

Prepare the Way of the Lord! Isaiah 40:1-11

We Are in a Pandemic Exile

If you were to choose the most frequently used word of 2020, what word would it be? I bet it would be, “Pandemic.” Right? The Merriam-Webster dictionary announced Monday that “pandemic” is their 2020 word of the year. “Pandemic” is the defining context of this year.

This unseen virus has literally changed almost everything. Everything is unsettled. Even though we live in the same place, we feel like everything we know has turned out to be alien and dangerous. Going grocery shopping, having lunch with your friends at Governor Francis, or Christmas dinner with your family... all these ordinary and routine activities have become dangerous. We feel that we are now living in a strange new world. Some say, “Coronavirus is teaching Americans what it’s like to live in exile.”¹

Just as we struggle in this pandemic exile, the Israelites struggled in Babylonian exile. In 587 BCE, the Israelites were taken as captives to Babylon and the temple of God in Jerusalem was sacked and completely destroyed by the Babylonian army. The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of their faith and religious life. They believed God dwelled in the temple so the temple was a kind of guarantee of divine protection for Jerusalem. But their proud city, Jerusalem along with its temple had fallen to their enemies. Their hometowns were deserted. Their vineyards and olive trees were burned down. Now, they were in exile, living in a foreign land.

Everything was unsettled. They were no longer able to gather at the temple for worship just like we cannot gather at the church during our pandemic exile. Just like us, they couldn’t freely gather with their relatives and family as they used to. They lost the very foundation of living and needed to look for new jobs and follow new restrictions imposed by the Babylonian government. In facing this national tragedy, the Israelites struggled with a theological question. “Why did this happen to us if God was with us? Where does God dwell now?”

I think that we may struggle with similar questions in this time of pandemic exile. Some have lost their beloved family members. Some have lost their jobs. Kids cannot go to school. Parents struggle to work at home while taking care of their children. Of course, many pastors lament that their seminary professors didn’t teach them how to edit worship videos or how to handle incomprehensible copyright laws. In the midst of this pandemic, we cannot help but ask “Where is God? What is God doing?” Some pastors have claimed, “the Coronavirus plague is sent by God to punish China and sexually immoral Americans.” Ironically, some of them have died due to Covid-19. What do you think?

I think that Covid-19 is not God’s punishment, though it is a result of our sin and greed. It’s not God who punishes us. Rather we have brought this punishment upon ourselves. In his book, *The Empathic Civilization*, Jeremy Rifkin argues, up until 1990, humans inhabited only 14% of the earth. But by 2000, the land inhabited or used by humans had increased to 77%. In other words, we, humans, have overtaken the land and space, which were once occupied by wild animals. It means there is a higher chance of being exposed to unknown bacteria and viruses that have resided in wild life. We have exploited God’s creation because of the cult of greed and destructive habits of overconsumption. Some have even suggested that Covid-19 is a self-protective mechanism of the earth and wild life.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

I believe there is a parallel between the Babylonian exile and the pandemic exile. The prophet Ezekiel explained, Jerusalem had fallen because the glory of the Lord had left the temple. (Ezekiel 10:18-19) Because of the wickedness of Israel, the holy God left His place in the temple and that opened up Jerusalem to the invasion of its enemies. The Israelites brought their punishment upon themselves.

The Bible tells us that God's glory dwells in creation and nature. "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool." (Isaiah 66:1) But we have exploited God's creation due to our endless greed and God's glory has departed. Can you see God's glory in those pictures? [ppt] No! We are in an exile we have created and are suffering as a result of our sin.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has also revealed persistent racial inequality in our society. According to data, "Black and Hispanic people are hospitalized for COVID-19 at disproportionately high rates."² Rich countries hoard covid-19 vaccine supply while the poor countries will have to wait years to vaccinate their people. Kids in underprivileged communities struggle to access online school, books and supplies. As I shared last Sunday, there are so many abnormal and unjust things happening in our society and we don't know how to clean up our messes.

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God

The good news is that God does not leave us alone forever. God saves us. God saves the people of God and all creation. Today's text from Isaiah was written at the end of the exile. The glory of the Babylonian empire did not last long. It fell to the Persian king, Cyrus the Great. Cyrus became the new ruler of the land and he allowed the exiles to return home. The Israelites understood this unexpected reversal of fortunes as the workings of their God.

The Prophet Isaiah described it as the glory of God returning to Jerusalem. "A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." (v.3-4)

God saves but that doesn't mean we don't need to do anything. God is not a heavenly handyman who fixes our problems. No! God is our Lord and we are God's partners. We've got streets to level and curves to straighten. Like John the baptizer, we are the messengers of good tidings and called to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

God's great gift to humanity is the ability for self-reflection. If we can learn from this pandemic experience, Covid-19 can serve as an opportunity to examine ourselves and our society, and ponder where we should go from here.

If we have seen God's creation only as natural resources for our financial fortune, we need to straighten these curves in our hearts. If we have perceived racial inequality and wealth disparities in our society, we need to work to level this uneven ground. Of course, changing injustice in our societies seems a daunting task like making every mountain and hill low and uneven ground level. Can we do that?

There is a well-known fable from Chinese mythology, "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains." Have you ever heard of it? According to the myth, an old man of 90 years lived near a pair of mountains. These two mountains were obstructions to his family and this old man sought to dig through them with hoes and baskets. It sounds impossible. Doesn't it? His friend said, "You are 90 years old. You are too old to do this. You will be dead before you finish your

² <https://www.heart.org/en/news/2020/11/17/black-hispanic-people-hospitalized-for-covid-19-at-disproportionately-high-rates>

task.” The foolish old man replied, “you may be right. I may not finish this task in my lifetime. But through this hard work of mine, my children and their children and so on through the generations, someday, the mountains will be removed.” He didn’t give up and persevered. The god in Heaven was impressed with his hard work and perseverance and ordered the mountains separated.³

The difference between our faith and this story is that the foolish old man didn’t know the god in Heaven would remove the mountains but we know that our Christ is coming for our salvation. So, my friends, don’t give up but keep up your good work.

Paul Spear said, “as one person, I cannot change the world, but I can change the world of one person.” We may not be able to change the whole world, but we can change the world of one person with our service and loving acts.

I am glad that Asbury UMC has never stopped making straight in the desert a highway for our God even in this pandemic season. As you all know, the outreach committee has done a virtual book fundraiser for 3rd grade students in Providence. Due to the pandemic, they are not able to access their school library, and most of the students do not have access to books at home. With help and support from Asbury and others, they will receive about 50 books to read. This may seem a small act toward social equality. We may feel like we are trying to remove mountains with a shovel. But my friends, don’t give up, but persist. Our Christ is coming for our deliverance and redemption for the whole of creation. Someday, we will see the glory of the Lord restore the world and everyone shouting for joy.

In this season of Advent, Proclaim the good news of Christ’s return and prepare the way of the Lord. Rejoice! Our Christ is coming for our salvation! Amen.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Foolish_Old_Man_Removes_the_Mountains