

THE BLESSINGS OF EXILE

Scripture Readings: Matthew 2:13-23, Isaiah 56:1-8

*A BB gun.
A model plane.
A basketball.
A 'lectric train.
A bicycle.
A cowboy hat.
A comic book.
A baseball bat.
A deck of cards.
A science kit.
A racing car.
A catcher's mitt.
So that's my list
of everything
that Santa Claus
forgot to bring.*

That's the poem "December 26" by Kenn Nesbitt. He writes for all of us who are happy to say Good Riddance to 2020 and all its disappointments, including a holiday season that didn't give us all we wanted. Here's a better way of putting our feelings about this year-to-year transition, in familiar words from Alfred, Lord Tennyson:

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,

The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

Tennyson brings us the words we need to hear at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 – words that put an end to a year filled with falsehood and fear, grief and greed, pride and slander and spite and darkness; words that look to a new year, a new ERA of hope and promise, truth and kindness, sweeter manners and purer laws, a thousand years of peace.

As Tennyson's wild bells ring out, we should be practicing the ancient breath prayer, with every exhalation breathing out sin and sadness, powerlessness and despair and with every inhalation breathing in grace and hope, power and purpose. Breathe out the old, breathe in the new. Do a couple of these breath prayers with me – breathe out, breathe in; breathe out, breathe in.

That's what we need – renewal, rejuvenation, resurrection. Even if 2020 hasn't defeated us, many of us are more than happy to leave it behind and start looking forward to something better, freer, healthier, happier, more loving, more alive than what we've felt this past year; looking forward even if that gaze is four, five, six, seven months distant. Breathe in – grace and hope, power and purpose. A new year leaving behind this last year's experience of exile from our lives.

Our Scripture Readings this morning are both about exile and what comes out of exile. And, surprisingly, each of them seem to be leading us to reflect on the blessings that can emerge from the experience of exile.

Now, let me tread carefully before proceeding. This next part of this morning's meditation may not be what you need to hear right now. It may be weeks and months before you're ready to have some philosophical thoughts about what this past year's experience has meant to you, has changed in you. For now, you may simply need to be freed from the sorrow and pain of 2020.

Secondly, I want to be clear that I am in no way asking you to think that God had a role in bringing about this Pandemic. The God we meet in Jesus Christ does not want death, disease, violence and destruction. But that same God is present with us through such tragedies, holding us close and helping to make way for a better future.

The rest of this meditation is for those ready to give some thought to what we might have learned from this past year, from Pandemic, and to reflect on what blessings of insight and commitment we can carry forward into the New Year.

First, let's think about what it means to wrest a blessing from exile. And that brings us to our Old Testament Reading from the 56th Chapter of Isaiah. The first part of the book of Isaiah is about announcing the coming conquest of the nation by the Babylonian Empire. It would happen in 586 B.C. when King Nebuchadnezzar brought his arm down on Jerusalem and burned the 400-year-old Temple of Solomon to the ground. Then they did something worse – they committed cultural genocide through exile, by scattering the Hebrew people among the nations. You think 2020 was bad – ask the folks who lived through 586 B.C. what that was like for them.

The second part of Isaiah, beginning with chapter 40, offers comfort by announcing an end to exile, a freeing of those who have been held captive in foreign lands for 70 years. This morning's reading begins Third Isaiah. The overarching message beginning in Chapter 56 is a plea for those who have been freed to come home to Judah, to Jerusalem.

Why do they have to be pleaded to, begged to come home? Well, think about it for a minute. They've been gone for 70 years, living in foreign lands. They were still practicing Jews. During this period synagogues began to be established. Since they no longer had a Temple to which they could sojourn for the three great festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Booths, the local synagogue provided a weekly, even daily opportunity to worship God and learn about living as God's people. In other parts of their lives, however, many of them had assimilated, gotten foreign homes and foreign jobs. More importantly, many of them had foreign mates, mixed families, even into a third or fourth generation. Those folks wondered how could they be welcomed back to Judah when they themselves were no longer ethnically and culturally pure, at least the kind of purity defined by the old Levitical laws.

