

## *Home from Exile*

*This sermon was preached by the Rev. Richmond Webster on Sunday, January 24, 2010 and is based Luke 4:14-21.*

Ask any third grader at Saint Luke's and they will tell you that the Bible is not a book, but a library of books, and in fact the word "Bible" means "books." And within this library we find a wide range of book spanning centuries—we find poetry, history, theology, ethics, letters, and of course the Greatest Story Ever Told, the Story of Jesus Christ and our Salvation.

And when we read these books, something happens to us. More to the point, when we read these books, God speaks to us, guides us, protects us, inspires us, picks us up, sets us down a new path, restores our spirits, gives us hope and good dreams and this is why we call the bible Holy.

And though these books may be ancient and quite diverse, we do find connecting threads as we study them, stories behind the story that holds them all together, and I want to talk about one of these stories today.

The story I'm referring to is the story of the exile. The story of the exile looms large in our Bibles, and I'll explain. Some 5 centuries before the birth of Jesus, God's people, the Hebrews, were overrun by the armies of the Babylonian king. It was a policy of this king to plunder their land, tear down their Temple, and to remove the best and brightest of them in order to live in exile, far away to the land of Babylon.

I say it looms large because, for starters, it was a profound crisis for a people who believed they were God's chosen. They were supposed to be protected; God lived with them in Jerusalem; so how could this be? Suddenly, they were far from home.

The exile is also looms large because so much of our Bible is touched by it in some way. For pages and pages, we read of prophets, warning of the doom to come, though no one believed them. Then we read of others, locked away in a foreign land and longing for home: "By the waters of Babylon," the psalmist wrote, "we sat and wept, when we remembered you, O Zion."

Other books were written after they returned home, blinking at the hollow shell of the Holy City, picking through the rubble that was once the promised land and trying to return to life as it was before. The book of Nehemiah, our Old Testament lesson for today, is one of these.

Nehemiah tells the story of rebuilding Jerusalem, and in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter we learn that their leaders were not satisfied with just bricks and mortar. Nehemiah wanted his people rebuilt, body and soul, so he called the priest Ezra to gather an assembly and read to them the scroll of the Law.

And there before the newly built Water Gate and amid the scaffolding of a new city, Ezra read them the word of the Lord. We are told they were thunderstruck. These words from God set them on a new path that day, restored their spirits that day, gave them hope and good dreams that day.

These were Holy words for a Holy people. The long exile was over, or at least they could see home from here.

You see, there was still unfinished business, beyond the bricks of a new Jerusalem. There were other words written in those days, words from the prophet who dreamed of God's finished product; who dreamed of the day that a Messiah would come and make the world right again; the blind would see, the lame would walk, the poor would be filled with good things. The prophet dreamed of the day all people everywhere would be restored, body and soul. Then it would be over. Then they would be home.

These were the words Jesus chose to read on the day he went home to preach. Five centuries later, and the exile still loomed large.

For just a second I'd like to talk about that day Jesus went home to preach, and as an aside I'd like to point out that only a few verses past the ones we read today, Jesus would observe that a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, and I'm here to tell you this is true.

I'm fond of telling people that I returned home to Montgomery after seminary, a move that was unavoidable given there were no other jobs that year, and risky since I was well known to that congregation as the kid who worked in a fancy clothing store for 13 years.

Here I was, a newly minted minister of the Gospel, trained and ready to take on the world, and usher would ask me if their pants were too long, or if their tie looked OK with a striped suit, or if their coat was getting a little tight and I didn't want to do that. With this in mind, I can only imagine Jesus, son of a Carpenter, returning to Nazareth only to be bothered with questions about a wobbly table or a sagging doorframe.

But if he was distracted by hometown concerns all that was finished when he read the scroll. We are only told that that all eyes were fixed on Jesus, but I can imagine it was a little like that day out by the Water gate so long ago. I'll bet you could have heard a pin drop as Jesus read the words of the old dream, the dream that just wouldn't die. Remember, the exile loomed large.

And then, the kicker. Jesus rolled the scroll, sat down as was the custom of the day, and said these words: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Today. Today. Today.

Read Luke's Gospel as a whole and you will notice that the very first word spoken by Jesus that is not a quotation of Scripture is the word, "today." Today, he said in effect, the exile is over; the Messiah has come. Today, you can go home. Today, you can be whole, body and spirit. Today.

In the book of Nehemiah we are told they fell to the ground when they heard God's word. In the Gospels we're told that people cried and shouted and followed Jesus everywhere. So I wonder: what would be our response if we were to live as if these words of God were actually true.

This much I know. We all know something about exile, I'll even wager it looms large, and by this I'm not referring to the long history of the nation of Israel; I'm not even referring to the current unfinished business of this world, like poverty or injustice or greed; rather, I'm thinking of the way each of us, in our own private ways, will stray far from home.

For some, exile comes swift and unexpected. A bad biopsy or a late phone call upends our world and sends us to the loneliest of places. Accidents and failures steal our hope and rob our joy. Sometimes we can't get out of bed in the morning and we wonder if we'll even survive. We find ourselves far from home.

For others, exile takes more time.

Perhaps this exile begins with a carefully crafted persona, a good one perhaps, something necessary to win friends and influence people, but in time, years even, this costume we wear becomes weighty, clumsy, a true burden. We work so hard at maintaining the appearances we think we need in order for others to respect us or listen to us or fear us or love us, that we become distant from the people we were when the world was new and the air was clean and days were filled with wonder.

We may be physically fine but inside we are dead as a hammer. We may be ethical and respected and follow every rule, but deep down we just aren't honest, deep down we just aren't free. We find ourselves far from home.

I could go on and on but here is my point. Exile looms large in our story.

But in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of Luke, we learn the exile is over, if we let it. God's dream for us has come true. His name is Jesus, and in him blind eyes are opened, in him the oppressed go free, in him hope is new again. In him, the costume falls away, in him, we can blink in the sunlight of a new morning. And it can happen today.

If we only let Him, we can rebuild amid any wreckage, body and soul. If we only let Him, we can walk a new path, see a new future, dream a new dream. If we only let Him, we can live again. We can go home. Today.

The exile is over, or it can be. Go home.