

Questioning God

sermon digest

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Isaiah 40:21-31

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I'm not sure where we got it. Well, actually, that's not true. I do remember my childhood. I do remember the counsel given to children in the little chorus that we should "only believe. All things are possible. Only believe." Questioning God, much less railing out at God was off limits. I don't put down the good people who taught us that. They were sincere. I'm convinced that it was the faith that they, too, sought to practice. I think that they were just fearful that if we started down a road of doubt and mistrust we might keep going and never turn around.

Such a definition of faith does not, however, reflect the experience of the people of faith in the Bible. The great Moses railed out at God for bringing him and his motley band of slaves into the wilderness where they would surely perish for lack of drink and food. The aging Abraham expressed amazement at the promise of a son, and the long barren Sarah laughed out loud. Job, that supposed paragon of virtue, refused to curse God and die—true; but neither was he silent about the raging questions that tormented his soul. And the psalmists—oh yes, the psalmists—spilled their challenges, their questions, their anguish before the supposed God of faithfulness on a regular basis. Their stock question: "How long?" "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" "How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" On better days we are impudent enough to laugh, and on more than one occasion I have heard my irreverent husband utter the cry of "how long". But on our more difficult days, in the midst of sadness, tragedy and loss, their cry echoes in our hearts. The pastoral care counselors/professors at Southern Seminary used to direct students going through loss or helping others through loss to the Psalms for that very reason. The Psalms openly and honestly express the anguish, the grief, the deep questions, the rage of our lives. Honesty to God and honesty about and before God is a good thing. Only in acknowledging the darkness do we find our way through the darkness.

Hear, then, the anguish of a people in exile—an exile that had lasted 50 years. Look upon their situation, if you will, as something on the order of a parable. We can approach their story and other stories in the Bible as irrelevant events that happened to a people long ago living in very different times with challenges very different from our own. Or, we can put a mask on and say to ourselves, it is Bible, after all, and we must approach it unquestioningly, taking it all at face value. Neither works. Neither gets at the flesh and blood involved here. Neither engages our imaginations and causes us to seek to plumb the depths of human emotion and experience. Neither is likely to jolt us out of our ethnocentricity, our prideful tendency to think that anything worth knowing or thinking originated in our own lifetime. If we do not know what it is like to be carried by a dominant power into exile, other people in our time do. If we have not lived in refugee or labor camps, other people have and do. If we have not questioned the faithfulness or at least the strength of the God we profess in such a situation, other people have and do. But more, I would suggest to you that even if we have not experienced forced, physical exile and imprisonment, we have, if we are honest, experienced the meaning of exile and imprisonment in our own lives; and in light of the loss and anguish that may have occasioned that experience, we have questioned the adequacy and the faithfulness of God and everything we have believed. So think in terms of a parable and together, let us seek to learn what we can from the struggle of this good people with the darkness.

Fifty years—in their day, literally a lifetime. Probably only a minority of those still living had been among those carried away in chains from the Jewish homeland. Some had done okay. Following Jeremiah's command, they had built houses and lived in them. Living in close contact with the exiled royal court, they had managed fine with the rations received from their captors. Others, however, settled in labor camps, had known hard labor, disrupted family life, the death of hope. The "good news" now of facing homeward, of going back to a land most of them had never seen was hardly welcomed. Rather than describing great joy, Nehemiah says that those who would go were selected by a lottery; and those who just on their own volunteered to go were greeted with great relief as having taken the monkey off of the backs of others. Why get their hopes up? Why strike out across the barren wilderness, especially at the ripe old age of those who did have any memory of Judea at all? Tired of all the tears and nostalgia, the younger generations had decided just to make do. The God of Exodus? A nice story for the old folks, but for those who still had their lives out ahead of them, they would trust in their own ingenuity. They would find a way. Yes, they would. Yahweh? Well, yes. Yahweh might find a place alongside the pantheon of gods of this, the new homeland; but worship of the one God, quaint though it might be, was for an older, simpler

generation.

