

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2,8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
MARK 1:1-8

Being Faithful, Attentive and Responsive Will Get Us Far

The people of Judah had had a really tough year.

Actually, the people of Judah had had a really tough *half century*.

In 600 B.C., Judah – the Jewish Kingdom whose capital was Jerusalem – was independent, sovereign in the land which God had given to their ancestor Abraham. They were ruled over by a king who was a direct descendent of the great King David. They worshiped in a temple in Jerusalem which had been built by the great King Solomon, inside of which, in the Holy of Holies, was the Ark of the Covenant containing the stone tablets with the 10 Commandments which Moses had brought down from Mt. Sinai.

Within 13 years, all that was gone.

Their country had been devastated and conquered.

Their king had been captured by foreign invaders, bound in chains, and forced to watch his sons be executed before his captors gouged out his eyes. Their temple was burned to the ground. The Ark of the Covenant with the original autograph copy of the 10 Commandments was lost to history.

I have seen what is left of Jerusalem from that time. It is a layer of charcoal carbon-14 dated to 587 B.C. A whole city was reduced to what's left in the bottom of a Weber grill after a really big barbecue.

Anyone of any education, prominence or skill who had survived the siege of Jerusalem was marched off into exile in Babylon – modern-day Iraq – hundreds of miles away. Those who had *survived*: in ancient times invading armies didn't have to actually conquer every city. Those cities which, like Jerusalem, were fortified and on hilltops, armies could simply surround and wait for the inhabitants to run out of food and water. Which they did, after terrible suffering.

It didn't have to be that way. The people, and especially the leaders, were warned. God's prophets – especially Jeremiah – warned the leaders that faithfulness to God, justice and righteousness in dealing with all people, rich and poor alike, and even following God's specific instructions regarding foreign policy *would* avert catastrophe. But the rich and the powerful liked being rich and powerful and dedicating themselves to

trying to become more rich and more powerful, and they ignored what had happened to the northern Israelite Kingdom a few generations before when the prophets had warned Israel to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God **or else**.

They could have looked north and pondered what used to be a free, independent Jewish kingdom like theirs which instead was destroyed and became “the ten lost tribes of Israel.”

The rich and the powerful in Jerusalem didn’t pay attention to history, or contemporary events, or God’s prophets. They chose instead to pay attention to the voices in their heads telling them that what they were doing wasn’t risky and that the prophets were unpatriotic (in fact subversive) and were getting in the way of creative new ways of running the country for the benefit of the rich and the powerful. So Jeremiah got thrown in jail for his trouble and lived to see every one of his dire “clean up your act or else” prophecies come true.

You can read the Book of Jeremiah and the last chapters of II Kings for the sobering details. The Book of Lamentations is a poetic reflection on the State of Jerusalem after its destruction. And Psalm 137 – “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept” – is the bitter poetry of the exiles newly arrived in “a strange land.”

Freedom, homeland, king, temple, Ark of the Covenant: all that they had known as a people – as the People of God – for centuries had been destroyed. It was time for some serious, serious soul-searching. The community realized it had sinned. Lack of social justice, lack of faithfulness in worship of the Lord, and an arrogant, risky and unsustainable foreign policy had doomed the country, and the legitimate prophets had seen it all coming.

As the shock wore off and the reality began to sink in among the exiles that they were in Babylon indefinitely, they had to deal with questions of **identity**. They were not voluntary immigrants; they were *captives*. Their nation had not merely lost a war, it had been *wiped off the map*. With land, king, temple and the Ark of the Covenant gone, *who were they?* Were they now to give up and become Babylonians, to become scattered and assimilated like their cousins from the northern part of the Holy Land? Was God punishing them justly for their sin, or had their God, in fact *also* been defeated or killed – the usual ancient assumption when a people experienced a catastrophe like theirs?

And if the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who had led them out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land, who had guided them, delivered them, chastised them and given them hope and purpose for centuries *was still*, in fact, alive, was he powerful enough to do anything to help – and if so, *did God care?*

It seems plausible that some of the exiles did give up. But many did not give up and they began to look not only at what they had lost, but *at what they still had*, an especially important exercise in time of adversity.

