

## Exile and Hope

(Read Is. 61:1-4) Then the text goes on to describe a community, a “people” of peace, prosperity, joy and justice, and ends with these words:

“As the earth puts out its growth, and as a garden grows its seeds, so the Lord God will grow righteousness and praise before all the nations.”

Who is it that spoke (wrote) these words? And about whom are they spoken? And how do they apply to us?

I’ve been pondering this text for the past week, and hoping that I would discern here a message for FOH in our present moment that would inspire comfort and hope. I can’t say that’s exactly happened, but we’ll see....

When Jesus quoted a short part of this prophecy from Isaiah, in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth, and said “these words are being fulfilled right now”, it had a good reception initially; his listeners found his words impressive and gracious. That didn’t last though, because he seemed to indicate that this prophecy of healing and hope applied primarily to people other than them; that made the folks quite upset.

Well, what about us—could we, should we, receive these as words of grace to us? *Good news in our poverty, binding up of our broken hearts, liberation from captivity, comfort in our mourning, gladness to replace our discouragement, the experience of Jubilee—the forgiveness of debts and a new beginning, rebuilding old, crumbling structures?* Is this for us?

I don’t think it would be wrong to receive Isaiah’s prophecy as words of grace and encouragement to us, but I want to suggest a broader picture.

Some 600 years before Jesus, the small nation of Judah, all that was left of the “Children of Israel”, fell to the Babylonian empire, and many of its inhabitants were taken as exiles to Babylon. This in effect was the *end of the People of Yahweh* (as they knew themselves): the king was carried off, his sons killed, the temple and Jerusalem were destroyed, its political, cultural and religious life and institutions were simply ended. Many of its people, including leaders and intact families survived, but were radically displaced to a foreign nation and culture, as refugees.

Just prior to and during this critical time, 3 important voices emerged among the now-refugee people, speaking for God. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah offered interpretation and counsel to God's people. What was happening, they said, was God's judgment on God's people for their injustices and unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Many of their words were harsh and uncompromising. They called their people to submit to their reality, living in exile, and to grieve, both their sin and their suffering. And then, surprisingly, these same voices, these prophet-poets, offered words of comfort and hope. From prophecies of judgment and despair in exile, they turned to poems of new life and homecoming: a new covenant, a new peoplehood, a new beginning. Suffering, then comfort; grief, then hope; death, then resurrection.

The text we're looking at today, Is. 61, is obviously part of this second movement—the comfort, hope, resurrection, and restoration stage. As you know, after some decades, the Babylonian empire itself fell to a new empire (Persia), and the Jewish exiles were permitted to return to their homeland in Palestine. Apparently our text was intended for those Jews who were going back home, to Jerusalem. The conditions they found back in Judah were discouraging: a destitute, poor, and dispirited people; a city in ruins; barren and unproductive land. Perhaps the returning exiles were themselves dispirited and in need of courage, healing and hope in order to carry out their mandate. According to this text, the humble, former exiles and mourners were rebuild, restore and raise up; those who were lowly would ascend to the positions of priests and ministers of the God who loves justice. It was to be a new day!

So, again, what about us at FOH? Are we primarily agents of this mission to proclaim good news, to bind up, to comfort, to liberate and rebuild? Or we primarily recipients of this healing, liberating, renewing word and work? Or are we both?

In the large picture of Jewish exile in Babylon, the first task of those refugees was grief. Ps. 137 expresses that: *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps... How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?*

Perhaps at FOH, we have been in this first stage of exile, that of grief. In recent years we have experienced loss—of wholeness, vitality and joy; we have experienced brokenness, of relationships, of unity, of health and perhaps of hope.

When we allow ourselves to deeply grieve these losses, say the prophets of exile, we open ourselves to newness, to hope, and even to joy.

In this last year, we have entered a time of intentionally seeking healing and restoration. It has not been easy because it means opening up our pain, acknowledging our woundedness and our anger, being vulnerable, and grieving. Perhaps it's in this time and place that we begin to hear that other voice of exile, the voice of comfort and hope. We heard that last week: *"Comfort, comfort, my people."* *"Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters..."* And now today: *The LORD God's spirit is upon me...He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, release for captives, liberation for prisoners, the year of Jubilee.* I believe these are words spoken to us, but also words that call and commission us—"co-mission" us with Jesus.

So can we say that FOH is in exile? We are moving through our own small exile. We are both grieving and yearning for hope. We don't know how our story will come out, even whether we have a future as a church. We simply know that we are called to heed the prophets' words and Jesus' confirmation of them.

I want to conclude by noting that FOH is not alone in exile. Walter Brueggemann, a Bible scholar who is more of a prophet for our time, insists that all Christians in this society are living as exiles in the American empire. What makes this so precarious is the seductiveness of empire to convince us that we are not exiles but upstanding citizens of the empire, despite its consumer militarism, environmental dismissiveness, technological hubris, tolerance of poverty and racism and Christian nationalism. We are exiles here, we are refugees in this culture, but we are not alone; others, persons and communities, our neighbors, small churches, the PPC, are living this journey of grief and hope, as we are. And whatever happens to our small "community of hope", there will be a Beloved Community, a Kindom, a People of God, that survives and celebrates and lives the Jubilee; that's the word of the prophets, that's the word of our Lord.

*FOH, June 25, 2023, Keith Kingsley*