

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 13, Year A – 8.2.20 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Isaiah 55: 1-5, Psalm 145: 8-9, 15-22. Romans 9: 1-5. Matthew 14: 13-21

For me at least, and I suspect for many of you this period of being out of the Church and unable to meet together for worship and fellowship has a feeling of exile about it. We are separated from what has become for many our spiritual home. It is this sense of exile that makes the words of the prophets, especially Isaiah seem to speak directly to us in this current situation. Authentic prophesy is the revealed word of God. It is timeless and speaks to people across time, place and situation. I find this especially true as we live through these unprecedented times. It has been several months now that we are practicing new precautions and learning new ways of connecting and being together while apart. It is a new form of exile.

In order to understand the prophets and their relevance to our lives today, sometimes a bit of historical scene setting needs to take place. To understand the significance of the prophet's words we need to know a bit about the world in which they lived and spoke. We all live in a specific context. Our specific context includes our age, our place of residence and the limitations we currently experience because of the COVID pandemic. It is within this context that we experience exile from what we had come to regard as normal.

Isaiah too had a specific context out of which he spoke the word that God gave to him. That specific context was also one of exile. It included the age in which he lived, and the place where he resided. That context was Babylon and the enslavement of the people of Judah. Strange as it may seem the Jews who had been deported from Judah to Babylon were very much like those of us here. They were the Jews who were relatively wealthy, healthy, educated and who had been powerful in their homeland. The military conquest of Judah meant that they were uprooted and transplanted. It was not something they chose. Psalm 137 expresses the initial despair they felt. "By the rivers of Babylon---there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

When we began to understand the way in which the Corona virus spreads and the need to stay apart and distant from one another, many of us felt the same sort of despair. How could we sing the Lord's song as we sing it at St. Augustine's if we are not able to meet together and to share worship and fellowship?

Like the Jews in Babylon, we began to settle in and develop ways to connect and we continue to do so. They are not perfect, we can do more, but we have begun and continue to be a congregation and to be a community gathered, just not gathered physically.

Isaiah's community in Babylon did the same. They moved away from the initial despair to living their lives, even if they were very different lives that they had planned and that they thought God had planned for them. And then news! Good news! Exciting news! Scary News!, but Good News all the same. The new rulers of Babylon might let them return to their homeland, might make it possible to end the exile. The end might be in sight even if a long way into the future. For us there is the hope of a vaccine, the hope of meeting safely all together once again.

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah with consolation for God's people. The beginning of what is known as the Book of Consolation begins with the words "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

Comfort, hope, consolation were the words spoken and heard by the people in exile. Comfort from God is what we long for just as the Jews in exile longed to be comforted. But more, they longed for a return to what had been. The wisest of them realized that what had been would not be again. They would not return to exactly what they had left. The people long ago heard the words of Isaiah the same ancient words we heard this morning. They were words that spoke of hope, of return, of restoration. They heard as we hear words of promise that things will be better, be normal again.

The wisest of the people who heard the words of Isaiah knew that they needed to consider well the experience they had been through and what it meant for their future life. The wisest among us also hear the words of Isaiah as words that call us to consider well what this time means for our future life together. For in this time of exile, there has been social and political ferment, protests in the streets and response by those in authority and power. What does this time of exile and all that has happened during this time mean for our future life together?

Our economic system has been damaged, people's lives dislocated and those who were before on the edges of society pushed even closer to the cliff. Our health care system has been strained to the breaking point. Many of the institutions we have trusted have not served us well. Life has been upended in ways we did not foresee and were not expecting. As we hope for the consolation of an end to our exile, we are like the wisest of those in exile in Babylon. We will begin to reflect on where we have been, what we have learned and where we want to go as we return and our life is restored to something that resembles what it was before. We are asking and being asked questions about what is valuable in human life. We are reflecting on where we as a society, a nation and a congregation find ourselves. We are thinking about our place and the place of those around us in categories of wealth, race, justice and freedom.

Isaiah frames the question to his people and across the centuries to us. "Why would you spend your money for that which is not bread?" for that which does not feed and sustain abundant life? "Why spend your labor for that which does not satisfy?" What do we value, what do we work toward, what do we commit resources toward to create the earthly experience of God's heavenly kingdom, an earthly experience for all people here and now?

We hunger and thirst in this time of exile, not for water, wine or bread so much but for a deeper and more just and merciful world. A place where everyone has enough to thrive. Our souls are hungry having been challenged and tested by the last many weeks. We are hungry for food for our souls. Our faith and trust have been tested. Some of what we thought held security has been found to be dust. The peace we long for can seem elusive. Our souls long for a way to renew our faith in God and God's presence in our lives. Our souls long for expressions of mercy a mercy that is ours to receive and to give to those around us. A Mercy that is expressed in sharing what we have and giving generously to those who are in need, who are literally hungry, thirsty, in pain or ill. Our souls long for ways to bring about justice in the world, ways to act in the civic sphere to bring about more equality for all. Our souls are hungry for peace, for mercy and for

justice. The wisest of us are reflecting on all of this, on what we value and want to bring into our restored life and what we are ready to leave behind. The leaving behind may not be easy, may not be rapid but the wisest of us know that such is the way to be a part of the creation of the community of God in our midst. A community of justice, equality, abundance, peace and mercy. A community where all are welcome and all have what they need to thrive.

When in a deserted place, Jesus was confronted with a crowd of hungry people, 5,000 or so in number, he said to his disciples; “They need not go away; you give them something to eat”.

Those in need around us, physically, spiritually or emotionally need not go away. As disciples we are called to give them what they require, give them something to eat.

What do we value, what will return to normal look like and how will we restore the community that we long to live within?