

Many of you know by now how much I love to travel. I'll gladly get on a plane heading anywhere at any time. I love the adventure, learning something new, going someplace I've never been before. I love the planning that comes before travel and the reflecting that comes after. Many of the places I've been to are places that some of you have experienced as well. I've enjoyed talking about Cambridge and England with quite a few of you. But then there aren't as many of you to chat with about Amman or Warsaw or Oban. Still, there's one place I've been that I'm positive every one of you has either been to, is there now, or is heading to in the not too distant future. Let me describe it to you – see if you recognize it.

This place is pretty dark. Even in the sunshine, there's a feeling of darkness that surrounds it. You may enter this place self-assured and confident, but soon you find yourself full of questions and doubts. It's the place where doubts, where fear, where scary diagnoses, or grief and loss abide. It's a place of vulnerability. I spent last summer here as my family watched my beloved granddad pass away. I still go to this place – even when I least expect it, I just look up and find myself here. Sometimes we travel here on our own, our own decisions leading us right to this place. Sometimes the decisions and sins of other people lead us here but many times we walk there on our own power. This is a place of darkness, of hopelessness, a place that seems insurmountable and inescapable.

Do you know this place? Have you been there? I call it the Pit. Some have called it the “dark night of the soul.” Whatever you call it, if you've been there, you then know something about Exile. In today's passage, the prophet speaks to people in Exile – people who have lost their entire center, socially, politically, and spiritually. For people in Exile, little makes sense. How did we get here? Does God care that we are here? How could God possibly be with us in this foreign land? How could God do this to us? How could we do this to ourselves? These are the people who, as Psalm 137 tells us, sat down by the rivers of Babylon and wept: *“By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of those songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? ...O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!”* These are the people who cried, “How long O Lord,” and “Why have you forsaken me?” These are the voices of Exile.

Maybe we've never experienced the physical exile from our homeland that Israel did – but if you've sat in the dark pit of anger, loss, depression, or doubt, you know exile. And so from the darkness of the pit of Exile, the prophet boldly proclaims: **THUS SAYS THE LORD**, Do not fear, I have redeemed you. I've called your name, you are mine. When you're over your head, I'm there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it will not be a dead end...**BECAUSE I AM YOUR GOD**. I paid a huge price for you – that's how much you mean to me! That's how much I love you! Isaiah shines a flashlight from the bottom of the pit of Exile right into the darkness. The God who is the Light of the World says to anyone who is lost in the dark, “Do not be afraid. I love you. I will pay any price to redeem you from the darkness of your exile. There is no situation you can find yourself in where I will not provide the light of hope and possibility.”

Maybe this is where I stop for the day – maybe this is all some of you need to hear. Those of you sitting at the bottom of a pit of grief or fear wondering how to get out. Those of you tending battle scars from clawing your way out. Those of you standing at the edge of the abyss wondering if you can survive the darkness. Maybe all you need to hear is: Thus says the Lord...you are mine, I will be with you, I love you. So if that's all you hear today, I'm okay with that. But no, I'm not done with my sermon quite yet. Sorry. Because what's really caught my attention is the second part of today's passage.

“Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. 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 prophet Isaiah spoke to a people who had gained influence, built palaces and a Temple, settled in to being a player on the world stage – socially, politically, religiously. Only to watch it crumble as their Temple and palaces are destroyed and they are sent off into Exile. From the darkest of moments, the bleakest of times, the prophet cries out, not words of despair but words of great hope and promise. Our God – the prophet declares – don’t you remember? Our God created everything out of nothing. Our God is the one who led you across the sea on dry land. Our God provided water and manna in the wilderness. And this God – our God – is going to do a new thing! This God is even here with us along the rivers of Babylon. This God goes before us even now to prepare a new way home. Words of hope. Words of promise. Words of possibility. When times are at the darkest, those are the moments when God’s grace shines brightest. The philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, “Faith sees best in the dark.”

Do you know how many times a week some article about the decline of the church pops up in my news feed? How many blogs, articles, and studies are done bemoaning the declining numbers? How many conversations I have with people concerned over the lack of young people, our failure to reach Millennials, the decline of the church’s influence on society, the rise in Sunday soccer matches? If I read every article, I think I would want to curl up in a ball somewhere. Or fall into a pit of darkness over the weakening of the church...

