

## **“EMERGING IN HOPE, SPREADING OUR WINGS IN LOVE”**

Isaiah 35:1-10; Colossians 1:3-14

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We call it “the exile,” a period in Israel’s history occupying much of the sixth century BCE. The definite article brings some emphasis to this time, but “exile” hardly begins to convey its importance in the life and faith of the people of Israel. The war had left its mark in the death of thousands, the rape of many of their women, the destruction homes, the city walls and their sacred temple. The fields had been burned causing starvation among the survivors. And then the Babylonians took their leaders and artisans away, breaking up families, forcing them to live in a foreign land where they became the work force for improvements to Babylon. What is an image or part of the story to us, was reality for them.

What happened in exile is almost too amazing to be believed. And yet we have seen it again and again after many disasters. The earthquake in San Francisco a number of years ago; hurricanes Floyd, Katrina, and Sandy; shootings in Sandy Hook and Columbine; natural and human catastrophes that saw communities come together, engage in acts of kindness, and form movements for change.

I’m sure Israel began with unimaginable grief, but soon they saw the need to live again. And so they formed communities even in exile. They renewed and reshaped their faith. They took the sacred out of the temple and inserted it into their daily living. Instead of rejecting faith, they adapted it so that it supported them in exile and helped them to reshape it for the future. It is not too much to say that Judaism is born in this period.

They came to believe that God had something better in mind for them than disaster. Isaiah spoke to them of a day of return. The day is coming, he said, when “Zion” will return “with singing” and “everlasting joy.” Nature, itself, will join in the celebration. The wilderness will be glad. The desert will break forth in blossoming. Rivers and streams will emerge in the midst of the dry land. Wholeness will come to the human community as well as the blind begin to see and the deaf to hear.

So Isaiah urges them to strengthen the weak hands, firm up the shaky knees, and let go of fear. They are to emerge from exile with hope.

Hope has remained a central aspect of Jewish communities down to the present day. One wonders if it is enough to sustain communities for the work ahead as the impact of disasters fade. Despair is setting in that legislators will ever take action to address gun violence. The commitment to rebuild communities seldom lasts long enough before the next disaster strikes. The struggle to address racial inequities continues to meet a firm resistance. Poverty continues to be a problem for individuals to solve for themselves rather than a social injustice based on economic inequities.

This is not to say that there aren't people coming together to address these things. Over 140 countries recently came together to negotiate a global response to climate change. Some police departments across the country are instituting major changes in the structure and responsibilities of policing in their communities. Many others have made changes in how they train officers. And there are bills before congress attempting to make a more systemic response to poverty and other social problems.

Of course, we have to remember that change is slow and that patience is required, but I'm coming to think that "hope" is just not enough to get the job done. I worry about this especially in the context of the larger church in which hope increasingly rests on the afterlife. Significant sections of the church are becoming less engaged with the problems of the world, restricting its evangelical message to the saving of souls for heaven while condemning those who don't hold to the correct doctrine of the atonement. These same evangelical churches preach a gospel of prosperity that says God wants to bless you with success and money without attention to the larger economic impact for others. And then there are the churches who preach a message of judgment against those with a different sexual orientation, gender identification, or have had an abortion. A church that offers an entrance pass through the pearly gates, a full wallet, or a sense of self-righteousness is not just separating itself from the world. But doing a whole lot of harm to it. Is it that they're not offering the right kind of hope or are they missing something?

I love these images from Isaiah. I feel like they really apply to the church today as it emerges from the pandemic. We have been in our own kind of exile and rather than rejecting God, we've adapted and I think found ourselves stronger. Hope is sustaining many of us. It's hope that dampens the fear, strengthens the hands for the work ahead, and takes the wobble out of the knees as we walk this faith journey together. But hope will not get us to the finish line without love.

This is what Paul affirms in the churches at Colossae. He has, he writes, "heard... of the love that you have for all the saints." He reports that Epaphras "has made known to us your love in the Spirit." And he speaks about the "kingdom of his beloved Son." When we became a part of the community of faith, we joined a community held together by love, and we began to move toward a world governed by the love of God.

There is little point in emerging with hope, if we are not committed to "spreading our wings in love." Love God! Love your neighbor! This is at the heart of everything Jesus says in the gospels. Love stands behind our policy during the pandemic. We set aside worshipping together out of love and concern for your health and safety. We found a different way to be together through livestream out of love for you and the connections you need to be a part of this community. We were baffled at churches who valued "religious freedom" over the safety of their congregations and over people who refused to mask in the name of their personal freedom.

"Outward Incarnational Focus" is one of seven marks of the vital congregation which adult education just finished studying. We'll be spending time learning more and developing them as a congregation for the next year or so. This particular mark gives some definition

to the form love takes. “Outward” says we look beyond ourselves. “Incarnational” says that we depend upon and intentionally reflect the God who lives within us through the presence of the Spirit. It pulls together love of God and neighbor.

Emerging in hope, spreading our wings in love is the focus of this year’s stewardship campaign because this is what the committee and the session see as Westminster’s future. We carry hope with love into the world. That’s the vision that we are asking you to commit your dollars and yourselves to this day. It’s the vision we will hold when we prepare, adopt and present a budget to you in January. It’s the vision that motivates a dozen or so of you to study and work against racism.

It’s why we do things like Angel Tree connecting incarcerated parents with their children, why we donate to food pantries and write letters to congress for hunger relief initiatives, why we hold an art festival every year to raise awareness and love for the earth, and why our deacons work hard to care for your needs.

“Emerging in hope, spreading our wings in love” gives shape and direction to our faith. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: “Faith, hope and love; these three abide, but the greatest of these is love.” Amen.