

August 23, 2020
Lectionary 21, Year A
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner
Isaiah 51:1-6

As you know, I've been on vacation for the past two weeks. On Monday, August 10th, we loaded our stuff and our kids and our dog into our van and headed south. We drove for 15 hours to get to my in-laws house in South Carolina.

Then, after a nice visit with them in their home, the next Saturday, we loaded our stuff and our kids and our dog into our van and Britton's parents and sister loaded into their cars and we all headed to the North Carolina coast, where we met up with my parents and my sister and her family for a family beach vacation in a house that we all rented together.

We spent Saturday evening getting settled into our beach house. The next morning, we watched the live stream of worship at my sister's family's church, Lord of Life Lutheran Church in Fairfax, Virginia. Then, it was time to go to the beach.

Everyone got into their swimsuits. Then we got all of our beach going stuff together, beach chairs, umbrellas, sand toys, boogie boards, snacks and water.

Needless to say, we were all super excited to get to the beach, to play in the waves, to dig in the sand, to sit in the sun, but we still had one more thing to do. We had to put on sunscreen. Let me tell you, it takes a long time to make sure that six people are adequately covered in sunscreen.

From the moment worship ended and we said, "Let's go to the beach," it was still about an hour before we were actually heading out to the beach. And guess what? Three out of six of us still got a sunburn.

So, the next day when we went out to the beach, it took us even longer to put on sunscreen, we did it with more urgency, and more accuracy, knowing the consequences would be painful if we cut that task short in our enthusiasm for getting out to the beach.

By the time we got to the beach we had driven for 19 hours cumulatively. We had loaded our van twice and unloaded it twice. We had moved into a different house, learned our way around a new kitchen, and then, when it was finally time to step out into the sand and the waves, it took us over an hour to get ready.

Every time we went to the beach it was clear that it was worth all of the time, all of the trouble, all of the stuff moving, house to car, car to house, house to beach, beach to house, over and over again. It was even worth all of the sunscreen. But during all of the steps of the process, there might have been moments when it certainly seemed simpler just to stay in the house, where it was cool and protected from the sun, and where we could gaze on the ocean from afar.

Our Old Testament reading for today is from one of my favorite parts of the Bible. In fact, I love this part of the Bible so much that before we were locked down, I was teaching a Bible Study on it.

The part of the Bible that today's reading is from is called Second Isaiah. It encompasses Isaiah chapters 40-55. The prophet who wrote this work of prophecy did not include his name or any autobiographical information with his work of prophecy. Later biblical editors added his work of prophecy, to the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem, who wrote chapters 1-39 of what we know of as the biblical book of Isaiah, and who lived about 200 years before the prophet who wrote the prophecies in Isaiah 40-55.

The prophet who wrote second Isaiah addressed his work to the Jewish people who were living in exile in Babylon.

Judah's encounter with the Babylonian empire is described in detail in the book of Jeremiah. The events of the Babylonian exile are also summed up in this passage from 2 Chronicles:

Zedekiah, [the king of Judah] was twenty-one years old when he began to reign; he reigned for eleven years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. He did not humble himself before the prophet Jeremiah who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God; he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD, the God of Israel. All the leading priests and the people also were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the LORD that he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling-place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD against his people became so great that there was no remedy.

Therefore he brought up against them the king of the [Babylonians] (Chaldeans), who killed their youths with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or young woman, the aged or the feeble; he gave them all into his hand. All the vessels of the house of God, large and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officials, all these he brought to Babylon. They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem,

burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah...
(2 Chronicles 36:11-21a)

These blunt facts give us a glimpse of the human tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. The Babylonians moved through Judah without mercy, killing and destroying all in their path, men, women, children, homes and fields, leaving people dead or damaged, leaving the land desolate, and largely uninhabitable.

Then they destroyed Jerusalem and the temple with it. They destroyed the sacred heart of the nation of Judah, of the people of Israel. They destroyed the only place where sacrifices could be made. With the destruction of the Temple, sins could not be atoned for, thanks could not be offered, the unclean could not be purified.

With the destruction of the Temple, God's own home was destroyed. God could not be approached. The holy presence of God, which had been in the midst of them, present in tabernacle and Temple, present in the now destroyed ark of the covenant, since the exodus, no longer had a home, no longer had a vessel. They had nothing, no place to go, nothing that they could approach and say, "God is here." For many of them, the destruction of the Temple meant that God was no longer with them, and perhaps, even, that God was dead.

And, so, into exile they went. Bereft of their national pride, of their honor as a people, bereft even of the consolation of their God, they went to

Babylon as a defeated people, as captives, as a people mourning their lost nation, their lost city, their lost temple, their lost God.

Psalm 137 was one of the Psalms written by the exiled people of Judah. This is what they said,

*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.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’
How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)*

But the years went by. The exiles settled in Babylon and raised families and tried to rebuild their lives.

Some of them, believing their God was dead, that their nation, that their identity as a people was finally and fully destroyed, were persuaded by the apparent power of the Babylonian pantheon, led by their god, Marduk, assimilated into Babylonian religion and culture.

Others held fast to their identity as Jews, as followers of the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and their descendants. During the exile, the religious leaders, wrote down many of the stories of their people, to remind their community that God had worked for

them in extraordinary ways in the past and to give them hope that God would do so again.

And so, they told the stories to each other and to their children as they always had, and now, they had scripture to read as well. They kept the sabbath, and the traditions of their people as well as they could without the presence of a Temple. Some of them fell away during this time of trial, but many of them found that their God had not been defeated and was with them in this strange land, speaking to them in new ways.

