

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
Richard E. Sindall, Guest Minister
Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 43:16-21; 51:1-3 and Mark 1:14-20
January 30, 2022

LOOKING BACK AND GOING FORWARD

The title of this sermon, “Looking Back and Going Forward,” reminds me of rowing a boat. Because the thrust comes from pulling the oars toward me, the boat moves forward through the water while I am facing backward, looking at where I’ve come from, not where I’m going. To look forward, I glance over my shoulder. That’s okay for rowing, but not for being a disciple or a church. Recently I read somewhere the observation that as Christians and as churches we too often look forward only by glancing over our shoulders, meaning that we give our attention to the past, back to the days when the pews were crowded with people of all ages, or just back to the ways we have always done things.

The prophet must speak a new word from God to his people, the Jews exiled in Babylon – a word of hope and encouragement. To our ears, this new word from God might sound wonderful: more positivity, more assurances of blessings, more good life. Not so to their ears. Their hopes have been crushed, their assurances shattered, and their idea of blessings rendered meager. Many find themselves left with three choices: blame themselves, blame others (particularly their parents’ generation), or blame God. All are choices of shame, and some choose all three. The exiles resist hope and are not about to look forward with any vision greater than adjusting to living as second class Babylonians, keeping their heads down, and making the best of it they can.

I understand that the exiles’ situation is extreme. Better, they feel, not to hope for much and so risk more disappointment. Better not to dream or let themselves care too much and risk getting hurt again. Most of us probably are not living in such an extreme of discouragement, bitterness toward life, and cynicism toward any word of encouragement or even advice, although some may be, and many of us have our moments. Certainly, I am not suggesting your church is in such a position, although most of the traditional Protestant churches know something of the feeling their best days lie behind them. No longer do congregations self-perpetuate, grow naturally, and thrive without needing to ask why or how. I remember the “good old days” of the eleven hundred member Presbyterian church in which I grew up: two packed services each Sunday, a nice new building buzzing all week with activity, strong youth groups (in which I found the support and acceptance I needed), and leaders actually debating how to spend all the money being received through offerings. A couple decades later, the same congregation, after a merger, numbered maybe 250.

In the two passages I put together for our reading from the second part of Isaiah, the Prophet of the Exile seems to contradict himself. First he tells his people not to look back to former things, the days of God's mighty acts of deliverance, the glory of the Jerusalem Temple now lying in ruin. *Don't look to the past, but look ahead because your God is about to do a new thing. Open your eyes and see. Then pack your bags, because invincible Babylon is about to fall, and you are going home. Impossible? Stand up and look. It won't take long.* But then the prophet tells them, in effect, *Look back, but look back, not at what you've lost but all the way back to your earliest ancestors, Abraham and Sarah. Are you too few and too vulnerable? Abraham was but one man with a wife who had never been able to bear a child, and when God came to them with the promise of countless descendants, they were too old anyway. Surely, they had every right to be skeptical, even cynical, and Abraham does voice his bitter discouragement. And yet, he believes, not because the promise seems likely or even possible but because God is the One who makes it.*

Yes, look back to our past. Since retiring, I do it often. I have my regrets, disappointments, and unfinished projects in life as well as many more reasons to be thankful. But the challenge to hope and the call to courage come, not from a mere prophet who seems out of touch with the realities of their situation, but from our God. So, look back to the past, not to wallow in regret, but to go forward in faith.

The truth about this prophet is revealed from the outset. He is no starry eyed optimist. When God calls him to voice the message of hope, he quite bitterly and cynically asks, *Why bother? Cry out? What is there to proclaim? All flesh is but grass, all accomplishments wither, all dreams fade away in morning's hard light.* The true prophet must share in the feelings of his people; otherwise, he would not be one of them but an outsider with no empathy for them, no understanding of their griefs. There is an old hymn that says, "Races and peoples, lo, we stand divided and, sharing not our griefs, no joy can share." Is that not our present reality? The true prophet must share the people's griefs and be able to represent them and not only himself before God. Then the prophet can represent God honestly to the people. That's what the Incarnation of the Word, the Truth of God for us, is all about. In his life and teaching and especially in his seemingly god-forsaken death by torture, Jesus represents and embodies God to us even as, refusing to step away from us and save himself, he represents and embodies us before God. In him we know that the God who will not go away and stop bothering us will not let go of us and let us drop in a free fall, either.

For the record, mighty Babylon, the unbeatable empire, fell without even a fight, and the conqueror, Cyrus the Persian, marched his army into the city to the cheers of its own citizens. For the record, Cyrus allowed the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem and even helped fund their rebuilding. Also for the record, more of the exiles remained in Babylon

than answered the call to go home. God meets us where we are, but God does not force us to accept hope and deliverance. Not all who are called answer, at least not at first.

In an adult forum when the church I was serving was engaged in an extended process of visioning – looking back, looking hard at the realities of our present situation, and looking as best we could forward – I drew a line down the middle of a blackboard and labeled one column “comfort” and the other column “challenge.” I asked the people to name some of their favorite hymns, Bible passages or verses, or parts of our worship services. Then we placed each favorite into one column or the other, although we quickly realized some belonged in both. Both comfort and challenge are needed. A church ought not be all reassurance and security, but neither ought a church to be all busyness and activities, not even all ministries. Certainly, a church ought not to be all entertainments.

Jesus came proclaiming very much the same message as John the Baptist, but with a difference I find crucial. John was all fire and fury. *Repent you brood of vipers! because very soon it will be too late.* Fear was the primary motivator, obedience the required response. Jesus also proclaimed that God was hand. “Repent and believe in the good news.” Wait, what was that? Good news? Where’s the fire? – as John would later ask him. Jesus awakened hope rather than playing upon fear, but of course, it was not mainly the well-situated and religiously secure who responded, but the outcasts and sinners.

People disappointed with life and with themselves do not need to hear, “There, there, it’s okay, no worries. You’re fine. Everything’s all fine.” No, it’s not, it’s not fine at all. One of the gospels tells us Simon Peter recoils from Jesus, saying, “Go away from me, for I am a sinful man.” But Jesus does not recoil from Simon. Jesus reaffirms the call, “Follow me.” How, in our time, can a church proclaim Jesus’ message of hope and salvation along with his call to humility and service without saying only, “You’re fine,” to people inflamed with resentment and selfishness? Can a church welcome everyone without having to hide Jesus’ demand for justice and without winking a tacit approval at bigotry? What is the meaning of my life? I need to ask that question, but also, “What is the purpose of our life together as a community of faith and service?” Jesus renews the call: “Follow me” *and I will teach you to represent God’s love and mercy for other people, all people*, in this bitterly divided world.

We need to look back so we can go forward. We need to look inward so we can reach outward. But we also need to listen for Christ’s call and to expect more from God than we can predict or calculate. We need to be realistic but not cynical, humble but not hang-dog, secure but not self-satisfied. Here and now we, individuals and churches, are called by Jesus to follow him, and he will give our lives meaning and purpose that are true. Amen.