Enter Second Isaiah, also known as Deutero-Isaiah. Not well versed in the methods of contemporary evangelism, Isaiah calls his people back to their foundations. His message, you will remember, begins at chapter 40. Chapters 1-39 largely precede the exile, warning of its approach and devastation; and then Second Isaiah enters with the word of comfort about the God who will come alongside God's people in strength and deliverance. A highway coursing its way through the desert, good news shouted from the mountain tops, justice meted out to the nations punctuate the prophet's hopeful message. Reasonable? Not really. Especially for those who are aged. Especially in the eyes of those who realize that some compromises must be made, that bets must be hedged, that at least some token acknowledgment of the Persian gods must be incorporated into a forward looking world view. (They are, after all, the latest victors).

Isaiah takes three critical steps.

First, Second Isaiah acknowledges the darkness. He does not pretend it is not there. But like prophets who have gone before him and those who will follow him, he recognizes that, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, something is "on the move" in the darkness [*Prophetic Imagination*, 23]. Despair, the certainty that things cannot be better or if they can be better, not much better, closed the exiles off, as it closes us off from considering hopeful change. Hope does not deny the reality of the way things are—the full, deep, grievous reality. But hope begins in and finds its energy in escaping what may very well be the majority opinion that the loss, the injustice of the situation, the power of evil has the final and only word that matters.

Second, Isaiah calls his community back to an uncompromised, unmixed, unapologetic embrace of the God of covenant at the source of the community's very identity. Idols? The gods of the victor nations? No thanks. Do you hear echoes of the God who questions Job from the whirlwind when Isaiah asks,

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or as his counselor has instructed him? Whom did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice? Who taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?

And you would compare this God, Isaiah asks in disbelief, to an idol?! The hope of this community—the hope of *our* community—resides, Walter Brueggemann insists, not in finding some neutral, safe, modern symbols of hope, but in claiming the power of those symbols that have carried our fathers and our mothers through the ages:

The memory of this community begins in God's promissory address to the darkness of chaos, to barren Sarah, and to oppressed Egyptian slaves. The speech of God is first about an alternative future—[66].

Third, Isaiah reminds the exiles and us that the God of transcendent power is the God who is *for us*. Isaiah questions the exiles: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?" Isaiah's forceful rhetorical questions have the impact of equally emphatic statements. Substitute the word *surely*. *Surely* you have known. *Surely* you have heard. *Surely* it has been told you. *Surely* you have understood from the foundations of the earth. Surely these are the foundations upon which the entire world and your very own life rests.

Remember, remember, remember, Isaiah tells the people. Remember who and whose you are. You say your way is hidden from God? You say God has forgotten you? Remember the God of the Exodus who brought you into being as a people. Remember the God who "does not faint or grow weary", the God whose "understanding is unsearchable", the God who "gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless". Perhaps as a special word of hope to those who are aging, who question whether they are up to the journey home, Isaiah goes on: youths, indeed, will faint and grow weary, and the young will fall exhausted, i.e., something more is involved here than just native abilities; "but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

In keeping with the parable for our time, then, the darkness is indeed real, whether that darkness be our own and our loved ones' aging bodies, sickness and death or the injustices and violence that seemingly thrive around us unabated. We need not deny the darkness or pretend it is not there; and we may and should bring our most nagging questions, our deepest longings and accusations to God. But

holding onto the hope that sometimes we cannot even feel, we hold on and walk forward still, possessed of the deep suspicion that the suffering, injustice and evil that we see around us do not hold the final word.

Some years ago when we lived in Louisville, a pastor in our community went through the excruciating experience of almost losing his small son in death. Afterwards someone said to the pastor, "What you went through must have been pure hell." The pastor responded, "No, for hell is the absence of God, and I have never been more aware of God's presence than in those dreadful days."

The exiles were indeed experiencing the absence, the abandonment of God, and sometimes we do as well. It is okay in the depths of those experiences to recognize the deepness of the darkness and to question God. People of faith have done so through the ages. It is, quite frankly, how we happen to have a Bible. But people of faith also have those experiences, too, of the God who is *for us*, the God who does not forsake us, the God who bids us forward to challenge the darkness of our world and partner with God in the work of hope. May we have the courage for both.