

Going Back Home

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Isaiah 58:1-12 and First Corinthians 11:23-26

Delivered on February 9, 2020

At the end of the film *Fiddler on the Roof*, there is a heart breaking scene. It is the early twentieth century, more than a hundred years ago, and the people of the Jewish village of Anatevka are leaving their little community where they have lived for centuries. The Russian czar, as part of his program of persecuting the Jewish people has decided to exile the residents of Anatevka from their home, the only home they have ever known. So the film ends with the people of this village loading up their ox and donkey carts, piling whatever belongings they can take into them and leaving their village behind. What they can take with them isn't much—some clothes, a few rugs, maybe some pots and pans, and as they pile these belongings into their carts, they make a slow journey down a long muddy road to places they have only read about, Chicago, New York, even Jerusalem. Despite this heartbreaking scene, we can imagine that some of the people of Anatevka are young enough to be excited about a new life in a new place far away from all this persecution and harassment. But surely others are old and tired and their only remaining comfort in life is the familiar and the known, and for them to be pushed out of their homes is in some ways a fate worse than death.

Well, if you have seen this film or if you can picture such a scene in your imagination, you can picture what today's scene is like from the book of the prophet Isaiah. For in this scene, we have the same ox carts and donkey carts. We have the same few belongings being piled in the back and we have the same slow journey down a long muddy road. We have old people and young people, and yes, plenty of middle aged people, too. But despite these similarities, today's scene bubbles with a lot more joy. For the people in today's scene are not being thrown out of

their homes. Instead, they are being allowed to return home. For the past seventy years they have been living in exile in a foreign land, and now their exile is over. The foreign land is Babylon, and their home is Jerusalem. Now certainly some of them, most of them, in fact, had not been born when their exile started seventy years earlier, but there are enough older people around to tell all the young people what it will be like at the end of this long journey. They fill the heads of these young people with visions of Jerusalem's lush gardens, glorious palaces and majestic temples. There is no internet in these days or cell phones or television, but there are good story tellers who can paint pictures with words more vividly than any artist could paint with a brush, and any time the young children get restless and bored on this long journey, they just think of the Jerusalem these older story tellers have painted on the canvas of their minds.

But as they reach the gates of Jerusalem at the end of this long journey, these exiles are shocked at what they find. Their ruthless Babylonian captors left their homeland a smoldering ruin. Tears run down the cheeks of the children. The women are wailing. Where there was once a temple, there is nothing but an ash heap. Where there once were palaces, there is nothing but rubble. Where there once were beautiful gardens, now nothing grows but weeds. Jerusalem is a disgrace. They have journeyed all this way to go home only to find that there is no home left to go to.

Well, now we fast forward a few years, and out of this sorrow and despair the former exiles begin to piece together a society. And they form a society which looks very much like our society. There are people getting rich off of the back breaking labor of the poor. There are people who are cheating the poor out of their fair share of what they deserve. There are people who are passing homeless people and beggars on the street as if they don't even exist, as if

they can't see them or hear them. But all the while they long for God to return Jerusalem to its former glory. They long for home, the home they once knew—the Jerusalem they once recognized. So what do they do? Well, they do what many people do when they want to please God. They go to church. They decide to sing their hymns a little louder than usual. They make sure the preacher says extra-long prayers. And they do something else. They fast. They go without food for as long as they possibly can to show God how sincere they are. "And surely, all this will work," they say. Surely all this will show God how much they love him, and surely all this will give God everything God could ever want. But in all this, there seems to be a problem. God seems not to notice all these gestures. Jerusalem is not returned to its former glory, and they cannot go home again. Now in our day and age when people see prayers being unanswered and pious acts being unseen by God they often say there must not be a God after all. But people didn't do that in those days, instead they wanted to know "Why?" And so today we hear their words to God as they say "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" But God tells them they've got it all wrong. Through the lips of the prophet Isaiah God answers, and God says, "You serve your own interests when you fast and oppress all your workers. Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? If you do these things, then you shall call and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say 'Here I am.'"

So what do we have here? We have a story in which God tells the people of Jerusalem the following: "if you want me to bless you, don't think I'm going to be impressed by how many times you go to church. Don't think I'm going to be impressed by how loudly you sing your

hymns. Don't think I'm going to be impressed with your fasts. If you want me to bless you, help the poor, house the homeless, feed the hungry, care about your neighbor."

