

“Wings of Eagles; Feet of Clay”

Isaiah 40: 21 - 31 ; Mark 1: 29 – 39

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Macalester Sunday

Our Old Testament text today finds the people of Israel in exile, some 160 years of exile from scholars best read. From the end of Isaiah 39 to the beginning of Isaiah 40 this 160-year pause holds the shattered story of the Jerusalem establishment; where the core of Israel’s social, cultural and theological world came apart. The Israelite’s dislocation is not only from family, friends, ritual, Temple, commerce, but from Yahweh, their God.

Anyone who has spent long periods of time dislocated from what is familiar knows that it provides the opportunity to consider the core principles, values of your life. It can be situations as common as a trip to a new place that jars the familiar landscape into new perspective or taking up a new job or retiring or even starting college. But 160 years is a long time; plenty of time to forget ones’ history, to develop a deep sense of homesickness and to have a lot of questions, theological and otherwise.

Maybe it was exile or at least being in an unfamiliar culture that led a seemingly friendly and easy dinner conversation into a one where I found my own faith in question. It was a gorgeous evening in Costa Rica. My spouse, Tom and I were guests of his cousin whose home, perched up on a mountain in the cloud forest overlooked an expanse that extended miles out to the Pacific. The sun was setting out across the verdant landscape, blazing in its glory as it sank orange, and then was bittersweet red and then swallowed by the mountains to the west. That night Tom’s cousin and his wife were having their closest friends, mostly U.S. ex-pats living in Costa Rica, in for dinner. The wine was poured, the hors’d’orves set out, the soup, salad and crunchy bread and gooey dessert waiting.

Indeed, maybe it was being thrust into an unfamiliar landscape or perhaps the guests had tromped over familiar conversational territory so often together that having me in the mix gave them the opportunity to explore something they don’t often explore. That night: religion. Perhaps it was the fact that these folks were far from their own homes, most of them had moved to Costa Rica looking for community, a setting where they could contribute to the well being of the environment and culture. They were bound together by being people living between cultures, at the edge of the Costa Rican one and on the margins of the U.S. one. Some might call this a hyphenated cultural identity. I might call it people in search of a homeland, and my hunch is that the homeland is not a geographical one but a vocational one, a calling. They were looking for something to define their lives, they were seekers.

The conversation that night was like many I’d had, but those at the table thought it was unique! When they learned I was a college chaplain, a Presbyterian one, the lone Presbyterian at the table, who had long since left her Christian roots, started off: oh, the Christian faith doesn’t mean anything to me any more. All eyes turned me, and how I would react. When they didn’t get what they may have expected—judgment--the floodgates opened. Everyone at the table proclaimed their disdain for religion; for the dogma, for the institution, for anything that would smack of rules or telling them what to think. At one end of the table was the injured Catholic; sitting on my right, the spiritual but not religious ex-Protestant. There was also the artist who can’t get enough of crosses—“Yes, I love crosses,” she said, “especially the materials artists use to create them. They don’t have anything to do with me, but the symbolism of intersection of heaven and earth; the vertical and horizontal, it is really profound.”

Up to that point a woman named Teresa sat quietly across the table from me. In the conversation with Tom’s cousin before the guests arrived I had learned that Teresa had lost her husband a few months earlier. She and her husband had retired to Costa Rica in their late thirties, having made a pile of money in the Silicon Valley boom of the 90s. Now she was living with a gaping hole punched by this loss that left her depleted, indeed in exile from all that delivered goodness, ease, joy. She was the one who had the real questions. In the pause she stepped in:

“What exactly do you do as a chaplain?” she asked. I talked about my work with students, how I encourage them to express their religious or spiritual commitments. I said that students and sometimes faculty and staff come to me to talk about what they believe about themselves and the world. “I am often quite moved

by what they say.” I concluded. Everyone was nodding and I figured I was off the hot seat. But Teresa didn’t stop there. She then looked at me squarely: “And how about you?”

“Come again?”

“What about you? What do you believe?”

It was one of those moments akin to what I suspect the exiles in Babylon were asked: where is your God now, when the temple is gone? Where is your God now, when your children have long since followed other gods? Where is your God now, when the captivity has gone on much longer than anyone ever thought? Where was your God when my husband died and left me to raise four children on my own? she may have thought. Chaplain, what do you believe???

I pause and silently lifted a prayer...wondering what I might say that would make any sense to them, to me, to anyone. I plunged in.

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know for sure, but my best attempt begins with: Mystery...when I stand on the beach with billions of stars overhead I encounter mystery. When I look at my hand, the way it is shaped like my Dad’s but the skin is like my grandmother’s I experience mystery. Yes, you can read the world as the supreme accident of coincidences but when I held my colleagues one-day-old baby just before I left, when I looked into that child’s eyes drenched with the pools of birth, I touch with mystery. It is haunting, it is magnificent. It defies explanation.”

They had stopped passing the appetizers, wine was in hand but they were quiet. “Is this making sense?” I asked. They nodded.

I went on, “I find this mystery shows up in moments of deep connection and love. It also shows up in the pain of recognizing that this won’t last forever. I certainly know I am mortal!”

“I know we have a choice: to dismiss it all—the coincidences of life as mere coincidence; the deep connections as hormones or plain old emotions; the mystery of your own life, where you came from/where you are going, are age old, unanswerable questions that defy and lead nowhere or somewhere?”