They still had each other. Unlike the Assyrians, who had conquered the northern part of the Holy Land over a century before and had scattered many of its inhabitants in their other territories, the Babylonians allowed the exiles to form a *community*. The exiles also “unpacked” physically and mentally for a long stay. *They still had the Bible.* They created a form of worship different from the sacrificial cult of the temple in Jerusalem. The community gathered on the Sabbath for worship which included readings from the scriptures, psalms, prayers, perhaps a brief, shared statement of the faith, and a sermon by a leader well-trained in the bible. If that format sounds an awful lot like the first half of our Sunday services, it’s because *that’s where we got this format*, from the Jewish exiles in Babylon who created the first synagogues. From great adversity came creativity and new life.

As the exiled people focused more and more on the scriptures, they collected the various writings, reflected on them and edited them, increasingly from a viewpoint which continued to assert God’s power and direction of history and to see the catastrophe as God’s just punishment of God’s people for their faithlessness. They also had prophets – Ezekiel’s visions date from this period – and they read the uplifting words of previous prophets like Isaiah, who declared that God was in charge of the **future**, not just of the past, and would continue to guide God’s people, ultimately through a transcendent figure who came to be called the Messiah, Emmanuel, “God with us.”

And in the meantime – well, those who still had faith *and* had raised the new generations now born in this foreign land in the faith, believed God could act at anytime to transform the present situation. Maybe.

Perhaps it was in a Sabbath gathering in a synagogue in Babylon nearly *50 years* after the exiles had been marched away from the smoking ruins of Jerusalem that a new prophet, an heir to Isaiah, stood up and, inspired by the Holy Spirit, spoke these words to the people, the words we just heard read this morning:

“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. A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”

I wonder if anyone got “goose bumps” in the synagogue that morning. How often does someone say, “The mouth of the Lord has spoken?” And no doubt someone asked, “What does this mean?” “We have been forgiven, and God will lead us **home**.” “Uh, prophet, reality check, the Babylonian army might have something to say about that.” And the prophet smiled and said, “God has appointed King Cyrus of Persia to be God’s instrument of liberation.”

And it came to pass that in 539 B.C. Persia (modern day Iran) invaded Babylonia (modern day Iraq) and, in one decisive battle, conquered the Babylonian Empire. Then, King Cyrus announced that *the Jews could go free*, go home to Jerusalem (also one of his provinces) *and* take with them all the stuff the Babylonians had looted from the temple in Jerusalem, *and* take with them a check from the Imperial Treasury to help with the rebuilding costs, with the condition that they remember the King in their prayers. “Uh, we can do that.” Can you imagine? Miracles do happen.

So what can we learn from this for us for now? First of all, faithfulness through thick and thin is part of who God is, and we are called to be faithful in all circumstances as well. Faithfulness includes honest self-examination, repentance of our sins, and turning more fully towards God. Just because there are some people who don’t get this doesn’t mean those who do are called to be complacent. Only by repentance can we receive God’s forgiveness, only by faithfulness can we keep in touch with God and receive the blessings that God has prepared for those who love God.

As we’ve reflected on the scope of the catastrophe experienced by God’s people in the 6th Century B.C. and the spectacular deliverance which followed – nothing less than a new Exodus – we should understand for ourselves, our country and the world that **there is no hole so deep that God cannot lift us out of it.**

We need to be **faithful** to God, **attentive** to God, and **responsive** to God, which includes, in the words of today’s Epistle, “leading lives of holiness” and responding to the call of the prophets (Including John the Baptist) to repent of our sins so that we may have room in our hearts for Christ. We can make the key words from today’s psalm be key objectives in all lives: *mercy, truth, righteousness and peace.*

Let us be faithful to God, attentive to God, and responsive to God. If we put the first letters of those three words together, f-a-r, we’ll realize that God can get us **far**. God’s done it before, and God can do it again.

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