

God's Heart, Revealed

It was a devastating time. The people, who had lived in comfort and what they thought was security, no longer knew that comfort and security. Their world had been rocked, they felt abandoned, devastated. All faith was shaken, and hope seemed absurd. Grief and depression dominated every thought. Where was their God in all this?

The setting of today's word from the Lord spoken by Isaiah is the period of exile of the Hebrew people from their home in the promised land, at the hands of the Babylonians. Their prominent leaders were carried off to Babylon, and many others were also deported. The temple in Jerusalem, that symbol of the everlasting covenant between the house of David and God, was destroyed, along with the rest of the city. In the words of Psalm 137, how could they sing the Lord's song in such a strange land?

Isaiah sings his song using multiple metaphors. The people of Israel are compared to a barren woman, a widowed woman, and a cast-off woman. In a culture in which women depended on their husbands and sons for shelter and food and protection, these metaphors raise the question: would Israel survive? Or would the shame, the loss, and the abandonment mean the end of the nation's existence?

More than 30 years ago my beloved professor of Old Testament threw out a comment at the end of class one day that has stayed with me all these years. He said something like, "Most of the Hebrew Bible took its final form in the time of the exile, which makes it more and more relevant today."

Pastor Mel Laurenz says this,

The grand narrative of Scripture speaks to the most urgent needs all people have, including the needs to be connected and grounded, to be protected and to belong, to know who you are and where you fit in. The Bible contains the stories of the people of God when they lost all of that. People torn away from their land, torn up as a people, and torn down by humiliating loss.

[\(https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2015/02/what-do-we-learn-from-the-exile-and-return/\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2015/02/what-do-we-learn-from-the-exile-and-return/)

The exile perspective is becoming more relevant every day.

Just think of those survivors of last week's earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia. When the ground turns to jello and the ocean swiftly rises to engulf the shore, the certainties of daily living simply disappear. Who knows what might happen in the next minute, or hour, or day?

Or consider today's statistics, the highest ever. 68.5 million people worldwide who are forcibly displaced from their homes by conflict or persecution. An additional 10 million people are stateless, meaning they are denied a nationality and access to basic rights.

<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>) Literal exile is the daily reality of these people. What will happen to them?

And we are just beginning to recognize a difficult to count number of people as environmental migrants, sometimes called as "climate refugees." Some are people needing to move permanently from their island nations or coastal areas due to rising sea levels, and some are those migrating because

drought is making traditional subsistence agriculture impossible. This kind of change can be more gradual, yet forecasts predict increasing numbers in a variety of places on earth.

And at the same time that we remember the world's struggles, we also can identify with an existential feeling of exile, separation from God, alienation from one another, distance from relation with our life-giving earth. Some call this the postmodern condition. We find ourselves disconnected and ungrounded, afraid that we will not be protected, uncertain to whom we belong. We aren't sure who we are and where we fit in.

The exile perspective is increasingly relevant today. Like the people of Israel, we need a word of hope from God.

Isaiah's word of hope begins with the tension within God between wrath and mercy. From God's perspective, these people were exasperating. They worshiped other gods. They forgot their covenant obligations, and they let the rich exploit the poor. Indeed, God was angry, and this text tells us that God chose not to protect the people when the Babylonians invaded.

Yet in this "wrestling match with wrath," God's mercy always wins. (Robert C. Morris, "God's Wrestling Match With Wrath," *Weavings*, vol. 1 xv, no. 5) "For a brief moment I abandoned you," says God. "I hid my face from you." Like a loving parent facing the typical parental dilemma of how to deal with a wayward child, deciding what to do or say to steer that child back to the right path stirs up a mixture of anger and affection. Some people reject the Old Testament for its frequent depictions of this tension, wanting to see only the face of God's love and compassion. Yet by hearing the whole struggle, the wrestling match, we can learn how to navigate our own way through anger to mercy. For in God's story, love triumphs over wrath.

"With everlasting love I will have compassion on you," says the LORD. And just as I promised that never again would I cause a flood to cleanse the earth of evil, "my steadfast love will not depart from you, and my covenant of peace will not be removed."

Elsewhere in the Bible this is summarized, "God's anger is but for a moment, God's favor is for a lifetime." (Ps 30:5) God's steadfast love faces up to what's wrong and names it, even while embracing sinners with compassion.

It is a stunning picture of God. And that more than 2500 years ago, Isaiah and other writers could express it in such beautiful, timeless language speaks to me of its divine origin. This is no wishful thinking. God revealed himself to the people of Israel in story and in words, so that then as now we might see the truth of a deity who is capable of wrath but whose heart is unconditional love for the whole wide world. Make no mistake, says Isaiah to the exiled people. God's love is steadfast, strong, and never-ending. God's compassion is boundless. God's mercy is true. And this steadfast love and mercy are for you, and for the whole wide world.

Sometimes Israel understood. But since the stories and the words weren't enough to reach the whole wide world, God gave us Jesus.

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was a priest in the Jerusalem Temple more than 500 years after Isaiah, a priest who became a prophet when he sang of his son's calling to go before the Messiah. He sang of God's purpose with these poignant words:

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

(Luke 1:78-79)

The stories and the words of Jesus tell us that God's heart is love. Just listen to Jesus, telling stories about lost coins and lost sheep and lost sons. Just see him healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, welcoming the children, forgiving sinners. But the whole wide world is a hard audience to convince. Telling is one thing; showing is another. God's desire to reconcile the world meant that Jesus confronted the powers of the world, which led to his death on a cross. There is no more powerful symbol of divine love than the empty cross. It is the image of God's wrestling match with wrath ending in the triumph of love. God's heart is broken on the cross, and with Christ's resurrection, the world begins to heal.

My friends, beloved of God, this is the revelation of God we have been given to give to the world. God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. I hope our fountain reminds you of that every week, and you take that sign of love with you into the world. Because if it stays in your heart, it may heal your sorrow for a day or two, but this kind of love must keep flowing or it will dry up. If we were to unplug that pump, the water would stop flowing downward. It would become a terrible symbol for God's love. Stay plugged in, keep the pump pumping, keep the love flowing, that fountain is telling us now. God's steadfast love never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end—and the love circulates in the wide world through us, God's people who are learning to love the whole world with the love of God, knowing that we are loved.

If you were with us last year, you will recall that for 8 months we explored the theme of God's call. For the most part we focused on our personal calls to live Christ's way in the world. This year the session of the church wanted to go deeper into our congregation's call, who are we to be together and how are we to live that call together. One question which motivated the group is this: What is breaking God's heart in the world around us, and how can we respond as God's people? So we are being intentional about learning God's love, and living God's love, together. If this is our calling as a congregation, then naming it can motivate us to greater good. Every week we offer invitations to be involved in the ministry and mission of our congregation, and we spout forth verbal announcements, printed announcements, and digital announcements. I encourage you to think of these as calls to learn and live God's love, together. What a privilege and joy that is!

There is one more symbol of God's love offered today, the meal set before us on the communion table. Each year at this time we join other Christian congregations in remembering the worldwide reach of God's love. We call this World Communion Sunday, for on this day we especially give thanks for the witness and spirit of sisters and brothers in Christ around this marvelous earth. We pray for world peace. We stand in solidarity with those who are suffering. And we commit to offering ourselves to the life of the world, following our Lord Jesus Christ. At the table we learn God's love; in the world, we live God's love.

The time of exile is over, the time of hope has begun. God's peace is here for us, and we are the vessels through whom God's healing love is flowing for the world.

May it be so.