

I.

These words from Isaiah are deeply profound words of hope to the children of Israel. They are a big pot of hearty stew on a bitter cold day; stew overflowing its pot – soul nourishment, spoon-fed to a broken, worn out people. In this passage God is bold and definitive with abundant promises of nurture, safety, peace, and justice; words that inspire a confidence that our God is in charge and we are going to be OK. God is crouching down amongst a people bent over by abuse and guilt, lifting them up, straightening their backs, speaking hope and life into them and setting their vision forward towards God’s holy mountain.

What has happened to Israel that these words are so important? What is going on that has them so broken? The book of Isaiah speaks of the experience of Israel forced into exile by the Babylonians and then, after many years, their return home. The exile was devastating and traumatic for the community. After multiple rounds of deportations to Babylon, Israel finally watched as Jerusalem and their beloved temple were destroyed. The book of Isaiah gives us a glimpse into the psyche of Israel as they grapple with their identity and their relationship with God. How did this happen? Where is God? What did we do? These are questions we often ask when we find ourselves faced with the reality that suffering and injustice is still part of our world. It is from this place that the community gathers and prays for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done here on earth. Within Babylon, Israel is struggling to come to grips with how their own sin, their own infidelity to God, their breaking of the covenant, contributed to this awful

experience. The thing that kept Israel going, kept them in communication with God even in their despair, were their memories of Jerusalem in its glory, memories of God leading the people from slavery in Egypt and the covenant God made with their ancestors, and a hope for a return to this right relationship with God. After nearly 60 years in exile, they are allowed to go home to Judah and it is in this time, back in the ruins of their holy city, that our text speaks.

II.

The delivery from Babylon was glorious. Isaiah says in chapter 40, “Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God,” and “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom.” This is what Israel longed for— God with arms wrapped around them, leading them home. These are the images that give hope – bright images of homecoming that stand in contrast to images of death, like Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones or the images we see so often in the news. Yet, the excitement of return gives way to a hard reality. Jerusalem is a very different place. There is division amongst the people, between those who are returning and those who were left behind in the conquered Jerusalem. The glory that was Solomon’s Temple is a pile of rubble; the city that was once full of wealth is now reduced to ash. Home is not what it use to be... and then... there are the memories, terrible corporate nightmares of what they had been through.

In December 2011, President Obama began the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq. It was a glorious homecoming for so many families. Over the past decade of war, images of troops returning home circulated the Internet from time to time and appeared on the front page of the newspaper. They are powerful images and provoke complex emotions, even tears. Men and women in uniform, finally free of the fear of

constant violence, now gathered up in the arms of loved ones. When I see those images, I can't help but wonder what those soldiers experienced, what they are carrying. I expect for so many it was the memories of home and the hope and longing for the return, longing for that moment captured in those front page pictures, that kept them moving on in the darkest times. The safe return home seems to inspire a sense that everything is going to be OK. Yet, for so many US veterans, that excitement of home is far too short lived and it gives way to hard reality, home may be a different place, or at least things may seem different. The adjustment back to civilian life is not proving easy for many veterans. It's incredibly difficult to find jobs and for many the months of stress, violence, and separation from family have taken a huge toll. Much of the difficulty is attributed to the traumatic affects of the war experience— post-traumatic stress. Many of those suffering from post-traumatic stress often relive those events over and over in nightmares every time they try to sleep. According to a VA psychologist, in nightmares they are forced back into the traumatic event and experience the very same emotion as the moment the event occurred.

The story of the exile and the hard return home is lived out all around us; sometimes in our faces and sometimes in quiet anguish, forced out of sight. The overwhelming feeling we get when we begin to try to take in the amount and variety of injustice present today is part of this. When we hear the stories of other's pain, when we share our own stories, when we grapple with the severity of environmental destruction, global poverty, the seemingly infinitely growing gap between the wealthy and those struggling to get by, the violence in our own nation, in our schools, in the streets of our city, we might find ourselves shutting down from injustice overload, "How can we live in this place?" Even though the people of Israel are back home in Jerusalem, they are still

grappling with the affects of their experience, they have brought their brokenness home, they wrestle with the corporate nightmare of what they had been through and a fear that God had turned on them. Isaiah conjures up language that Israel used in exile. “After all of this, will you restrain yourself O Lord? Or will you keep silent and punish us so severely?” God’s response here in the beginning of chapter 65 is also reminiscent of the exile. God reminds them that they are the rebellious ones who turned from God to idols: “I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here I am, here I am,’ to a nation that did not call on my name, I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people.” In their continued, now domestic despair, God reminds them, just as when they were in captivity, that God has been with them all along, not silent, but saying, “Here I am, here I am.” God goes further still—in our text, God’s language does not remain in the place of the exile, rather it moves in a radical direction, breaks the narrative of despair and places something brand new in this raw void: Hope. Here God begins a new creation story, not just a story of rebuilding, not just picking up the pieces trying to get back to where they were before everything fell apart. You see, this is a transfiguration Sunday and this is what transfiguration looks like. Like Moses coming down the mountain with the law from God, like Jesus transfigured on the mountain – glowing – with Moses and Elijah, showing the whole world a new way, a new creation. For Israel according to Isaiah, God is about to do what God did in the very beginning: **Create** – the word is used three times in the first two verses of our passage. In fact, the verbs attributed to God here are rich; in response to Israel’s accusation of God’s severe punishment God responds by *creating*¹, *rejoicing*², *delighting*³, *blessing*⁴,

