

# Returning Home

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 16 July 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 6A

**Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23; Contemporary Reading: “Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?” by Mary Oliver in Why I Wake Early.**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

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When I was a child attending St Paul’s Presbyterian Church in Timaru, in New Zealand, there was a sentence that could be uttered some days by the minister that would fill me with a sense of despondency. It was “*this morning the sermon is taken from the Old Testament lesson...*” Somehow the Old Testament seemed more likely to produce boring sermons. This despite the fact that I found the Old Testament stories in the horrifyingly illustrated Children’s Bible quite fascinating. At church though, without the teaching and deeds of Jesus, I assumed it was going to be a long sermon. And if it wasn’t actually long, it was going to feel long.

Studying Old Testament for my first theological degree opened my eyes to the complexity and diversity of the Old Testament. I was intrigued to learn that there were two distinct creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, and that the Genesis 2 story was the older one. That textual investigation of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, had revealed that there were four author streams.

- The Yahwist who names God as Yahweh. Starting in Genesis 2:4, it includes much of Genesis and parts of Exodus and Numbers and is dated around 850 BCE.
- The Elohist (from Elohim) primarily describes God as El or Elohim. Starting with Gen 15, it covers material similar to the Yahwist and is dated around 750 BCE.
- The Deuteronomist – is a distinct source or author, associated just with the book of Deuteronomy, and is usually dated around 621 BCE.

The Priestly stream encompasses writings scattered from Gen 1 to the notice of Moses’ death at the end of Deuteronomy. It is generally dated quite a bit later, around 500 BCE.

Realising that the Old Testament comprised not just the rich tapestry of the first five books, but also the prophets and the wisdom contained in the writings, transformed the view that I had held, that the Old Testament was less interesting, important and useful than the New.

From childhood, I had also accepted the common understanding that the God of the Old Testament was wrathful, violent, vengeful and capricious. And that Jesus ushered in a totally new understanding of God, as a God of love. I thought that Jesus had invented the ethics of loving God and loving neighbour.

It was much later that I learned that these teachings first appeared in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:9-18. I came to appreciate Jesus, the One in whom the Divine is made known to us, as a Jewish man deeply and profoundly shaped by his encounter with God in the Law and the Prophets.

At Union Theological Seminary in New York, I learned to call the Old Testament the Hebrew Bible, and to see it as a collection of documents that had shaped both Judaism and Christianity. The Hebrew Bible that we have is not the last word of the sacred texts in Judaism. Additional texts and interpretations of texts were added in the intertestamental period and in the Common Era, especially after the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. I learned that modern Jewish scholarship is deeply critical of the Christian method of interpreting the Old Testament as of little interest except for predictions about Jesus. And I learned that the use of the Hebrew Bible to claim the superiority of Christian theology had contributed to Christian anti-Semitism, expressed most appallingly in the Holocaust.

I now believe that just because the state of Israel uses some texts of the Hebrew Bible to justify its oppression of Palestinians and the illegal confiscation of their land does not mean that the texts themselves are rendered invalid. Just as the gospels and the letters of Paul are not rendered invalid because they have been used by people who bomb abortion clinics or by people who support the death penalty for homosexuality.

There is violence in both testaments, including violence attributed to God, but we Christians tend to gloss over those aspects of Christian sacred texts and focus with a microscope on the violence of Jewish texts (and even more so on those of Islam).

I believe that in the texts of the Hebrew Bible is wisdom that challenges us even now to live with love of God and neighbour and that it does not serve us well to reject them or to believe that our sacred texts are morally superior.

So, this is a long introduction to those formerly dreaded words: Today's sermon is based on the Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah.

The reading from chapter 55 is such a small fragment that it too, needs locating and grounding in a historical context.

As I was fascinated to learn about the four threads of authorship through the Torah, so I was intrigued to learn that book of Isaiah contains the prophecy of three prophets who prophesied at different times and places.