I’ll speak from within our Methodist story on this – because that’s who I am and who we are together, but our once scrappy and radical movement grew, exploded really, in revival, in passion, in influence. It grew so much that we started building buildings, launching capital campaigns, and we settled in on Main Streets across the USA and got used to the influence and power. But we’ve slowly watched that power and influence wane until we find ourselves in a bit of a pit where hopelessness and frustration, sadness and grief abide as we sit along the rivers and weep for what used to be. We’ve felt it across our country, within our Conference, and within our own walls. We are only a few short months away from General Conference and this exile, I think, has never felt so deep a pit as tensions run high on every issue and threats of division persist. It’s hard not to feel like we are lost in exile – without our center – not quite sure which direction to go.

This is where today’s passage really gets me. In the same breath almost, the prophet goes from reminding the Exiles “remember your God and all God has done” to saying “Forget about what’s happened; don’t keep going over old history!” Wait. What? How can we remember all that God has already done and at the same time forget what’s happened before?! It seems that after the initial horrors of Exile wore off, Israel settled down into their new life in a foreign land. Which is exactly what the prophets told them to do – plant vineyards, pray for peace. But perhaps they started to get too comfortable in the pit. They built homes and had families. Some even prospered financially – more so than they would have done back in Judah even. Maybe they hated their captors and bemoaned their situation. Maybe they told stories of the good old days back in Judah. But they had crawled into the pit of Exile and set up camp. And the longer they stayed there, the less they could see a way out of it. But isn’t it true for all of us that when we visit the darkness of the pit, we often pack the whole house and move in instead of taking an overnight bag. We settle into our Exile.

And so from the midst of the Exile, the prophet cried out – God’s going to do a new thing! And that’s exactly what God did! When a foreign power had once been their captors, now God would use a foreign power – this time Persia and King Cyrus – to be their liberator. Generations later, Jews during Jesus’ day would hear again the words of Isaiah and say to one another, “Here we go again! In the darkness of the Roman rule, God’s doing a new thing with Jesus!”

I wonder if the church hasn’t gotten a bit too settled in Exile. We maintain our buildings and our ministries, we keep plugging away, living life as if the decline of the church is inevitable, irreversible and the new reality. Our eyes have adjusted to seeing in the dark and so we forget to see with faith the possibilities beyond our current situation. Maybe we, too, need to hear the prophet’s voice shouting: Hey you! Church!

Wake up! God's going to do a new thing! God's going to make a road through the desert and rivers in the wasteland.

The season of Lent is a time for thinking about the cycle of life, about death and carrying the cross. But it not a season without hope and the possibility of resurrection. I think it's no coincidence that we journey through Lent even as the dead of winter recedes, that even as we speak of suffering and death, we also see tangible signs of new life as robins invade our yards and daffodils begin to spring forth. All around us are reminders that for every death, there is new possibility, for every ending a new beginning. One of our dads asked his 2nd grader recently, "What makes Jesus special?" We had to laugh a bit at his son's response because his answer was that, "He's the guy that dies every Thursday but is back by Sunday." So maybe we need to work on the idea that no, Jesus' death and resurrection isn't a weekly occurrence. But there's a bit of truth in his response – daily, weekly, throughout our lives, we experience the Pit of death, of darkness, of exile. But we have a God who is constantly surprising us with new possibilities, with bridges across the ocean, and rivers across the dessert.

Yes, the decline of the church is reality in America. But it is not the end of our story. We do not have to live as if this is the end of the story, an irreversible and inevitable Exile. For every article that's written about the decline of the church, we should be naming all of the possibilities that await us. For every conversation about the absence of the Millenials, let's have a conversation about what new thing God is working on now.

We had no way of knowing when we started Messy Church 3 years ago how many families we could reach through this ministry. We just joined a God who wanted to show us new possibilities. We had no way of knowing when we started planning our Great Day of Service that we'd have almost 150 people volunteer, ready to serve across Greenville on Saturday. Faith sees best in the dark, in the unknown and uncertainty. We don't have to sit in the dark with no vision or hope. We can see, by faith, the light of new chances, of new life. As Paul Hanson writes, "once faith is sure of its grounding in the one true God, it is able to address every aspect of life boldly, freshly, and courageously." Because faith sees best in the dark.

The Exiles of Israel who had once hung up their harps and wept by the rivers of Babylon learned to sing a new song. Amazingly enough, the time of the Exile and the years following were some of the most creative times in Israel's history. They learned to write their stories, to worship in new ways, to form new communities of faith and learning. They looked at the new possibilities opening before them as God showed them how to build bridges in the ocean and rivers in the wasteland.

As we prepare to sing our closing hymn today, I invite you to consider what new thing God is doing in your life, what bridge or way God is calling you to help build. For yourself and for our church. May the words of this final song – and our singing of it – be our prayer for the future of our church. "In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed and apple tree; in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free! In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see. There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody; there's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me. From the past will come the future; what it holds a mystery, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see..."