Now, I think it is easy to misunderstand what is going on here in this conversation between God and the people of Jerusalem. I do not think God is saying "Do these things for your neighbor in order that I will bless you" as if that's why you do them. I know it's easy to hear this story that way, but I don't think that's what's happening here. I don't think we have people who just treat God as if God is supposed to dole out blessings to them like candy from a machine every time you put in a good deed like your putting in a dollar.

I think instead these are people who love God with all their hearts, and they are either deeply angry with God or deeply disappointed in God. And why is that? Why are they so angry and disappointed? It is not just that they want God to give them a blessing. They think God owes them a blessing. They think they have clean hands and they are innocent before God, so why are they still living in a heap of rubble? Why are they still living in this disgraceful shadow of their former home? And so when we read these questions in this text we should hear the anger behind them, we should hear the hurt behind them. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

But in a voice filled with compassion, I think, God says "I do not owe you my beloved children, and you do not have clean hands. Those with clean hands are those who care about the poor. Those with clean hands do not ignore and neglect my people. Those with clean hands are people who are blameless, and they are not you. You may think you are innocent because you do all the so-called religious things, because you go through the religious motions, but think

again. If you don't care about the people I have made you are not innocent, and I don't owe you anything."

Well, the fact that these people of Jerusalem were not innocent before God may have been news to them. They may have thought that going through all the rituals of their faith like fasting and worshipping and praying was all that was necessary to be innocent and they had no idea that justice and mercy and kindness was as much a part of being obedient to God as all these other things. And I feel sure there are people in this world who are no different than these folks. I am sure you can meet them every day—people who think that there is really nothing more to being a Christian than going through a lot of religious rituals that will not put food in one hungry mouth, or clothes on one person's back, or bring justice for one person who is innocent. I think you'd be surprised, I think we'd all be surprised at just how many people think that way, think the way these returned exiles think. Now, I don't think there are too many of *us* who think that way, nor do I think there are people who think this way in a lot of churches that have nothing to do with being Presbyterian. Just yesterday I was out at the Chapel in Greene with two other members of Northminster and they were hosting a sex trafficking ministry which I will talk more about in the coming year. I don't think we have much in common here with the Chapel but I know there are all kinds of Christians and not just Presbyterians who are not like these Jerusalem exiles, but out in the world I think we'd be surprised at how many people think just like them.

And yet, yet I am not talking to people out there in the world, am I? I am talking to the congregation of Northminster Presbyterian Church. I am talking to all of us in here. And if we

know better, then why do we need to hear this story? Why do we need to hear what we already know?

When we turn to our New Testament lesson today, we hear familiar words. But words that are so familiar we may not think about them much. We hear the words that we say every time we celebrate communion where we tell the story of how Jesus, when he sat with the disciples at the Last Supper, broke bread and gave it to his disciples and said this do in remembrance of me. And Paul of course tells us that every time we eat this bread and drink this wine we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. And so what I think we are being told here in these familiar words is that as the people of God we celebrate this sacrament over and over and over again because otherwise we forget. We forget what we know. Do you ever forget what you know? Of course you do. And one of the problems you see is that in English the word memory isn't a very useful word. The problem you see is that we talk about memory in two different ways. If I am talking to you one day and you are telling me all kinds of stories about your childhood and you describe to me all these vivid details about things that took place decades ago, I might say "You have a good memory." That's what we call dispositional memory. But just because I have a good dispositional memory doesn't mean I can call to mind certain things when you ask me, like the capital of Florida or recall your name when you're standing in front of me. That's what we call occurrent memory. You could have a great occurrent memory but a lousy dispositional memory, or a great dispositional memory, but a lousy occurrent memory. Sometimes kids have great occurrent memories. There was a guy once who was a young father and he had a four year old girl that he took to his office with him because it was take your daughter to work day. And oh this little girl couldn't wait, she was so excited to go with her dad

to work. So they got to the office, and you know the man introduced his daughter to his boss and all his colleagues and so on and so forth, and all of the sudden this little four year old girl burst into tears. She just burst into tears! So, of course the dad was like what's wrong. She said "Daddy, I don't see any clowns, where are all the clowns you said you worked with? So, you know kids can have great occurrent memories. But part of the challenge of the Christian faith is to get what we know from our dispositional memory into our occurrent memory—to get what is filed away in the back of our minds to the front of our minds. We forget that being faithful to God is not about what we do in here. It is what we do out there. We forget, and so let us hear it again. Let us hear it again and again. If you say you love God, then love people. If you say you are devoted to God, be devoted to your neighbor. Or hear it the way the prophet Isaiah says it: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? If you do these things, then you shall call and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say 'Here I am.'"