Then the the word of the unnamed prophet, now called “Second Isaiah”, spoke to the people. The first words in his work of prophecy were these: *Comfort, O comfort my people.* (Isaiah 40:1a)

The message of the prophet was that God was going to work on the geopolitical stage, to change the world, to bring them home. God had anointed a foreign king and warrior, Cyrus of Persia, to be God’s servant, to be a tool in God’s hand to destroy the might of the Babylonians and to bring God’s people back to the land of Judah, back to Jerusalem, where the Temple could be rebuilt.

There was one problem, though. The prophet speaking through the inspiration of God, seems to know there might be some reluctance about this return. During the years of exile, most of the people who remembered Jerusalem, the people who had worshiped in the Temple, had died. They had raised their children in exile, their children had had children and Babylon was their home.

They had no sense of deep roots in the soil of the land of Canaan. Of course, they had heard and even read the stories of the Abraham’s call, of the lives of the ancestors, of the Exodus from Egypt, of the wilderness wandering, of manna from heaven, of the conquest of Canaan, of judges and

kings, of David and his family, of the building of the Temple, of the songs and Psalms of worship that had been lifted up in the Temple,

They had also heard the stories of the collective trauma of the Babylonian assault on Judah. They had heard about the destruction, about farms, orchards, groves, villages, towns that had fallen to sword and fire. They had heard about the dead left unburied as the living fled before an oncoming army that knew no mercy. They had heard about the city of Jerusalem and the beautiful Temple burning.

They knew that a homecoming to a home where most of them had never lived, that most of them had never seen, and that most of them did not remember, would not be a return to Judah as it had been under the great kings of the past, a return to a prosperous kingdom, thriving, peaceful, and beautiful. They knew that it would be a return to a land that had been devastated by war.

And some of them, even the ones who still believed in their God, who had, indeed, learned to sing the Lord's songs, in a foreign land, might have wondered if it made sense to make the long journey through the wilderness to rebuild a broken land.

It was to those, those who wondered, those who doubted, that the prophet spoke in our Old Testament for today. He reminded them of who they were, saying:

*Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;*

*for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many. (Isaiah 51:1-2)*

He reminded them of God's faithfulness to Abraham, the way that God had promised to give Abraham and Sarah a family and to make that family a nation. And then he gave this new generation of exiles, who perhaps did not think of themselves as exiles, this generation of people who had grown up in the storied city of Babylon, who might not have yearned for a return that for them was not a return to a land laid waste by war, a promise, that the land to which they were being called, was a place where they would see God at work, where they would experience God's presence, that if they would step out in faith, that if they looked forward and not backward, they would find the presence of God working for them and in the land to which they were being called. This was the promise:

*For the LORD will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song. (Isaiah 51:4)*

I started this sermon talking about some of challenges or, more realistically, minor inconveniences of going on vacation, leaving our home, the familiar, comfortable and easy for an experience that was, without question, worth all of the time, and all of the miles, and all of the moving. But, of course, in many ways that kind of time, trouble, miles, and moving

are the least of our worries this summer.

And this summer, of all summers, coming back home does not mean going back to normal. We are living during a time of challenge and change in our world. Covid-19 is reshaping the way that we live and interact with each other and we don't know when that's going to end. We do know that things are never going back to exactly the way they were.

Too many people have been lost, for things ever to go back to normal, for their families, for the communities that they touched, and there are so many of them. 180,182 as of this morning, and the number grows every day.

Too many people are still sick, alive, but not getting better, this virus is not just running its course, for them it's becoming chronic, and feeling normal is ancient history.

Too many people have lost their jobs or lost their businesses. They are faced with rebuilding their lives at a time when it's harder than it usually is to start over.

For all of them, for all of us, for the grieving, for the sick, for those whose financial lives have fallen apart, and for all us who are facing the devastation of the society we used to know, back to normal, back to the way things were, just doesn't seem like it's possible.

And then there are the things that we've learned about living in community with each other. Some of them are good, we've learned to do things that we might have never thought we could. We've learned to use the tools of the digital age that we might have never thought we would touch, to keep in touch with family and friends, to attend worship, to play games, to study scripture, to learn and to grow.

But we've also seen again, that inequality is rampant in our society and that for some, even for some who talk so much about Christian values, that

talk, which has at its heart, loving one's neighbor, is only talk, when they have to confront mild discomfort or inconvenience.

We've learned that we're capable of more than we ever thought of and sadly, devastatingly, we've learned that hatred and selfishness runs deep in our country as well, sometimes seeming like it has a life of its own.

Maybe we too, who, like those ancient exiles, have been thrust into a world that is different from the one that we thought we are living in, have to face the challenges of a rebuilding, a journey to a new world, that we are challenged to have to and blessed to get to shape.

We are called to help shape it with compassion, with justice, with mercy for the suffering, with love, with generosity, with creativity, with peace.

So, perhaps we should hear God's words of comfort and hope to the exiles, as words of promise with hope for us too.

For the Lord will comfort us. The Lord will comfort all of our waste places, all of the places where our lives are not what we wanted them to be, all of the places where we are suffering, all of the places where our neighbors are suffering.

The Lord will lead us, will give us a garden where the thorns and brambles of the past grew. The Lord will give us joy and gladness, in exchange for our sorrows, in exchange for our cries of lament for what was, as God leads us into what will be.

The Lord will teach us thankfulness for what is and teach us to sing a new song, a song of hope, a song of justice, a song of peace, a song, that will lead us into the future that God wants to give us.

I am coming home from vacation. But for me, for you, for all of us, who will hear what the Lord God will teach, who will seek after righteousness,

who will learn justice from God, and seek God's salvation, the journey, the most important journey continues, and God will go with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.