

The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 10. On Isaiah 55: 10-13 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods,  
Freeland. Nigel Taber Hamilton. July 13, 2014

When I was in my teens I would often lie in bed, turn out the light, and turn on the radio. It was listen to a broadcast by Alastair Cooke that the BBC aired each week. Cooke is perhaps best known here for his hosting of Masterpiece Theater - he was a journalist and author, and he hosted that fifteen minute program from 1946 to 2004. He interpreted America for the British. He interpreted America for me. I listened for perhaps ten of those years It's one of the reasons I wanted to come here.

But I never thought that would happen. English clergy were not well paid, and I wasn't even a clergy person, just a poor student! I couldn't see how I could afford it.

In my final year in seminary someone suggested I apply for a World Council of Churches fellowship to study in this country. I almost didn't do it, because I was convinced there was no way that such a large and important organization as the WCC would ever consider me for such a program – after all, I didn't have a degree from a prestigious university, nor did I attend a prestigious seminary. Why me?

But I applied. And they called me for an interview. The other five candidates were all very high powered, and really seemed to know what they wanted, and were eloquent about expressing it. I thought I did a poor job.

Imagine my surprise when I got the news that a fellowship was mine!

Have you ever had something like that happen to you? When something happened that was so startling that you found it hard to put into words how you felt?

Now you have a context for the wonderful reading from Isaiah! The writer of this particular poem – because that's what it is, a poem (or actually, the end of a poem) – felt the same kind of shock at an unexpected, but fortuitous turn of events.

It was written towards the end of the Babylonian Exile, and it reflects a really profound joy felt by those captives who saw God's work in the international politics of their day.

They'd been captives in Babylon for two generations and suddenly, after the successful replacement of the Babylonian by the Persian Empire, they were being allowed to go home.

Think on that for a moment – you've been away from the land you love, from the places you remember and cherish, from your holy sites, and especially from the Temple in Jerusalem, for 48 years. There would have been few who remembered what it was like.

But those who remembered were filled with joy. And they wanted their grandchildren to understand and to feel some of that joy, they wanted to pass on what was important to them so that those cherished memories would live on.

They'd kept their identity as Jews by telling stories to their children and grandchildren of the glory that had been Jerusalem.

When Cyrus the Persian king told the Jews they could leave not all of them decided to go. Many had settled, owned land, liked where they were.

Isaiah wanted them to understand the promise of a home they hadn't known, a place where they would, initially, be strangers.

And Jerusalem was in ruins. Those who returned would first have to stake their claims to land in the area. Many of the fields immediately surrounding Jerusalem had gone uncultivated (hence the language that presents a vision of successful sowing and reaping). There was only a small settlement where the city had once stood, so they would have had to build houses, city walls – in fact, the whole infrastructure. It was not an attractive prospect for a generation who had no personal experience of the old city.

Isaiah melded the vision of a home most had never known, with both a glorious vision and also a dose of reality. I've often wondered if John F. Kennedy was thinking of this story when he uttered those famous words “ *We choose...to do the[se]...things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone....*”

On Thursday the Congregational Survey Team met with the vestry and shared an Executive Summary of that survey. It's the same summary we will distribute to you at our Town Hall on July 27 – two weeks from today. The summary contains much that's positive, and also identifies some challenges that need our attention.

I think I'm safe in saying that we see God's hand at work in the results. There's both joy – perhaps not quite so unexpected as Isaiah's – and also a dose of reality that tells us that there's work to be done. That's a thing to celebrate, too – some guidance on where expended energy can see the best return on its investment.

In a sense the survey's results are offering us a glimpse of home, of what it means to strive for a place that carries with it all the promise that “going home” offers: to be known and loved; to be understood, to be welcomed, to be included and made to feel....well...at home. To be able to know that if we need help with something someone is there for us, that if we want to cry there's a shoulder to lean on, that if we want to celebrate there's someone to hug!

To be home, freed from all those places of exile that can haunt our souls and leave us feeling so alone.

So come in two weeks, and begin that journey home. Amen.