As I sat looking around that room I had the distinct feeling that we are all exiles in some ways. The exile that most of us face is not primarily geographical exile but social, moral cultural exile, where the familiar markers for life have been moved, shifted, changed.

Do you ever feel like you are living at a time when everything you once counted on is being swept away? When the deepest dreams you’ve harbored don’t seem like they are going to happen. Sometimes we may feel like the exiled ones of old, who asked: Where are you, God? Have you forgotten your child, your world? Have you left us to duke it out on our own? How long will you hide your face from us? You may wonder where your faith has gone? What is at the core of your belief? Is it eagles wings or clay feet?

If you are anything like me, I suspect you find yourself doing more stumbling over clay feet more often than we soar like eagles. We are more like the disciples, who came searching for Jesus so he could get back to business they thought was his, wondering why, when he was at the top of his game, yes, the potential super bowl champ, that he hid out in a quiet corner, away from the pace. We can imagine Simon’s frustration when he found Jesus: “They are all looking for you, friend. You need to show ‘em your stuff. They really *need* you!” But Jesus’ knows where he is going and what he is to do. Jesus was on a journey; and those who thought they could peg him down, had no idea that his feet were taking him to a cross so that those of us with feet of clay could rest easy, run and not grow weary, walk and not faint. Maybe such a stance takes a lot of courage and even a measure of defiance! Maybe we have to start with our feet of clay—tripping a bit, but not giving up!

Hebrew Bible scholar, Walter Brueggemann says that the words from Isaiah 40 we read today is a doxology of defiance. He notes that in their dislocation, when release, return to their promised land, or any hope was remote if not impossible the exiles needed to defy the cultural messages that would have them believe that everything good has ended and were helpless to change anything! The doxology of defiance rails against such summation. Rather than collapsing into despair, the exiles’ defiant faith sets their sights on God. The power of the doxology invites those who sing it to be a people of praise, to be so in love with God, so in love with all that God has done, be so grateful for the power of the day, hour, minute of your life, that it propels you out of exile into a wondrous newness. This is based on the assurance from God that the people will renew their strength, mount up with wings of eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

As a college chaplain I work with young people who are looking for a large, spacious vision for their lives. They know a lot about clay feet, about what trips them up, what may hold them back. But if anyone longs to hitch their lives to eagles wings it is college students. They are waiting for something that meets them: God, faith, hope, a future. They seek the transcendent, the mysterious. Whether it is the mystery of a cell or of technology, or the longing for intimacy...they are reaching for that which sustains in a world that risks becoming obsolete. I am afraid that the church often gets mired down in our internal politics losing sight of the core of our convictions. Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time* says it well, "No wonder our youth are confused and in pain; they long for God, for the transcendent, and are offered, far too often, either piosity or sociology, neither of which meets their needs, and they are introduced to churches which have become buildings that are a safe place to go to escape the awful demands of God."

I suspect if we would reclaim the power of the church's prophetic voice in our time, if we could reimagine our life in the radical message of the gospel that what you see isn't everything you get, losing your life to find it, that you are named and claimed by Christ that we'd do what Pulitzer Prize winner author, Annie Dillard suggested. We would need to wear crash helmets to church instead of stocking caps. If we preached what Christ lived, a life of disruptive abandonment to all that would hem his purpose in, we would be hitching our faith to nothing less than the disruptive power of God.

This kind of faith cannot only be learned by intellectually interrogating it. It cannot be fully engaged by volunteering it, but it can only fully be known by giving up our hold on it, that is approaching it with abandon. How do we teach faithful abandonment? How do we teach defiant doxology? By stepping out; by mounting wings of eagles. I've seen it happen.

It has happened with students who have experienced great loss. It takes all their strength to open the door, their tears spill, stunned silence or low sobs, searching my face, or eyes downcast. Often they are far from home. Often it is a parent who lived with compromised health because options for treating their illness are limited. And their questions are "How will I live, now that the very ground of my being has a serious fissure in it."

It has happened when a when student receives affirmation beyond their wildest dreams. Bursting through the door with the rush of fevered excitement tipping their faces toward the stars. "I got the job...or the A...or the internship...or forgiven..." Yes, when the light filters through the cracks in the fear or uncertainty, the wholeness of life, the great precision of who we were intended to be, receivers of the bounty of goodness can arrive.

But I have also seen the air of transformation ringing from moments of institutional distress. It happens when a white board on a student's door in his dorm is littered with a racial slur or when a swastika is painted on the door of the Hebrew House, or when a student is assaulted walking from the library to his house a block off campus. I have watched tears well in a faculty member's eyes when she hears of an alumnus of the college drowning or when a colleague receives a bad diagnosis from a doctor. All of these experiences could drive us to become holy cynics, casting aspersions on the whole damn mess. But I have to believe that a campus peopled with spiritual mavericks, and a church proclaiming the good news boldly, who won't rule out that even the most stricken human heart, even the most seething spirit, even the disrespectful, despicable act; all of this can be changed, forgiveness asked for and given. Yes, right in the midst of these shocking, sorry, pernicious moments on campus. I've watched the stunning, gracious, sweeping love arrive in its wake.

It is in these moments and many more that the Maverick of heaven seems to arrive with unbridled goodness, holding the tears, fears, and hope itself as a gift, on eagles wings, no less.

We have feet of clay, to be sure. But our calling is to mount up on wings of eagles. This is our promise. This is our deepest hope.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN