

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, Louisiana
7 April 2019

Isaiah 43: 16-21

We have a great reading in Isaiah 43 this morning. Let me set the background. The year is anywhere between 587 and 538 and the setting is Babylon. The people of God have been exiled to Babylon in two waves -in 605 about 10,000 of their artisans, metal workers, tent-makers and other skill laborers were taken by force to Babylon. The nation of Israel was then imposed heavy taxes and allowed to remain on their land, as long as they obeyed their new overlords. Unfortunately, a few years later, Israel rebelled against Babylon, which resulted in an attack by the Babilonian armies, killing thousands and exiling the rest of the population to Babylon in 587 BCE. Only the very elderly or those who were sick were left behind. Now, years after their captivity had started, the people of God wonder if God is done with them or if he has forgotten them. They fear they will die in slavery and never be allowed to return to their promised land.

Let me tell you a brief story of kidnapping and exile, which might help us understand Isaiah. An old professor of mine in Colombia was kidnapped by Guerrilla groups outside of Medellin around the year 1980. He had preached a sermon criticizing the revolutionary movement and the means by which they were trying to accomplish their goals. Now he was a slave of the capricious demands of the guerillas performing all baptisms, the occasional wedding, and the funerals of guerrilla soldiers fallen in battle. Once upon a time, he had been a great preacher, seminary professor, and a respected pastor. Now, many thought he was dead, the authorities had stopped looking for him, and even his Diocese seemed to have moved on. He was constantly tired of the walking from camp to camp on the treacherous terrain, the insufficient food, and the constant taunting of his captors.

In a twist of irony, not uncommon in Latin America, a new recruit had been his parishioner and acolyte at his church in Medellin. He was the only one in the camp who showed any compassion towards the old man. He would come to him daily and engage in long conversations with the priest. The young man would ask, "Remember father all those prayer groups, pot-luck suppers, Bible studies, and all-night vigils? Remember how much fun we used to have? God seemed so real to us then. My only worries were about not messing up at the altar on Sundays. Life was so simple! What happened to those good old days, father? How come God seems so far away now?"

The priest remembered the young man as a young acolyte. He also knew him to be a fierce fighter --ruthless, heartless, willing to kill at a moments notice. One day, after an episode of reminiscing and nostalgia, the priest looked at the young man with sadness in his eyes and said, "The problem with you Carlos has always been a lack of imagination. All you do is

remember how things were, but you are unable to see how things are and how things can be. You have lost hope and that's why you have taken matters into your own hands. You are constantly looking back, and you and your friends are fighting to bring us back to the past. But God is about to do something new among us here and now. There is a new future awaiting for all of us. The problem is that you can't see it. You are too focused on your own pain and your own history, and you can't see God's new works unfolding in front of your eyes."

The old priest was right, not just about Carlos, but about all of us as well. And this is the message that the prophet Isaiah tells his people today. They are captive in Babylon with their attention permanently set on their past. With longing in their eyes they remember how things used to be. Not so long ago they had their own nation, their own temple, a thriving kingdom, and all the blessings of their Lord, who dwelt in their temple. Now they have nothing. They have lost it all, captive in Babylon, they reminisce about the good old days. It is at this very dark time in their lives that God sent them prophets to sing a new song, to lift their spirits up, to spark their imaginations so they might see God present in their midst, and to rekindle their hope. Isaiah boldly proclaims to them today that God is about to do a new thing. God was still active in their lives and all they needed to do was open their eyes and perceive these things. God had a future for them and all they had to do was envision it, dream it, live into it.

The exiles are in Babylon where they are "displaced, alienated from the place that gave identity and security...[and] the shapes and forms that gave power to faith and life" (Bruggerman, *Reverberations of Faith*). For Israel, exile was "being lost, homesick, divided, unmoored, rootless except for memory. It must have been hard not to get too comfortable with Babylon ways, Babylon beliefs, Babylon values. It must have been hard to resist the temptation to settle down, fit in, sell out, and forget the story that had held them together" (Ibid). Isaiah stepped into this heart-ache and proclaimed a new message of hope and restoration.

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old."

How many of us believe that the best years of our life are behind us? Many of us wake up every morning feeling washed-up, unfulfilled, and disappointed by the way our life has turned out. Many of us believe that our present reality is all that is. We believe that God no longer acts in amazing ways in our life and in our world. All of us feel like this from time to time. Our minds are prone to living in the past. We have a memory of when life was good, we were at the peak of our game, and the world was in our hands. And we fix our gaze upon that memory and become so fixed and so rigid, always doing what we have always done, that we refuse to even explore what we have never done. We continue to expect the same old signs that tell us that life still makes sense. We wake up every morning to repeat the same patterns of behavior, engage in the same old vices, relive the same old memories, and day-dream the same unfulfilled dreams. In many ways it is true that in our minds we are all 20 years old.

In the mean time, we fail to see God working here and now in our current age. We become so used to our own misery that we fail to imagine what God might be doing in our lives, in us

and through us. Many of us still live in the darkness of past pains and hurts and many are still enslaved by addictive behaviors. We all long for the good old days and fail to realize that God is not just the God of the past, but very much the God of the present and the God of the future. To us, Isaiah says,

(Thus says the Lord) “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.”

God is powerful and he is in control. Only he can create rivers in the dessert. He is the path maker, the Prodigal Father, always looking for new ways to rescue and deliver his lost children. This is the truth of the Gospel. God is still active in our lives, but many of us have forgotten that we follow the God of deliverance, the God of forgiveness, the God who is always doing great things in our lives.

My friends, if your are too fixed on the past, remember that God is present, doing a new thing in your life. If all you can see in the horizon is the way things used to be, whether peak moments or deep valleys, whether great joy or heart-breaking betrayal and unmet expectations, remember that God is present and that he is doing a new thing in your life. When we are consumed by guilt, anxiety and shame, remember the Gospel of Forgiveness. We are forgiven and we are loved. As the Gospel today reminds us, the Son of God has been anointed for his passion, our forgiveness has been purchased by his blood, and our salvation is a reality that is new and fresh everyday.

Lent invites us to assess our lives and to let go of anything that impedes our relationship with God in Christ, including the past, our preconceived ideas of the world, our stubborn ways, our inability to fix our gaze on the future. Today, as we approach the end of Lent and as we see Holy Week closing in in the horizon, I invite all of you to embody a generous economy of expectation. I invite you to embody an extravagant hope. Allow yourself to dream and to envision as that old priest in captivity did, up to the point of his liberation after seven years of captivity. Allow your imagination to soar, as you think of what God might still do in you and for you and through you.

May God give you the courage to realize that the best years of your life are ahead of you and not behind you and may he give you the hope to exclaim, “Come, Lord Jesus Come!”
Amen!