

There are times when history sort of sets precariously on a pin and the future can tip one way or the other. July 4th, 1776 was one of those times. In subsequent years we celebrate the outcome of that first July 4th which set our country's course of history for these many years. Through ups and downs, successes and defeats, heights of moral leadership and times when as humans we fail our country, ourselves, and our God, we still remember July 4th 1776 and it inspires us to be our best as a people.

For Israel there was a time when their history set precariously on a pin. It was the time of the great exile when the Israelites (after being defeated in battle) were taken to Babylon to live for a whole generation before being granted permission to return home. As I talked with Tom about my sermon (as I do every week) he reminded me how hard it is to wrap our minds around how singularly important this event was not only to the Israelites but also to us today.

We read in Jeremiah that there were a little less than 5,000 Israelites who took this journey, but Jeremiah was counting only the adult males so we can project that there was somewhere between 10,000 and at the most 20,000 Israelites living in Babylon for a generation. Today we as inheritors of the Judeo-Christian religion are dependent on the fact that not only did this group survive in an hostile land, but they recorded who they were as people of faith and that record remains as our Holy Bible telling US our history as people of faith today.

Now think about the likelihood of that small number of people not only surviving assimilation but charting the course of God's history. It would be like saying the population of the Claremont Colleges would significantly effect the next 2500 years of humankind's life on earth. This singular event of human strength and courage and faithfulness to their God was pivotal to many who came after it including you and I. Sounds like a miracle to me.

While I was at the Claremont School of Theology, I heard a sermon by the famous preacher of the Riverside Church in New York City, James Forbes, and he spent a lot of time on the very first word of this text, which is “Ho.” (Now, get your minds out of the gutters because I'm not using this as a bad word!) Forbes said that as he studied the chapter over the course of his week's sermon preparation, he always returned to this word. Here in this context the word is meant to grab the reader's attention. It means: Look! Pay attention! Hear this! And then follows the invitation to abundant life as only God knows how to give it.

Remember that these words are being heard either by people who are in exile are perhaps just leaving exile to return home or maybe even returning to see after many years their ruined homeland. This is what they hear from God:

***I will make with you an everlasting covenant,*** (unconditional love)

***You shall call nations that you do not know, and nations shall run to you***

(What? Run to a ruined temple, a ruined country?)

***For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.***

***For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.***

God reminds them (as us) that we are an important, though minute part of God's great history. The divine love that moves the universe is a lot larger and a lot smarter than we are and much more enduring through eons of time. And yet there is a paradox because God does not devalue Israel's or our places within God's history. God honors our participation as co-creators. God sends the rain and snow from heaven and they water the earth making the earth and all that

is in it bring forth and sprout, grow and flourish. ***So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.***

Earlier Jim led us in the singing of Woody Guthrie's song *This Land Is Your Land*. I looked this song on Wikipedia, and one thing I learned is that it has been borrowed by several countries, including Canada, Ireland, Scotland, India, Belgium, and Israel and adapted to their countries' contexts. It is easy to take ownership of land as though it truly and forever is ours. In America it is easy for us to forget that our beloved land was inhabited by Natives who loved the land as much as we do and long before our footprints landed.

Many wars have been fought over land ownership. But the land is truly a gift to us by the Creator to have during our time and place in history, to be cherished and to be shared for the good of all. But it is God's gift to give and God does so joyfully. And to this small band of Israelites about to return to their homeland from exile God says ***you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace.***

There are critical times in which countries or peoples face a future of only God's imagination. And there are times when personally we face a future that is beyond our imagination, when we know only what we do not know. Many of you know that Tom and I are in that place; we join many of you who have lived in and through the diagnosis of cancer. As I write this, we still await "the final word" but we are being told there is no other answer that fits.

Yet, this is not only our journey but a journey like many others who have come before and will come after us. And we live with their same hope and a hope grounded in the creative love of the universe who said long ago and says to us today: ***So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.***

What you need to know now are two things: One, Tom feels so badly about burdening and worrying others; he knows in his head this is ridiculous, but his giving heart is not there yet. And two, he is emotional, which is one of the reasons I love him so much; so please allow him to cry. In my lifetime, I have known of no one with a greater faith than his. This is why when you hear him read scripture he feels it so intensely; he believes it so completely. So may we all take strength in believing God's words through Isaiah's voice:

***My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways...***

***For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,***

***so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.***

***For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace.***

It's these times in life when it's hard to imagine being without a community of faith. We love you and we know you love us, and in the midst of our individual trials may we remember that we still have God's work to do and it is a work that is greater than anyone of us but relies on each one of us. The hurting world needs a healing word, and we can be part of that word from the experiences of our lives, our families, our churches, and our country. May it be so!