The Book is identified by a superscription as the work of the Jerusalem based 8th-century BCE prophet Isaiah ben Amoz, but there is strong evidence that much of it was composed during the Babylonian captivity and later. Isaiah of Jerusalem (the first Isaiah's) words are contained in chapters 1 to 39. Chapters 40–55 are authored by Deutero-Isaiah, an anonymous 6th-century BCE author writing during the Exile in Babylon. The writer is also called Isaiah of Babylon. Trito-Isaiah, the third Isaiah's words, covering chapters 56–66, were composed after the people returned from the Exile. So, our one is the middle one.

Isaiah of Babylon describes how God will make Jerusalem the centre of God's worldwide rule through a royal saviour (a messiah) who will destroy the oppressor that is Babylon. This messiah is the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, who is merely the agent who brings about Yahweh's reign. Isaiah speaks out against corrupt leaders and Isaiah speaks for the disadvantaged.

Isaiah 44:6 contains the first clear statement that we have about monotheism: *"I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god"*. This model of monotheism became the defining characteristic of post-Exilic Judaism, and the basis for Christianity and Islam.

Today's reading is at the end of Isaiah of Babylon's prophecy, addressing the people who had been forcibly relocated 1200 kilometres from their homeland to live in the land of their enemies and oppressors, the Babylonians. In captivity, the prophet called them home, not just to the land but to their spiritual story, to their relationship with God. The prophet invited them to see that hope is grounded in the reality of creation – in the rain and the snow (which is what inspired me to choose the Monet painting on the front cover of the liturgy).

As it was in Isaiah's time, it is not easy for us to think and imagine new possibilities beyond our present circumstances. A month ago, we celebrated the excitement and joy of Pentecost – God's spirit with us. But such joy (and the joy that is described in the passage of the trees clapping their hands) is often defused when we are forced to face the complexity of our life circumstances. Hope must be more than a mountaintop experience with Spirit. It must be grounded in the concrete realities of both heaven and earth. Isaiah of Babylon reflects an understanding of hope inspired by moments of transcendence in the context of everyday struggles of human existence.

In that time of Exile, between 587 and 539 BCE, human beings were struggling to do what we still struggle to do as human beings in our time – to hold on to hope when the circumstances of our personal lives, our communities, the world around us, the whole world - seem to suggest that despair would be a more appropriate response.

Chapter 55 starts with a hopeful invitation. Yahweh's claim that *"my ways are higher than your ways"* (v. 9) is not a put-down to human beings, but a challenge to look up – in the way that Mary Oliver invites to look up. A challenge to realise that, unless hope is grounded in the concrete realities of the moment it may indeed lead to despair. The theological category of hope is vastly deeper and richer than mere optimism. The invitation in this text bases hope on a theological reality that is grounded in the creation itself.

Isaiah sees the evidence of God's faithfulness in the rhythmic nature of creation. Although Yahweh's ways and thoughts are higher than the earth, things that are high will come down, just as rain and snow come down upon the earth to nourish it and bring it back to health.

*"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be..."*

Isaiah's portrait is of a God who loves and cares for the people and is passionately involved in creation. The sources of hope are extensions of God's connection, involvement in the life of the earth and the life of the people. The nature of reality itself is interwoven with the nature of the divine.

Isaiah of Babylon's people had become a bit habituated to living in a foreign land under the influence of a foreign religion. The state of exile became the new social and political norm. They got used to it. A community in captivity to a dominant culture was suffering from erosion of their social and religious purpose. In the heart of the empire it is hard to hold on to a religious desire that is alien to empire. And that is true for us!

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The prophet invites the people to celebrate God's saving ways in the context in which they find themselves, and this celebration leads to a holy discontent that energises them to hope for the return home, not only to the city of Jerusalem but to their relationship with Yahweh. They will be led out of captivity and back to the land of promise. There is Exile and there is return.

