

GO OUT IN JOY

Isaiah 55:10-13; Romans 5:1-5

Throughout this pandemic we have heard the phrase “back to normal” or “the new normal” quite a bit. We, as humans, are creatures who enjoy and even rely on our comforts, our rituals, our habits, our routines. Perhaps it comes through daily exercise at the gym, or eating the same thing every morning for breakfast, or meeting with a friend at a coffee shop every Tuesday, or sleeping with a particular kind of pillow in a room set at the just the right temperature each night. We all have our own “normal,” and that normal also helps us to feel at home and comfortable. It brings with it a sense of peace. Which is why so many of us have been thrown off by changes that are out of our control during this pandemic. Lockdowns and distancing have kept us away from our “normal.” And so we adapt, but we must also accept that we may never fully get back to our old routines and rituals.

In our scripture today we hear about the Israelites who have been in exile in Babylon. The cream of the Israelite crop had been snatched away from their land, taken to Babylon, and made to assimilate with the Babylonian traditions, gods, clothing, and way of life. We can imagine that many of their “home” comforts were destroyed. Some gave up on trying to keep their Hebrew culture and traditions and beliefs and became one with the Babylonians. But others held strong and chose to keep their faith in God, even when it was really difficult to do so in a foreign land with foreign powers in control. But it didn’t come without its struggles and doubts.

And now, after so many years, exile is coming to an end; the Israelites will be allowed to go home to Jerusalem. Future hope is come! But even if the Israelites are able to return home they know that things have not gone back to normal. The “new normal” is very different from the life that once was. While they may be able to travel back to their hometown, new powers govern over it. Their time under Babylonian control has caused them to entertain the idea of new gods and ways of being. Their faith in the God of Israel has been shaken. Could the Babylonian gods be more powerful than their God? There has been so much loss, so much suffering. They hold onto doubts and even

accuse God of having forgotten them. How are they to expect that the end of exile will really change anything? In a way, they are still in exile: they are still far from what they know, or used to know. Their plans have been obliterated. How can they sing God's song in a strange land? Even if that land is Jerusalem, it's not the same Jerusalem they once knew. The Israelites have lost hope. They are not yet able to see future hope in front of them; rather, they see despair.

In many ways we, today, are not so unlike the Israelite people. There is so much that causes us to lose hope and see the future as nothing but bleak. In our despair we worry about climate change, about systemic racism and other systemic issues that feed in to poverty, homelessness, acts of terror, wars. We worry about rising prices, the housing market, about not having enough experience or education to compete for the jobs we want. Tomorrow Canada votes in the federal election, yet we fear that elections hold no real hope for change, that no matter which party we vote for we will be left disappointed in the lack of positive change and support to those who need it most across our country. And we fear that no matter how hard we work, we will constantly be one step behind. But what can be done?

The second half of Isaiah has one major theme: hope. In fact it opens with the words made particularly well known through Handel's *Messiah*: "Comfort ye my people, saith your God; speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned" (Isa 40:1). God, through Isaiah, speaks of comfort and hope. There is hope in God's promises. Babylonian powers are nothing next to the free, gracious, and compassionate gift of God, who will bring the exiles to wholeness. And how will this happen? Through a servant, the Messiah, who will lead the people from darkness to light. A servant who will turn the world on its head, leading with love and compassion even when rejected and up until death.

Yes there is suffering. Yes there is uncertainty. But God's words of hope are meant to be a balm to these broken and hurting people, and a reminder that with God there is always more to come. Through Isaiah, God tells the Israelites,

"You shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;

the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” (Isa 55:12)

This isn't a hope that exists in just the human realm—all heaven and nature sing God's praises, as well. When God tells the people to go out in joy, it isn't a request to bury or suppress their feelings of doubt, of fear, of anger, of anxiety and put on a happy face. This is a joy that goes beyond simple happiness; it is a subversive joy, a joy that lives into the tension of peace and struggle. It is a joy that knows that our God is a God of love who accompanies us on the journey, whose hand is at work in the world. We are not alone.

