

Lost and Found
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Isaiah 55: 1 – 13
February 28, 2016

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 that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

II. There are 60 million refugees in this world, the most displaced persons there have been since World War II.

60 million lives shaped by tragedy and grief, terror, loss of identity, livelihood, loved ones. One of every 122 people in the world compelled to journey to a new community, more often than not a completely different country and language, because the choice is between exile and non-existence. We say we can't imagine. We watch from a distance, we glance away and again at the photos and news reports. We weep for such suffering. We affirm that there is no such thing as someone else's child even as we hear that half of Syrian refugees are children and the majority of those fleeing Central America are unaccompanied minors. The unfolding story is of the most unbelievable inhumanity one to another.

To the Israelite refugees residing in Babylon, Isaiah spoke, and speaks still in this moment when there are more refugees than any other time in human history. And Isaiah speaks to us.

And we wonder: is there comfort in his message, relevance, any hope, in the face of such displacement, trauma, loss? How would we who are not refugees know?

We hear the poetry of Isaiah: Come, drink, eat, live! How do these words, these active, confident, life-affirming words, matter to us, we who are called to care, and the ones who run? Are these words of comfort to the Guatemalan teen who one day walks away from a language and a life that makes sense to her, but will be the end of her should she stay? Or the Syrian mother, who flees in the night with a toddler on her hip and terror

lodged in her throat? I pray that there is comfort, in words and in the power of action, I pray that there is food for such a journey as this.

What is the prophet's call to those of us who are right at home? My home is not under siege. I am quite certain that my way of life today will be what I wake to tomorrow. And the next day. I don't even have to think about it. So besides absorbing the beauty of Isaiah's poetry, what does it have to say to me, to you, in this world of displaced people?

I wonder if those Israelites in Babylon, some 40 years after the exile that made them all refugees, would have said the same thing on hearing Isaiah's words? We have settled now, and forgotten from where we came. Babylon isn't so bad, really, we are practically citizens here now.

Eat, says the prophet, for you are children of another bread. You who wander in a foreign land, every day relinquishing your religion, your language, your culture, your identity. Don't forget who you really are, to whom you really belong. You who have had 40 years to bury your grief, 40 years to assimilate, 40 years to forget the beauty of their identity that has sifted now through your fingers like sand, and while you tell your children who they are, they have no context, they can't tell the difference in the bread.

To survive, you have so deeply imbedded yourself in the values and practices and ideas of Babylon that you are more dismayed and confused than comforted when the invitation comes to return to Israel, to return to what was promised you all along. Return to what? To whom?

I am Babylonian now. Citizen of this adopted land now, I am not hungry now, in fact we have grown lazy and slow from Babylonian delicacies, our thirst has been quenched . . . but the prophet persists. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread? And your labor on that which does not satisfy?

You listen, but not closely enough. Listen, so that you may live. The land from which I came is foreign now, those doors have closed, that return road long ago washed away, destroyed . . .

Come, eat, drink, live! Isaiah persists, what are you wasting your life on? You are so much more than this. The ways you spend your days, the ways you spend your money.

It gives me chills to think that Isaiah could be so theologically daring in the face of such utter loss and devastation. It gives me chills that he could be so perceptive to the new thing that God was doing in the face of such a collapse. And though Isaiah was addressing the people in exile, he is revealing to us something essential about the character of God's transformative word that reaches us today, even this morning. This word of God is not something we possess, but it claims us. It is something we experience; something that changes us. When God speaks, things happen. God's word will not return empty. It will forgive us. It will transform us. It will set us free.