Springfield Presbyterian Church

February 7th, 2021

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

A Poem for the Exiles

1. A Poem for a People

In our reading from the book of Isaiah this morning, those first sentences might seem like a

reprimand from a strict teacher of yesteryear, with those words, “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” or perhaps with a modern twist, “Were you not listening? Pay attention.” Like all other texts though, we need to read it in context.

What you hear this morning is a poem, rather than address or a narrative. It is a poem for the people in exile in Babylon. These folks were living in a painful reality – they were forced from their homes, they were scattered as the temple was destroyed, and they became refugees from the very land that was promised to them. Instead of an indictment, the poetic start is to help to remind the Babylonians – you’re in a really difficult spot, it looks like everything has laid to waste – but do you not remember Your God? Do you not remember the provisions he has made? They are so deep and so mired by the sadness of their situation that they have forgotten about the mighty strength of God.

But honestly, who could blame them? Babylon might be a long way from here, but it feels pretty real these days to empathize with what they might be feeling. You and I, no matter how this journey of life has looked thus far, we have seen our struggles. We are human, we have suffered, we have struggled in the grips of sadness, and when your head is barely above water, it’s hard to remember this God that is proclaimed about as joyous and good in the text. But when we are in that space, there is no shame – we are human, and the poem today reminds us of the good word to remember in light of the hard times – God was, is, and will be present in love and here to strengthen us all the days of our lives.

1. Hard to Hear

I like to think of the poem as a nudge for the soul – a nudge to remember that in the midst

of life’s challenges, it’s like God is crying out, “hey – over here – remember me? Remember that you aren’t in this alone, remember that I am mighty and strong, and I will lift you up and help you soar. It might not feel that way right now, but try to remember.” And that is the life of faith – remembering in the good times and in the bad.

I heard a story once about a woman from Tennessee, a woman named Margaret Stevenson and she was in her 90s. She used to hike ten to fifteen miles a day in the Smoky Mountains. In her lifetime, she hiked the trail up to Mount LeConte more than 700 times and could tell you tree by tree their Latin and colloquial name. So a younger man named Bill joined her once and as they hiked together, Margaret said to him that they are right near the most unrelenting two mile ridge with no break in order to keep going. Margaret knew the trail well, and invited Bill to sit with her and take a break before they made that climb, but Bill was younger and said that he was going to go on ahead. And so he did – he climbed and climbed but at the end of the first mile, he found himself lying on the ground in exhaustion. Bill looked up in his tiredness and he saw Margaret, with the click-clack of her cane, taking a slow by steady climb. As Margaret passed Bill on the trail, she said, “One more mile to go, Bill! I’ll see you at the top!” After Bill rested a bit, he made his way up to the top, and found Margaret standing there, smiling, enjoying her routine hike.

I have to admit that I feel more like Bill than Margaret in this story. I would be the stubborn one, thinking that I could make it to the top with no problem, not daring to take a break or ask for help. I wish I listened more often to the Margaret’s of our world – to those who know the way, who have seen it through, and are there to guide if we were but to listen. Chances are, in her younger days, Margaret might have been like Bill – she might have been lying on the trail catching her breath – but she learned her lesson and she remembered and that remembering changed her.

1. Margaret Said…

When you remember the road, when you’ve seen hard days – it’s not that those days get easier, it’s just that you know how to navigate them differently. It seems that it’s only when we are weak and feel helpless or when we are vulnerable enough – that is the time where we can really experience the power and grace of God. And in those spaces, those places of deep growth, God will lift you up, on Eagles wings, you will run and not grow weary, you shall walk and not grow faint.

1. The Ministry of Remembering

There is something so important about remembering – remembering these poems, these

stories of our faithful ancestors, to steep us in the knowledge of a loving God. We have to practice remembering, so when the quicksand takes hold, we’ve got a promise that we know like the back of our hands.

I’m in a coaching class and this past week, we talked about the ministry of encouragement and celebration. I shared with the group that I feel like most weeks I put this congregation in a hostage pastoral prayer situation, where I won’t move in prayer until I hear more joy. It’s not because I’m difficult, it’s just that I’m kind of forcibly making you practice the ministry of remembering joy and finding encouragement from the most monumental of things to the very smallest. It’s this practice of remembering the joy and celebrating the God whose Spirit is moving – it’s this practice that moves us forward into growing more deeply in our faith. It also, possibly more importantly, teaches us to live a life that when the ground beneath us falls out, we can still give our cries of anguish to God, but we remember who God is and what God can do and what God has done.

My encouragement to you this week is to build upon the practice of the ministry of encouragement and celebration. I want you to take this ministry seriously – I want you to celebrate, even if something seems like a small win – to praise God and be grateful and share the good news of what has happened with a family member or friend. And a greater hope is that when we all practice this ministry together, that we encourage each other to see joys in our everyday lives.

So may you go from this place, knowing that God is certainly with you in the struggle, but he is definitely right alongside you in the joy and celebration. May you learn to live in the balance of both, sadness and joy, and I pray that God who will lift you up, strengthen you, and call you by name when you cannot remember – so that you may grow in faith and in love. Amen.