

A 7.9.2023 Pentecost 6

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Here in Matthew, the disciples have returned from their mission. They have been spreading the good news of the kingdom of heaven “come near” and showing it to be true by curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers and casting out demons. They have traveled far. They’ve met people who received them and rejoiced at their coming, and they have met people hostile to their message. The dust is thick on their feet and they are likely exhausted, tired, wearied.

Do you hear it then in these gentle verses? That what lies behind them is not a pastoral scene of Jesus welcoming home his faithful disciples. What this beautiful invitation points to is struggle - deep and depleting struggle.

Paul has given us a rich description of the struggle he is faced with - the conflict between his will and his actions, his mind and his body. "For I do not do what I want," he writes, "but do the very thing I hate." "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death."

It is plain to see that Paul is at odds with himself. Through his words, you can discern an interior condition of great angst and turmoil. It's urgent, he's helpless, desperate. It makes you wonder what the "very thing I hate" is that he has done. Indeed these words and their tone tell a story we are not privy to, but perhaps they bring to mind our own internal struggles. Paul lands where he does, on the one in whom he finds a rescuer, a savior, but his experience of deep struggle is clear all the same.

Our reading from Zechariah was likely written during the reconstruction of Jerusalem as the exiles returned from Babylon. Yes, they are words born of deep struggle in a foreign land, cut off from the land God had promised them and delivered to them. Cut off from the temple of Solomon, reduced to rubble in their holy city. In this way, exile was for them an exile from identity. Defined by a specific land, a specific story and culture, they were unmoored from who they knew themselves to be - God's chosen people, blessed to be a blessing.

But Zecharia speaks it true: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter Zion." The struggle is over. "Lo, your king comes to you - he will cut off the chariots, the war-horses, and battle bows... Return to your stronghold, O Prisoners of Hope." This is rejoicing language indeed. I wonder if such rejoicing is even possible though without having endured sincere and tremendous struggle.

The Psalm is a beautiful, firm and insistent statement of faith. You might imagine the returning exiles saying such words: "All your works shall praise you, O Lord, and your faithful ones shall bless you. They shall tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your power... You, Lord, are faithful in all your words, and loving in all your works." But were such words ever on their lips back in Babylon?

What of our own Babylons? What words are on our lips or in our hearts when we find ourselves in exile? Exile takes all kinds of shapes and forms, but the forms dealing with faith go deep. Hard questions, hard histories, and the realities of the Christian communion in the Western US present their own challenges to Christian faith. But that feeling of being unmoored is close at hand for those of us who seek and search for something we can hang onto in the swirl of life, of weird liturgical forms and practices, and even weirder people. Even for the lifelong Christians in the room, when things have been hard, when life takes painful turns, struggles in faith take hold and promise to leave you changed if not also scarred and bloody.

We know struggle. In our daily lives, we know struggle. Whether it's getting along with your spouse, keeping up appearances, fighting with our own demons of addiction or depression, or just managing in the face of loss or loneliness - we know struggle. Keeping hope in the face of all the things we face in the world is a struggle - climate change, gun violence of epidemic proportions, war... In the face of it all, what has faith got to do with it? At times we struggle to believe what we hear in church, what we want to believe - that in Jesus, God made a way where there was no way, that God is present in the struggle, suffering along with us. But boy is that hard to believe sometimes, especially when you've changed churches, bulletins, liturgical practice, and more. When church is suddenly unfamiliar and for months, transition and exile can start feeling very similar. Lord have mercy. When will this terrible ride be over?! How long, O Lord, must we wait to hear this invitation and receive the rest you offer?

“The Book of Delights”, written by Ross Gay, is the product of a personal project he undertook in which he watched for delight everyday for a year, and wrote a reflection on what he found. He lays out the project in the Preface this way:

I came up with a handful of rules: write a delight every day for a year; begin and end on my birthday, August 1, draft them quickly and write them by hand. The rules made it a discipline for me. A practice. Spend time thinking and writing about delight every day.

From this description you might expect the book to be a “light read,” but it is not. I haven’t yet finished it, but a few entries so far have really sat with me. Especially one titled “Joy is Such a Human Madness.” Towards the end of the chapter, he wrote this. I quote him here at length.

Among the most beautiful things I’ve ever heard anyone say came from my student Bethany... ‘What if we joined our wildernesses?’ Sit with that for a minute. That the body, the life, might carry a wilderness, an unexplored territory, and that yours and mine might somewhere, somehow, meet. Might, even, join.

And what if the wilderness - perhaps the densest wild in there - thickets, bogs, swamps, uncrossable ravines and rivers... - [what if that wilderness] is our sorrow... It astonishes me sometimes - no, often - how every person I get to know - ...lives with some profound personal sorrow... Is this sorrow... the great wilderness? Is sorrow the true wild? And if it is - and if we join them - your wild to mine - what’s that?... What if we joined our sorrows, I’m saying. What if that is joy?

Whether you see the struggle of these disciples, the struggle of Paul, the struggle of exile as wilderness/sorrow or not, I hear in these words what it is we do here together in church, in this community of faith. We bring our struggles, our wild sorrows, we hold them together, joining them in the presence of a God who sees and receives them. And knowing them, God in Christ invites us to receive rest. In that rest, in that closeness with Jesus, we know a deeper joy - an end to what separates, a shared knowledge and a shared weight of wearying burden. After all, in the prayers of the people, we speak our burdens shared- “ God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**” All our many prayers (struggles, wildernesses, sorrows) become our prayer.

These new members whom we’re about to welcome come to add their prayers to those of this community. Struggle and sorrow is part of each of their stories, as they are a part of ours, as people and as a community. We open our struggles to each other and join them together, in hopes of learning the easiness and joy of the yoke and the “soul rest” Jesus offers.

The transitions are over, the season of change has ended. And here Jesus meets us, inviting us to rest, to an easy yoke, and a burden lifted. It is rest from struggle, not an end to it - to be sure. But in this rest, whatever the struggle you know today, may we trust that the weight of our struggles joined are not too much for the one who seeks our rest and in whom we find it. Jesus shoulders with us what we could never do alone. And for a time, we recover, we remember our baptism, we eat at this table and find our burdens joined to each other’s as we are joined in the body of the one who gives us rest.

AMEN