That's the context. Now our reading:

ISAIAH 56:1-5

Thus says the LORD:

*Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.*

*Happy is the mortal who does this,
the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil.*

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
'The LORD will surely separate me from his people';
and do not let the eunuch say,
I am just a dry tree.'*

For thus says the LORD:

*To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,*

*I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.*

The tolerance and loving universalism expressed here in Isaiah is an astounding theological leap forward from the narrow-minded, provincial, and even xenophobic message so often preached and practiced in the past. Their experience of Exile brought about a new thing; an expanded understanding of God and God's loving intentions for the whole world. And the only part of the law held up here as vital to their faith is the practice of sabbath. As Walter Brueggemann reminds us, sabbath is, more than anything else, a sign of our resistance to empire, resistance to the oppressive structures of a system that regards us as worthy only in terms of what we can produce. In the view of empire, you and I are THINGS defined by our WORK, valued by the powerful only for how we can hasten their accumulation of power and wealth. Sabbath is the key was that we say NO to that system, NO to our commodification, NO to letting others define our work. Sabbath says YES to God's grace, God's peace, God's justice, God's shalom.

Hear Isaiah spell it out:

ISAIAH 56:6-8

*And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.
Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.*

You should have recognized some words in those last verses, words that Jesus shouts at the moment when he was the angriest we ever see him in the Gospels. He is overturning the tables of the moneychangers and kicking over cartons of sacrificial doves because they have set up their moneymaking business in the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple, crowding out foreigners who have come to worship God.

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples!” The theological insight into God's inclusive love and universal hope, a blessing from the Babylonian Exile, still burns brightly 600 years later in the fiery righteousness of Jesus.

Speaking of which, Jesus had his own experience of exile, even as a newborn baby. Listen to our Gospel Reading from the second chapter of Matthew, taking place just after the departure of the Magi:

MATTHEW 2:13-18

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'*

Just as Moses went into Egypt to lead God's people out of bondage and oppression, so too comes Jesus (a new Moses!) out of Egypt to liberate us from bondage to fear and hate, despair and powerlessness, and into a life of love and justice and resurrection! And the powers that be, like Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar before them, respond with violence and hate. But that isn't the only exile the young Jesus faces. Listen as the story of his early life continues in Matthew:

MATTHEW 2:19-23

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

There's the second exile – an exile from Judah, from Jerusalem into the northern lands of Galilee, a humble community of farmers and fishers, a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, where the hand of Rome is not so firm, and the religious elite seem far away. Think of the blessings of exile that came to Jesus:

- He was a refugee whose heart was particularly moved by the refugee, the outsider, the poor.
- His teaching was grounded in the earth, in stories of farming and fishing, in family, in the experience of poverty and sickness, in the hope for something freeing and lasting on this earth.

- His life was marked by courage; bravery in the face of violence, compassion in the face of hostility, forgiveness when faced with cruelty, love when confronted by hate.

The examples of Isaiah and Jesus persuade me that there are blessings we can draw from Exile, even the peculiar kind of exile we have faced in 2020 and will continue to face in the months ahead.

What if we draw inspiration from their example and "*ponder anew what the almighty can do*" through our experience of 2020. What is the most important lesson you learned in 2020?

I'll start since I seem to have the floor. Here are three briefly described lessons learned from church, and one blessing I would wish for our nation.

- 1) This church, which has prided itself on its great music and legacy of meaningful preaching, has started to speak another language – a visual language of image and art, picture and movie. And it's been noticed and has attracted folks who learn better visually than aurally, particularly those of a younger generation. A blessing of Exile: two languages are better than one.
 - 2) I've received more than a few notes from folks saying how much more they attend worship online than they did in person because they can drink their coffee, stay in their jammies, or simply access the service at a time that works with their schedule. It will be wonderful to be able to be in the same space with you and offer you a loving handshake or a good, warm hug. But we need to continue providing a creative and flexible online presence – and we need to keep getting better at it, too! A blessing of Exile: connection can transcend physical presence.
 - 3) An odd paradox: with our building closed and worship, fellowship, and small group learning held online, geography no longer defines our ministry. There are people from all over attending our worship and other offerings. But more than ever, our ministry is and must be defined by neighborliness, how much we connect to one another in caring and sharing, and how much we provide for the needs of our neighbors. A blessing of Exile: not geography but neighborliness.
- Now a hoped for blessing for our nation: many have felt like they have spent this past year in a political and intellectual exile. Can we enter the New Year with a renewed commitment to science, to facts, to honesty, to civility, to the search for common ground in pursuit of the common good? Can that be a blessing of exile?

Now it's your turn to reflect on blessings you might have discovered in your experience of Exile, lessons you could carry over into the New Year. That's been the legacy of our ancestors, from Moses to Isaiah to Jesus – God can bring a blessing out of a curse, hope out of despair, life from the grip of death. What is the most important lesson YOU learned from 2020? And as you reflect, don't forget Winston Churchill's brilliant advice: "*Never waste a good crisis!*"

Amen.