

“DON’T FORGET WHO YOU ARE”

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Isaiah 40:1-11

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Do you remember your first Christmas away from home? In my family my father made it a point to tell my brother and I, that no matter where we might be, when Christmas came, we would do our best to make it home, home being wherever my parents were at that time, which since 1972 has been Calgary. Since both my brother and I attended university in Calgary, it wasn't until I was in my mid twenties that I first experienced Christmas away from home. Even when I was attending seminary in Toronto, I came home for Christmas. It wasn't until I was 25 and in Korea between my second and third years of seminary that I first spent a Christmas away from home. It was a strange feeling to be away from home for Christmas for the very first time. I did end up visiting some of my relatives in Korea in days prior to Christmas, but on Christmas day itself, I think that I was pretty much alone. I have to admit that being almost 30 years ago, my memory is a bit fuzzy, but I do think that later on that Christmas day, I went bowling, alone. I am willing to bet that no one else here has ever gone bowling on Christmas day!

Being dislocated from familiarity can make a person do strange things. And if just one Christmas away from home can lead a person to go bowling on Christmas day, imagine what a more permanent displacement from familiarity might do to a people in regard to their sense of identity. In the days of the prophet Isaiah, the people of Israel had been taken captive by the Babylonians. Because of their stubbornness and their turning away from God, the best and brightest of the land had been taken into exile by their enemies, and even the temple in Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed. And as the years passed, as those living in exile began to adjust to the unthinkable possibility that they would not live to see home again, they would have wrestled with issues of identity.

It's often said that the past is a strange country. Studies on people living in exile have shown that exile means, more than anything else, a painful reversal of one of our most common cognitive and emotional orders of familiarity. Exiles are bi-fur-ca-ted or dual beings, torn between memory and attachment to the past, a past that is paradoxically often reconstructed in our memories as a paradise lost, and the sobering, sometimes strange reality of the present. Exile, in other words, is when you live in one land, and dream in another.

As the Jews living in Babylon struggled with identity, the words of the prophet brought a fresh reminder of God's faithfulness. ***“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.”*** The words speak a double truth. First, even though the people of Israel had resisted God and turned away from God's

command, falling to their enemies and living in exile, they were still God's people, and second, even after all that has happened, God is still their God. Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. The purpose of the words is clear. Exile can rob a person of their identity, that fundamental sense of who a person is. When those cognitive and emotional orders of familiarity are taken from us, we can lose our sense of identity and we forget who we are. In effect, the prophet's words are God's way of saying to the people of Israel, **don't forget who you are! You are my people and I am your God.**

And Isaiah fleshes out a vision of what God has in mind for his people. God envisions a time when God's own glory will be revealed for all people, a time when roads will be made straight in the desert, when valleys will be lifted up and mountains made low, when the uneven will become level and the rough places a plain. God envisions a time when exile will be no more, when displacement will be no more, when brokenness will be no more, when nothing created will take precedence over the one who creates. People are grass and their constancy is like the flower of the field; and the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. The words are God's way of reminding people that when you find yourself in exile, when you find your identity being threatened, when you fear you're going to forget who you are, you don't put your faith in created things, ***you put your trust in the one who is the Creator.***

This pandemic has been a time of disorientation. We have had our routines stripped away from us. Those things that have given our lives structure and meaning have been displaced. Things like work, relationships, church, worship, these things are not like the way they have been. When you can't worship with those who have been for so long part of the body of Christ, when the transitions of life and death, such as the ability to mark our grief through ritual, cannot be observed in the way we have become accustomed to, when the meaningful physical contact that roots our relationships have been uprooted, it feels like an exile of sorts, we begin to lose our sense of identity. When we can't work or have to work alone, when contact with family and friends is restricted to little boxes on a computer, when in a sea of masks all you can see are eyes, with no other facial features from which to take your cue, we become disoriented and there is a growing fear that we will never recapture that which is being lost now.

Loss of identity, this sense of exile, living in the present while dreaming in the past, there is a distinct lack of peace that accompanies such a state of being. It is precisely at times like these that we need to remember that we are loved by God who claims us as his people, who tells us not to fear and who invites us to make him the constant in our lives, to make God the center of our identity in a time and context where it becomes so easy to forget who we are.

Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae...The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary... These are the words from the Prayer of the Incarnation that Roman Catholics say to remember the announcement from Gabriel to Mary, that she would be the mother of Jesus. Every morning, every noon and every night, the ringing of the Angelus bell would call monks, nuns, priests and parishioners of the Roman Catholic Church to a short devotional prayer in honour of the birth and life of Christ. If you know your art, you may remember a painting by the French artist Jean Francios Millet, of a peasant couple stopping from their work in the field to pray, with a church steeple in the background. That painting is called the Angelus.

There's a story about monks that lived in the Abbey of Gethsemane, the Abbey where Thomas Merton the famous Trappist monk lived for 27 years. The Abbey was located in a heavily wooded rural area of Kentucky. In the summer, the dry heat would make the forest surrounding the Abbey ripe for forest fires. The monks living there would post sentries to watch for possible fires. The signal was sent one exceptionally hot summer day and all the monks came running with shovels to help put out the fire. And then, as happens every noon-time, the ringing of the Angelus bell was heard, calling the monks to prayer. With the fire spreading over the dry grass and trees, Thomas Merton yelled to the others, "Stop, let us say the Angelus." And so the monks, with the smell and heat of the fire in the air, all turned around and faced the Abbey, dropped to their knees and bent down with their fists in the dirt and recited their prayers.

One of the novices of the Abbey, James Finley, would later write about this and other times he spent with Thomas Merton. But at the time, all he could do was laugh out loud at the seeming foolishness of letting the fire spread while the prayers were being said. ***But James Finley came to realize that it is always a bad time to pray: there are always fires raging that demand our time and effort. But unless we are willing to kneel and knuckle down before the flames, we will never truly pray.*** (Illustration is borrowed from David Jennings' sermon: The Ringing of the Angelus)

The Incarnation reminds us that in our midst God is present, that we are not alone, that there is a reality bigger than ourselves. Unless we take time, make time, to connect with God, with the eternal things, with the creator and not the created, unless we realize that the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever, unless we are willing to connect with the divine, unless we are able to say that God is our God and that we are God's people, the forest of our demands, the flames of tension, pressure, anxiety, frustration, and fatigue, the disorientation of these pandemic times, can overwhelm us and reroute our identity. ***We can get so caught up in the forest of the pandemic, in fighting whatever fires shape our sense of exile that we forget our true identity as children of God. We need to hear the bell ring to lift us out of our self-focused lives and see the reality of God.***

When fear rises in the heat of our disorientation, in the confusion and uncertainty of how things are whether they may ever be the way they were, whatever your exile may be, whether it's because you're living away from the home in which you were raised, whether it's due to a relationship from which you are estranged, whether it's because things are changing so quickly and you fear that you just can't keep up, whatever our exile may be, ***may we hear the call of God ringing out over the din, calling us to take time and make time to connect with God, so that we don't forget who we are, so that we will give thanks for the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, for the assurance that we are God's people and the promise that God is our God.***

And isn't that what the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is all about? This table is God's invitation through his Son Jesus Christ, to remember our identity. We may be living in an exile of sorts, but we are not forgotten by our God, who tells us that we are his beloved people. We are God's beloved children, and the bread and the cup are reminders of who we are, of our identity as the very ones that God loved so much that he became one of us, born as an infant to a seemingly inconsequential couple in an insignificant town, ***and yet born to utterly change the world and renew and restore God's creation.*** For the vast majority of us, this is a season unlike any other we've known, a sort of a Christmas away from home, from what we know and are familiar with, but this too will pass, this season will not last, like the grass and the flowers, this pandemic will fade. But the word of our God will stand forever, the living Word, Jesus the Son, crucified and risen, whose body is broken for us and whose blood is shed for us, will stand forever. God in his amazing love and infinite grace, invites us to come and remember our identity.

***Come my people, says your God.
Don't forget who you are.
Come.***

Thanks be to God, Amen!