The story of the Exodus, the escape from slavery in Egypt, is much more well-known than the Exile story, but the Exile story is one of what Marcus Borg calls the three 'macro stories' of scripture. The other macro story he describes, in addition to the Exodus, is the Priestly story which has led to Christian preoccupation with sin, guilt, sacrifice and forgiveness. I think it is time to give the Priestly story a rest, in theology and liturgy, and to recover the macro stories of Exodus and Exile. And that's why, in our prayer of awareness, I sometimes use confession, sometimes lament, sometimes openness, sometimes that sense of call to be who we are in relation with the sacred.

The Exile was a real historical event (whereas the stories of Exodus and conquest of Canaan are not able to be verified historically). It shaped the religious imagination of the Jewish people for centuries to come.

We live now in a time in human history when millions of exiles and refugees know this experience first-hand. As we have come to know the stories of refugee background people, we also have a glimpse of what it is like to leave everything, not just possessions but family and friends, and a way of life. Exiles experience powerlessness and marginalisation, and often oppression and victimisation. Exile is an experience of spirit as well as a physical experience.

*"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion."*

In Borg's reflection on Exile he recalls the poignant moment in the movie ET where the little green alien points his finger at the sky and says in a haunting voice filled with prolonged yearning, *"Home."*

It seems to be part of the human condition, at least at times, to feel a loss of connection to other people and to the Sacred. Philosophers have spoken of estrangement, or to use a word that ET could relate to, alienation. We feel flat. We lose connection to vitality. We lose sight of meaning.

Exile is a reality, politically and psychologically. Spiritually, living in exile is separation from sense and awareness of Divine presence. This is true whether you have a personal or a non-theistic understanding of God.

If the problem is Exile, the solution says Isaiah of Babylon, is return. This is the prophet who gave us the words we hear each Advent: *"In the wilderness prepare the way of Yahweh, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."* (Isaiah 40:3-4)

Exile is a journey story. It has powerfully entered the human imagination for both Judaism and Christianity, calling us to see our lives as a journey to the place where the Sacred is present, a homecoming, a journey of return. And as Isaiah of Babylon reminded the people, even in the return to God, paradoxically God is with us.

Throughout the chapters of Isaiah's prophecy there is a sense of the power of God's word. In our text, we heard that that the word that goes out from Yahweh's mouth shall not return empty, but it shall accomplish Yahweh's purpose, and succeed in the thing for which it was sent.

In chapter 40, the beginning of Isaiah of Babylon's prophecy, is written the claim "*the word of our God will stand forever.*"

On our journey of Exile and Return, and that of our broken world, how is the eternal nature of the Word to be understood? What good is this Word for people struggling for life and justice on the West Bank and Gaza? Or in the ruined cities of Aleppo in Syria or Mosul in Iraq? Or in the damaged body and spirit of an addicted, mentally ill person who is homeless on the streets of Sydney?

What this text is telling us is that the promise of homecoming and healing is not limited to one nation, one border, one people.

Where can we find hope now? We need to tell the stories of kindness and liberation that the political powers and the news media, which profit from fear and alienation, do not want to tell.

For people of faith, we may be encouraged by the promises and the holy visions that have been preserved for millennia after the exiles of Babylon began to find their way home. The Word spoken so long ago to a marginal community, captive to a hostile empire has survived the terrors of history and the amnesia of subsequent civilizations. A sacred text of hope, grounded in struggle, is part of who we are today as a faith community. The promises were remembered by a people who did indeed return.

So, we should not dismiss this text as primitive, or pre-Christian, but instead wonder at its wisdom and embrace its call. Its very survival is a sign to us that the Sacred is indeed intertwined with creation and with the very nature of human existence.

The Word engages the world through the language and life of the prophets, and the people of God, again and again and again. This Word is in us, around us and beyond us... calling us to again and again to the intertwined commandments, to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Through this, and only this, the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.