

COMING HOME

Jer. 31:7-14; Wisdom 10:15-21; Eph. 1:3-14; John 1:10-18

We have been studying the great religions of the world in the Adult Forum. In describing Judaism, one author (Stephen Prothero) claims that the great problem that Judaism addressed and addresses is the problem of exile and specifically, exile from God, the loss of contact with God. The solution to this problem is to return to God who is one's true home.

The fundamental story of exile and return for the Jews comes about with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 586 BCE. According to the Old Testament, King Solomon built this temple which became the sacred site of Israelite religion, the religion out of which Judaism as we know it would emerge. Israelite religion was a priestly tradition that was focused on sacrifices that were performed in the Temple. The Hebrew Prophets protested against many things but most of all against the religion of ritual and sacrifice, seeing this as a distraction from the real work of God which is the doing of justice and bestowing of mercy.

In 586 BCE the Babylonians conquered the Israelites and destroyed the Jerusalem Temple. At that time, many of the Israelites went into exile in Babylon (current day Iraq). Many saw this exile as exile from God who was believed to reside in the inner sanctum of the Temple. This exile was seen by the prophets as punishment by God for Israel's unfaithfulness. After the Babylonians were defeated by the Persian king Cyrus in

538 BCE, the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem where they set to rebuilding the Temple, which was dedicated in 515 BCE. The theme of exile and return runs through the Old Testament as for example in the story of the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden because of their disobedience to God. It is also evident in the stories of Abraham and, of course, of Moses and the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and the wandering through the wilderness to the Promised Land. With all of this in mind, hear again the words of Jeremiah: “With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I [God] will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble, for I have become a parent to Israel and Ephraim my firstborn.”

Christian faith is, of course, rooted in Judaism. The great themes and struggles of the Jews have been taken up into our faith. We feel free to read our faith back into Judaism and Israelite religion and to read Israelite religion and Judaism forward into our faith. An alternate lesson for today comes from a text called the Wisdom of Solomon, believed to be written in the century before the birth of Jesus. In this reading, the Wisdom of God, personified in a feminine figure, Sophia, is declared the spirit that has seen the Jews through their trials and who is accompanying them into the future. Much that is said about Sophia/Wisdom in these writings will come to be said about Jesus in the New Testament. Books like the Wisdom of Solomon are understood by Christians as bridges from the Old Testament to the New Testament, combining as they do Greek and Hebrew thinking. But you didn't come here for a lecture on inter-testamental literature, and my point is simply that we Christians owe a great debt to our Jewish forebears in faith.

Let's go back to the theme of exile and return, because it is surely our theme as well as it is that of the Jews. In the vision of the Incarnation in the Gospel of John, we are told that Christ is life and light. We are a people walking in darkness who must be enlightened. We are a people dead in our sins who must be brought back to life. We are a people exiled from God, looking for a way home, and Christ is offered as the way, indeed, the way and the truth and the life that leads to God. This is our faith.

We are this morning barely across the threshold of the New Year. Does the New Year mean anything to you beyond the trial of learning to write a new number for the date? Are you the kind of person who at year's end reflects on the year that is passing and assesses the gains and losses of that year in anticipation of reducing the losses and increasing the gains in the New Year? Are you a New Year resolver who vows that things will be different in the New Year—lose 10 pounds, be more patient, be nicer to your siblings—or are you a person who has a longer view and takes the passing of the year as a measure of the progress of your life? Or maybe you don't do any of that. Still, does not the passing of the year get to you in some way? Perhaps as a benchmark not just of the passing of years but the passing of us? The *New York Times* has pieces about the famous and quasi-famous who have died in the past year. Then there are people we know personally who have passed. And we are all older—we know this more insistently with the passing of the year. We wonder if we will be here next year? Or who we will be next year? To what end are we living? The New Year raises such questions.

On the Third Sunday of Advent, I spoke to you of the road as a metaphor for life. Moving on. Moving from one place to another. To where? To home? The Israelites wanted to go home from their exile in Babylon and thought of home as a place from

which they were literally exiled, a place to which they must return. Spiritually speaking, we might well think of ourselves as in a kind of exile as we evaluate our lives at year's passing. Am I at home with myself? Am I who I ought to be? These are the same questions as were I to ask am I at home with God, because who I truly am is who I ought to be and who I ought to be is a true child of God. Is there anyone standing on the threshold of a new year who is so self-satisfied as to believe she is who she ought to be?

That is for you to answer, but however you answer the question for yourself, the world is full of self-satisfied people who are positive that they are right and are unrepentant when they are wrong, who believe they are entitled to anything that it is within their power to have or achieve. So convinced of their own righteousness, they see no necessity in considering the points of view of others. President Bush seems to have been such a person, as reflected not only in the history of his presidency but in his own recent memoir. As one reviewer of that book has written, "During the war years, Bush fell in love with his own resolve, his refusal to waver, and this flaw cost Iraqis and Americans dearly. For him the war remains 'eternally right,' a success with unfortunate footnotes." (*The New Yorker*, 11/29/10) And this from a journalist who supported the Iraq war. (George Packer).

Exile was a great crisis for ancient Israel. The Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament viewed this crisis as flowing from Israel's complacency and blindness to the injustices that it practiced and the truths it denied. Exile was bad, but so it seems was being home, as even we see today in the creation of the State of Israel in which Palestinians are often treated as Jews were treated in the ghettos of Europe before the Holocaust.

The scriptures, Hebrew and Christian, are about the tension between exile and home. The spiritual lesson in the scriptures, Hebrew and Christian, is that our home is in God, a home in which we live at peace with our neighbors and with ourselves and where life is full of grace and truth. This is the home, we believe, that has been revealed in the teachings of Jesus, a home enlightened by the Word of God, for which we long and strive even as we cross the threshold from one year to the next. Amen.

Second Sunday of Christmas, January 2, 2011

Emanuel Lutheran Church