, old story that renews our exiled souls and remakes our broken world.

ⁱ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, Abingdon Press, 1989, pp. 54-55.

ⁱⁱ Heidi Husted Armstrong, “A Case of *Koinonitis*?” in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 191.4, February 9, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ This story can be found at <http://www.storycorps.net/listen/stories/studs-terkel>