

II Advent, 2020 - St. John's Episcopal Church, Minneapolis - John Bellamey

Two years ago on this very Sunday, I preached about John the Baptist and Jesus growing up and neither one going into the family business. John's father was a high priest in the temple and Jesus' dad was a carpenter. Both of them tried it, John combing out his beard and dressing all in white; Jesus getting calluses and slivers. John was a city boy from the south, and Jesus a small-town boy from the north.

My telling was autobiographical, for sure. I'm a city boy, born and raised in north Detroit. Although I was christened John in honor of the Gospel-writer, I am also a son who left the family business. My sister now runs the machine shop in Detroit that our grandfather and then father operated since 1911. I worked there for four years as a young man, and learned many things, but left to become a teacher.

My 2018 sermon began and ended with another career that went nowhere: the future Maria Von Trapp, failing as a nun. I had everyone singing *how do you solve a problem like Maria?* from the Sound of Music. It was so fun. My point came as late as possible in the sermon, after noting that the Holy Spirit is unpredictable. After advising my fellow boomers that although our kids don't go to church in large numbers, they are finding spiritual nourishment and community in lots of places. Organized religion may just get replaced by disorganized religion. After making my usual -- even predictable -- comment that church is too much talking and not enough doing, my point was the end of the song: *...how do you keep a wave upon the sand? Oh, how do you solve a problem like Maria? How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?*

*God is like that wave. That moonbeam.*

Preaching that sermon, in fact preaching ANY sermon to you guys, is such a blessing. This morning, I'm going to talk about the Old Testament reading, though tradition insists I comment on the Gospel. Which I just did.

So let's back up: the reading from the Hebrew Bible comes from the book of Isaiah, as they pronounce it in the UK.

His book wasn't a book at first, but a scroll. Part One: the kings, the priests, and the elites are failures, liars, and fakes. They worship at the altar of money and military might and literally at the altars of competing gods. They're going down.

Part Two: Isaiah, one of those same elites, has a vision: fiery angels ask him to bring messages to the king and his court. They press a hot coal to his lips to burn away his unworthiness.

Part Three: His messages.

- You think Our Lord is like the gods of Canaan? Assyria? Egypt? No. He is not just in charge of our fate, but theirs, too.
- Why do you ignore the poor? The widow? Seek justice, not wealth!
- You think that an alliance with Egypt is going to save you from the Assyrians? No.
- Um, don't show off your gold and jewels to those ambassadors from Babylon. It will just make them want to send their army for it. And for us!

In other words, Isaiah was totally involved in politics. Social justice. International relations. He was what we would now call a capitol insider.

And sure enough, his warnings came true. The Assyrian army obliterated the northern half of the kingdom and turned the southern half into a client state. Hundreds of thousands of Israelites were deported and resettled all over what we now call Syria and Iraq. And people from those places were deported and resettled in northern Israel. A cruelly-effective policy of tearing tribes and nations apart. It's how the ten lost tribes were lost.

Two hundred years later, the Babylonians were the new great power, and they did the same thing, except they took the wealthiest, the best-educated, the artisans and physicians off together and settled them in a kind of ghetto in their capital. Unlike the ten lost tribes, they didn't assimilate.

Another writer took up his pen in Babylon and wrote today's words, two hundred years after Isaiah's unheeded warnings. He didn't pretend to *be* the original Isaiah, but his scrolls fit the big story which was, *after the catastrophes north and south, our awful exile is ending*. Unfortunately, he wrote, the prophecies had been true. Here we are, back east in an alien nation. Yes, God punished us. And we have paid double the fines. We've done our time. We'll be able to go home soon. Back west. But folks! it's gonna be a great trip. The road won't be up-and-down. No valleys or mountains. When we get to the Jordan, there will be people waiting for us from all the cities we remember! And we'll tell them "You thought God abandoned us, but no! Here is our God!"

It's true, the writer continues, our lives are short like the wildflowers. A lot of those who were deported died in Babylon, but we are still Judah. Jews. The children of Israel. We have all these stories and we're coming home. *Our* God took Cyrus of Persia by the hand and showed him how to capture Babylon. Told him to set us free and send us home.

So be comforted! You will see Jerusalem! Like a mother sheep, or maybe a sheepdog, God will round us up and take us home.

Exile is forced absence from our home country. Not our choice. Exile is a punishment, but not necessarily deserved. Now this quarantine of ours is not exile. We're not cooped up a long way from home. We're cooped up AT home! But it still feels like exile. Some of us are

far from the ones we love. From customers who can't come to our restaurant. From students who sit at home, glued to screens. From relatives in assisted living or nursing care.

Think about your own life, either now or in some time of exile in your past. Forced separation. Does it make you angry, or did it? Sad? Depressed? Tempted to escape? Are you like the original Isaiah, telling everyone "I told-you-so" about the virus? Or maybe you're like the later Isaiah, accepting the exile as it is, not as you wish things to be. Staying hopeful. Seeing a chance to grow.

My own dark time at age 25 is not really worthy of the label "exile." I left the family business and for months kept in touch with my parents and sisters only by phone, though we all lived in the city of Detroit. I didn't visit, or invite them to my apartment for dinner. I was in therapy to combat the shame I felt in giving up on my father's path. I did not know what my own path was. Maybe teaching. Maybe, now that I'd also left the Catholic church for the Episcopal church, maybe priesthood or something. My exile was quiet, lonely, dark, introspective, and lasted nine months. It even began in Advent.

If you have an exile story, think about telling it to someone else this week. If you are exiled right now, and a lot of us are, think about how you can give and receive the kind of hope that the comfort guy, second Isaiah, is talking about. Yes, life is fleeting, like the tall grasses of summer. But take courage, and open yourself to people who want to encourage you.

Hope isn't a delusion. It's a decision we can make every day.

This dark time is not going to last longer than we can manage.

Someday soon, we'll be together again.

In the meantime, let's be quick to love. Let's make haste to be kind.

And the God of Compassion will go with us.