¹ Is. 65: 17, 18

² Is. 65: 18

*answering*⁵, and *hearing*⁶. What a stark contrast to their jaded, completely understandable perspective. I think God understands this too, I think here we see that God understands what it is to struggle against the onslaught of crippling nightmares, memories of lost stability, lost joy, and innocence, and the violence and despair that has taken its place. God remembers this for all those who have experienced trauma, all those who know such despair that hope is barely a flicker, for those who feel a veil⁷ covers them. God knows what each of us carries, not just in an intellectual way, but God knows what it is to be *us* very personally because God has been with *us* in the person of Jesus Christ and God is with us still. God knows our pain because God has experienced it. Piece by piece God names exactly the pain that Israel carry that tortures them: their children dying, the work of their hands, their houses and vineyards ripped away and taken over by others, children born into the terror and the suffering of the exile. God get's down to the level of the people, down to the dust and ash with us and names exactly what we are struggling to overcome and God makes a command that honors this struggle, a command that, if taken seriously, can lead to recovery, the veil lifting, transfiguration, a new creation—you see, God says here in Isaiah, “*Let go*,” specifically God says, “the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” The command to forget comes as a welcomed gift. Maybe what Israel expects in their fear and shame is for God to say, “remember your idolatry, remember how you abandoned me, remember how you suffered for it, remember how you experience your sin.” But God is breaking that narrative. This is transfiguration. It's time to let go, it's time to be free from the memories

³ Is. 65: 19

⁴ Is. 65: 23

⁵ Is. 65: 24

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ 2 Cor. 3: 14

of old Jerusalem, freed from the trauma of the deportations, the lives lost, the humiliation, free from the wages of sin – “You are free”, and in the Isaiah text here is what God gives to replace it: gladness and rejoicing in what God is doing, and a powerfully restorative statement of confidence from God, “I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people.”

We are invited by God to be glad and rejoice in what God is doing because what God is doing is rejoicing and delighting in us. The image we long for, the one that seemed dashed by the coldness of reality, well, God is bringing that image back into focus, God is saying, “Yes, that is who I am. I am the one who lived with you and died for you. Here I am, before you call I will answer, while you are yet speaking I will hear.” God is saying before you can even find the words because the pain is so deep, before you can even bring yourself to ask me for help, I am here answering you! When the anger and hurt leads us to stammer, using noise to fill the silence, God is hearing what we are trying to say before we know how to say it. “Here I am,” God says. “I am creating you in joy, I am delighting in you.” Peace is coming because God is creating it. This is the word that carried Israel forward, this is the word which Isaiah made plain as the people of God began to emerge from the darkness and join God in this new transfigured creation; build houses, plant vineyards, rebuild their lives, “enjoy the work of their hands” the way God did as God created from dust in the beginning. This is the word that Jesus Christ made plain to us in his life, death, and resurrection. By joining us in our darkness, Christ brought a great light. The Apostle Paul said it is in Christ that we are this new creation, the old has passed away, and everything has become new and with unveiled faces, we see the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror.⁸

⁸ 2 Cor. 3: 18

III.

“Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.” Christ has made a new covenant, and it is this very thing that we declared and remember in baptism of Marshall this morning: before we are able to call out to God, God claims us; while we are trapped in the nightmares of our own exiles, whatever it is that we use to isolate ourselves from God and the community, Christ joins us and breaks the cycle, destroys the narrative of sin and death, and transfigures our lives, “those former things are not to be remembered or come to mind,” Isaiah tells us. It is this truth that God, crouching down amongst a people bent over, declares here in Isaiah, lifting us all up, straightening our backs, speaking hope and life into us and setting our vision forward towards God’s holy mountain. We, the church of Christ, we the faithful gathered here at Morningside, join the evangelists in the New Testament and remind the Beloved Community and all of creation, the wolf and the lamb, the lion and the ox; over and over of this new reality, that God is at work, that we are transfigured through Christ’s transfiguration, that God has declared an end to the injustice and the pain, the violence and domestic warfare, that God is about the joyous and delightful work of creating new heavens and a new earth and through the power of the Holy Spirit, helping us to be present and active in this mission of God. Brothers and sisters, let me assure you in great faith and hope, that God is saying to you “Here I am.” God will end the pain and the injustice, and so let us, full of faith, live out our lives in God’s new creation, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.⁹ Amen.

⁹ *Ibid.*