Not only are we not alone because we have God, but also because we have the community of the church. The church is God's love lived out in community. In a world where so many things have ends dates and expiration dates and time limitations, God's is a love that love will not end.

The church is a sign of hope in a world where many get caught up in only seeing despair: a bad economy, a rough road ahead, systemic injustices, a dying earth, misguided leadership. Where you might feel like just one person in a vast sea of turmoil, paddling against unending waves, God gifts each of us the church as a beacon of hope. Here, God's Word is sewn and those seeds of hope are nourished. Here, God's Word doesn't just scrape by, barely eking out God's will, but takes root and grows. God nourishes us with rain and with the Word.

But what happens if we cannot see ourselves as part of that plan? What if we still see ourselves in exile and filled with doubts and accusations? Then come be amongst others who feel just the same! And find comfort in God's presence. Through Isaiah, God explains that just as rain and snow fall and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it grow and produce new seeds for people to sow, creating a cycle of sowing and watering and growing that spreads, so shall God's word go out and not return before fulfilling its purpose, its promise, its comfort and hope. The church is the tiller of the good soil of hope, action, and justice in this world. It is a place of

transformation, where you might arrive feeling choked by the weeds of despair, worry, and fear, but find yourself transformed through slow, careful tending.

Accepting transformation is what allows us to go out in joy—to live into that tension of despair, struggle, or a feeling of being in exile on the one hand, and peace, hope, and steady growth in the other. If we think of joy as simply a feeling of happiness it will not meet our needs. Joy is both a feeling and the ability to reflect on an experience that moves us. As a result we can encounter joy not only in experiences that bring happiness but also in the face of suffering or despair.

As an example, we might think of the Indigenous peoples who were taken from their land and their people and forced to live in residential schools. They are in a kind of exile—no longer confined to lives in residential schools, but neither back to the home they once knew. And as we, as a nation, observe and come to better understand the atrocities experienced by large numbers of our Indigenous neighbours, we might respond with sadness and anger over the way they were treated not just by our country but by our own church. But even in that feeling of loss we might also find joy in the knowledge that the Presbyterian Church and even more locally, we as Armour Heights Church, are finding ways to repent, to open our arms, and to listen more carefully. Joy gives us the ability to reframe our sadness and anger with expectant hope.

And this helps us to appreciate Paul's reminder to the followers of Jesus in Rome. He says to them, "And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5:3-4). If we read this through the lens of happiness, it can seem dreadful and overwhelming. Feelings alone will make us flee this moment. But through the perspective of joy, our beliefs frame a richer picture where feelings are not the end but the beginning of a transformative moment. If we are brokenhearted, could it not make us more compassionate? If we are hurt by someone, might it teach us to forgive? If we are disappointed, might we learn to be even more diligent? Paul tells us to "boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Romans 5:2), because even when we are hemmed in by troubles, suffering, anxiety and loss our joy can grow through

hope in God. And as Paul points out, hope does not disappoint because God's love has been poured into our hearts.

This kind of joy doesn't always come naturally, but we can cultivate it. Like anything, it takes practice. Which is where the church comes in, as well: prayer, worship, practicing spiritual disciplines, Bible studies, being in Christian community—all of these are exercises that enable us to see things more clearly and consistently through the eyes of Christ and through God's great comfort and hope.

Our Backpack Blessing today included the gift of a sticker emblazoned with some of the words from Isaiah: "Go out in joy, be led forth in peace." The sticker is meant to act as a reminder—a reminder that as you journey through each day God is journeying with you. A reminder that, with practice, with the tilling of the church around you, there can be transformation. A reminder that you can go out into this world in joy. Despair does not have the final word, not when God's word rains down upon us and God's love fills our hearts. God brings all of us exiles back to wholeness. Amen.