

*All of Us*

The exile of Israel after King Nebuchadnezzar's army decimated Jerusalem, causing the fall of the last-standing kingdom of the Hebrews ranks right up there with the oppression and enslavement of Israel in Egypt. Both slavery and exile are powerful, theological symbols for human suffering. And both raise the questions of why it happens in the first place, and when it does, where is God in the mix? And in the case of Israel, neither the time of slavery nor the time of exile came to a complete end. The liberation of Israel from their slavery in Egypt was followed by 40 years wandering in the wilderness. And the delivery of Israel from exile by the Persian King Cyrus, was followed by an interminable reconsideration of the meaning of loss and defeat and suffering, and the seeking of new and redemptive grounds for hope.

Now, I fear that you may be thinking that, right now, this all sounds very academic and irrelevant to you and your life; but hang with me here. To be caught between unavoidable suffering and unimaginable hope is a very contemporary condition. With little effort, I am sure, each one of us here can recall certain moments of blind despair, when we felt trapped, with our backs against a wall, facing certain wreck and ruin, and absolutely nowhere to turn. And some of us, almost as surely, do not even have to look back, but only at present circumstances. I would not be surprised if a few came here today almost feeling driven here by terrible circumstances, to seek help and wholeness. For even if a few among us are not willing to admit it, all of us are acquainted with despair. Otherwise, we would not be fully human.

And inasmuch as we are acquainted with despair, and especially if one has been driven here to seek relief from despair, some of you will know and the rest of you will be glad to hear that this is a good place to come. The church is, after all, the bearer of the Gospel, which simply means "good news." And for us, this first Sunday in Advent, this good news comes to us in the form of an ancient lament from near the end of the book of the prophet Isaiah. It is a desperate but honest and heartfelt prayer of suffering Israel.

It begins with a cry that is more than just a cry. It is a desperate appeal. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," begins the lament. Heedless of the horrendous implications of such a plea, Israel beseeches God to rend the partition separating heaven, the dwelling place of God, and earth, the dwelling place of humans. And not only so, but Israel prays that this coming will be violent: with a force that causes the brushwood to explode into flame, and causes the waters of earth to boil. But couched in this desperate language is an altogether respectful and even loving appeal to God's honor, God's sovereignty: "From ages past," Israel prays, "no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God beside you, who works for those who wait for him." And so Israel flings its prayer of lament out into the dark unknown, but nevertheless, to a God with whom Israel is intimately related. Israel knows God. Israel has a history with God. And Israel remembers God. And then Israel does that which is absolutely critical in order for desperate peoples to open themselves up fully to God: they make an honest confession of sin.

And so the poem of lament turns to some sort of introspection, some sort of self-evaluation, some sort of honest self-assessment. *We sinned*, they now admit. *We transgressed*, they now confess. *We have – all of us – become like one who is unclean. All of our supposedly righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We -- all of us – fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take all of us away. There is no one – not one of us – who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; in fact, you have hidden your face from all of us, and have delivered all of us into the hand of our iniquity.*

This prayer of Israel is comprehensive. It acknowledges total failure. And this total failure is acknowledged by all of them together. This is what exile is really like, a total disruption that is totally disorienting. One knows not any more where one is, or which way to turn. One is denied access to familiar resources formerly relied upon for a good sense of self, for a good sense of community, for hope, not to mention optimism. All the usual signs and symbols that affirm our value and worth and dignity and ability are gone, and not only so, but they have been replaced with strange and adversarial signs and symbols that tell us we are nobody, we are worthless, we are weak and helpless, and hopeless!

I equate this utter hopelessness with what I call Jesus' experience of "Godforsakenness." Remember how, with calm, conviction and courage, Jesus endured humiliation, condemnation, and torture; but that calm, conviction and courage failed even Jesus after he had been nailed to the cross and left to hang a while. "My God, my God," Jesus then lamented, "why have you forsaken me?" This, it turns out, is a gospel conundrum, some sort of puzzling announcement of good news that Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, himself suffered, cried out in desperation, died and was buried. Of course the good news does not end with the burial of Jesus' corpse, but with the resurrection of his body! **But do not** let that diminish in any way the great good news, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, entered fully into the human experience of Godforsakenness, and as a result, Jesus Christ has an ear tuned, if you will, especially to the sound of human suffering, Jesus hears the human cry, and takes people, all of us, into himself, into his own death, so that we may also experience in Him a resurrection. Here, then is hope.

But just short of that very hope, Israel, in total repentance, expressed the quintessential faith of Israel: they prayed the mighty "Yet." Y-E-T. *Yet, O Lord*, they cried, *yet, you are our Father; we, all of us, are the clay, and you are our potter, we, all of us, are the work of your hand.* And packed into that little three-lettered word "yet" is the entire gospel! The purist expression of faith, this gospel faith found right here in the Old Testament, this "yet," makes hope possible even and especially in the face of hopelessness. In this "yet," people turn to God without a leg to stand on. In this "yet," people appeal to God only for God's own sake. In this "yet," people acknowledge that in the final analysis they/we don't really count, all that counts is God. In uttering this "yet," people shift radically FROM themselves, FROM oneself, FROM ourselves, TO the one, the only One with power to save. And finally, this "yet," remarkably tears down each and every difference and division that would separate us from one another.

Reputation. Pedigree. Race. Nationality. Wealth. Strength. Beauty. Knowledge. Skill. Talent. Even religion! All that separates and divides humans one from another dissolves into thin air at the very appearance of this "yet," for the poem, the lament ends this way: *Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider: we are, all of us, your people.* The Gospel is for all of

us, or it is for none of us. This Advent, remember: no experience of human suffering, no doubt or cynicism, no fear or threat, can diminish in any way the very highest hopes we would place in the coming of Jesus Christ, unless we let it.