

This sermon invites us to participate in a couple of conversations. The first one we have already heard. The dialogue between Jeremiah and the Psalmist who are wrestling with the new religious landscape they find themselves in. The second is an ongoing conversation between Rev. Ann Rolasky, minister of my home church, First Congregational, Montclair and myself as we wrestle with the new religious landscape in the US.

Let us begin with the scriptures.

Jeremiah and the Psalmist are caught in a tension, that is like a rubber band pulled to the snapping point. The twin poles which stretch their faith is life before and life after exile. Life in the land of privilege and life in the land of deportation. Life where God clearly reigned and life where God seems absent. We are aware of befores and afters ourselves. Life before and after marriage, before and after starting a new job, before and after kids, before and after the death of a loved one. You know from your own experience what it means to be stretched.

Between the two poles of before and after expulsion are stretched the lives of the Jerusalem exiles now in the land of their bitterly hatted enemy, the Babylonians. These folks are struggling with the the shock of a culture that does not honor them and the spiritual panic of wondering if God cares anymore. Psalm 137 sums up their longing and mourning and despair:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down,  
oh how we wept when we remembered Zion.  
We hung our harps in the midst of the willow branches.  
For there our captors, who deported us, demanded that we sing;  
They that laid waste to our homes, required joy,  
saying, "Sing to us one of your fabled songs of Zion!"  
Yet, how can we sing the songs of our God in a strange land? (vv. 1-4)

Later the Psalmist, lost in despair cries out, “You want us happy and filled with joy? Happiness will come when Babylon is destroyed. Happiness will come when you children’s heads are beaten against rocks” (vv. 8-9). This is the depth of the tension, the taught energy of the before and after, into which God speaks.

You and I are there in this very same tension. Only about sixty or so years ago we lived in our Jerusalem. America was a “christian” nation. Not necessarily in the sense that we mirrored the teaching and life of Jesus, but in the sense that Christianity was the civil religion of our society. Which means if you weren’t in church on Sunday people looked down on you. While it pains me to say so, the greatest external motivation to become religious is to fit in.

Now we are in exile. In the waning decades of the 20th century and the opening chapter of the 21st century Christianity lost its magical perch as America’s civil religion. Now without the external motivation to fit in, we realize that a lot of people find us pretty irrelevant to their lives.

We can debate how good or bad our forced exile is. I for one am happy that we can finally demarcate between a US civil religion and the way of Jesus our Christ.

- When a person running for senator compares his molestation of teenage girls to the pregnancy which Mary, the mother of Jesus consented to, that is civil religion, for the way of Jesus teaches us to honor the child in our midst.
- When folks deny the validity of God given scientific facts and hide behind the bible as science instead of a testament of faith, that is civil religion, for the way of Jesus teaches us to observe the lilies and the birds and to learn from them.
- When an attorney general tells us to obey unjust laws because the bible tells us to submit to government authority, that is the heinous voice of civil religion, for the way of Jesus teaches us to resist laws that strip us of our dignity and subjugates us to the tyranny of prejudice and bigotry.
- And you know from your own history, that when the religious leaders cheer the overthrow of the legitimate monarchy, that is the greed and self-centeredness of

civil religion and not the way of God who never panders to the need of the few over the needs of the many.

However, I know post-Christian exile is a bitter pill to swallow so closely on the close of “Christian America.” My home church pastor, Ann Rolasky puts it this way, “In churches across the country pews are emptying, denominations are fracturing, and polls tell us that, when asked what religion they affiliate with, most millennials say ‘none.’ Those ‘nones’ – and lapsed Catholics – are the fastest growing spiritual group in the country.” The rubber band is stretched my friends, for we are in the midst of exile.

Now the choice is ours. We can, like the Psalmist, give ourselves over to despair. Demand that we be treated to the level we were accustomed too, and then pray that God will dash the millennials’ children’s head against rocks. By the way, I really don’t suggest this as an evangelistic approach. However, as Cornell West has taught us, singing the blues can be cathartic. So if you need to sing the blues, sing the blues!

The bible tells us that our sorrow is noticed by God. The bible also tells us that sorrow last for the night but with the morning comes joy. So when you are done singing the blues the bible encourages us to heed the voice of God through the prophet Jeremiah. Bless where we are, plan for the future, seek to touch lives living in the post-Christian culture, and celebrate God’s presence and love in the midst of this strange land.

Again I turn to Ann Rolasky, “Old paradigms are not holding, old messages are not preaching, but NEW ones are breaking through. This is an AMAZING time to be the church because the possibilities for how God can speak to us in this new era of upheaval and renewal are limitless. It’s true that people are not coming to church the way they used to, but the hunger for God in their lives is as strong as ever. We human beings long for stories that connect us and communities that strengthen us and sacred experiences that inspire us. We long to make MEANING out of the joys and sorrows – and ordinary moments -- of our lives. Deep within us, woven within our divinely given

DNA, we know that our small, fragile stories are indeed connected to a larger, eternal and transcendent story. God's story. And folks are longing for places to share it."

We are those places for story sharing and meaning making, every time we gather to worship, gather in youth groups, gather in women circles, gather in men breakfasts, and in the simple act of sharing with a friend we create space for folks to share their stories.

As opposed to the Psalmist, Jeremiah says to his people in the after of exile, "Sing the songs of Zion, teach them to you children, make the new city a place for God, even as the old city was a place for God." We may not know exactly how we'll be morphed and shaped in this new land, but we know where we have come from and where we come from is the God who has already blessed us in our dislocation.

One last time let me quote the Rev. Rolasky, "We, as the church, we as the Body of Christ, have a ... story to tell. One that says every human being is made in the image of God – no exceptions. (A story) that says that power is found in compassion and vulnerability and justice and forgiveness. That our wealth is found in the grace we receive and the grace we extend, and the willingness we have to lay down our lives for each other... It's a story that says, despite all the ways we get it wrong, God loves us so recklessly, so extravagantly, so outrageously, that (God) sent (the) beloved (Son) to share his life with us, to GIVE his life for us, to show us that nothing – not hatred or violence or fear – can ever separate us from God's unconditional love."

Let us be about being the children of God in this new land, and let us then become God's blessing in exile.

As the praise chorus proclaims:

Let the song of our God rise among us  
Let the song of our God rise among us  
Let the joy of our Christ rise among us  
Oh, let it rise!     Amen