

FAITH MENNONITE CHURCH

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21, 2010

Sermon: Weldon D. Nisly

TITLE: A way in the wilderness

THEME: Holding On, Letting Go

TEXTS: Isaiah 43: 16-21 God, the I AM will redeem...God's people...faithful witnesses

Lenten Gratitude for what God is and is doing

I bring you greetings from Seattle Mennonite Church and Saint John's Abbey. I thank God for you at Faith Mennonite Church and for your faithful witness to the crucified and risen Christ. My prayers and blessings are with you as a community of faith and with you, Joetta, as FMC pastor. I am grateful to worship God with you this morning and to see all of you. I am especially grateful to see Matthew, Kami, William, and Ava, so dear to us at Seattle Mennonite, and to see Andi and Dan from our Jubilee Fellowship days in Philadelphia, as well as to you Gerald and Joetta for our friendship and shared vision over the past years.

This morning I also want to acknowledge the loss of our dear friend in Christ's way of peace, Gene Stoltzfus, who died suddenly 10 days ago. On Thursday many of Gene's family and friends gathered in Emo, Ontario to remember Gene's life of faith and peace. I could tell you many Gene stories as can anyone who knew Gene. I acknowledge Gene's family here this morning: Ed and Phil and Candace. Gene Stoltzfus – Presente!

The Biblical Story for Biblical People

As God's people steeped in God's Word we turn to two scriptures that have as much to say to us today as they did in their day so long ago. God's Word is ever new.

Our Lenten journey of "Holding on and Letting Go" approaches the crescendo of Holy Week with Jesus. We can hardly do better than listen to God's prophet Isaiah and God's incarnate presence in Jesus who receives loving devotion from Mary.

Isaiah the Prophet

We turn to God's Word by setting the context of the prophet Isaiah. First Isaiah is God's Word to God's people telling them of their Exile to come. Many of them will be taken off to exile in Babylon and Jerusalem will be destroyed. The year 586 BC is the year we mark as Isaiah's prophetic word comes true. First Isaiah covers chapters 1-39 of the Book of Isaiah.

Second Isaiah begins with chapter 40 and continues through chapter 55. Third Isaiah is told in chapters 56-66. God's prophetic Word for us today comes from Second Isaiah, among the most poetic and prophetic oracles in the Hebrew Scriptures we know as the Old Testament.

This Word of God through the voice of Isaiah comes about a half century into exile in Babylon. It opens with the incongruent and beautiful proclamation:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God..." Isaiah 40: 1, 3

God's Word through Isaiah goes on with eloquence telling God's people "Do not fear!" and lamenting "the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears!" (43:8). God calls for a global assembly the nations: "Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble....Let them bring their witnesses to justify them" (43:9). Isaiah knows that the witness of the nations will reveal that their god is empire and a false god.

God declares through Isaiah over and over, "I am God, there is no other God" (43:11-13). God is the great **I AM** as God had earlier revealed to Moses.

So what are God's people to be and do? They are to be prophetic witnesses and servants of God. "You are my witnesses...and servants whom I have chosen!" says our God (43:10). Listen to Isaiah's prophetic word again:

Thus says the LORD,

who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,

¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior;

they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

¹⁸**Do not remember the former things,** or consider the things of old.

¹⁹**I am about to do a new thing;** now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

²⁰The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches;

for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,

to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself

so that they might declare my praise. Isaiah 43: 16-21

Isaiah's Prophetic Word of God for Us Today

What a powerful prophetic word from God for us today! God has redeemed us already in Christ and is even now doing a new thing. The "new thing" is "a way in the wilderness" – the wilderness of empire. We are to give witness – to be witnesses – to what God is doing – to God's way in the wilderness.

It is hard for our eyes to see and our ears to hear Isaiah's prophetic Word because we live in a land of pervasive blindness and deafness even though we make every claim to be God's people.

God's Word in John's Gospel – John 12:1-8

Let us also turn for a moment to the gospel for today.

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

There is much we could see and hear from John's poetic Gospel for us today as well. I am going to let the hearing of the gospel speak for itself this morning. I simply invite us to hold in our heart and mind the image of Mary – this Mary who gave her loving devotion to Jesus!

Like those who have eyes but don't see and ears but don't hear in Babylon, Judas is blind and deaf. Oh he takes the expected stance and speaks the expected word – the word of reason and authority condemning Mary's wastefulness. For all its sound and appearance, the gospel tells us parenthetically that it wasn't because he really cared about the poor. People with money and power rarely do.

We hear loud strains and echoes of Judas' chastisement of Mary these days in the tumult over health care reform! Nowhere is that so clear as it is from the mouths of those who make loud claim of devotion to Jesus Christ!

In a nutshell, the Word from God's servants Isaiah and Jesus for us today is that we are often blind and deaf to our living in exile in empire! Instead we fiercely declare that we are God's while acting as agents of empire. We are blind to being in exile and deaf to hearing God's Word. The biblical question for us in this season of Lent and season of never-ending war is this: What would happen if we in the church in America truly saw ourselves as being in exile under empire?

As God's people we are to God's Word from the prophets and the gospels to train our eyes and ears to see and hear what God is doing and would have us do even in exile under empire to be the community of faith following Jesus in our lives and world. With that word in heart and mind I want to share some stories that took me back to the land of this biblical word.

A Way in the Wilderness in America and Journey back to Iraq

In January I made a long-awaited journey back to this land of the biblical story – the wilderness of Babylon. I confess that it is hard to see and hear that God will make a new way in the wilderness and lead us out of exile. I want to share a few glimpses of our journey in the wilderness. I do so with a sense of reversal for place and image in the biblical story. While the land I went to is the wilderness or desert of Babylon as we know it from Hebrew scripture, I want to propose that we live in exile in the wilderness of empire and that returning to Iraq is a way of clarifying my sight and sound to see Jesus again. (Note: I identify the following stories without including their full details in the written text.)

Story of March 29, 2003...Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) in Baghdad early days of the US war on Iraq...accident near Rutba, in the desert of Iraq where an Iraqi doctor and medical assistants treated us at a clinic in Rutba and refused to take any money from us even though US planes had bombed their Rutba hospital 3 days earlier. The doctor said, “Go home and tell Americans about Rutba.”

Story from Amman, Jordan

Rutba Peace Team (RPT): Shane Claiborne, Cliff Kindy, and I who had been in the accident on March 29, 2003, and Peggy Gish who returned with others to find us, plus Sami Rasouli, Greg Barrett, Jamie Moffatt, and Logan Latuiri.

Iraqi Embassy hospitality...first received by Third Officer Mohammed who did everything he could to help us get visas....but nothing succeeded so we asked to meet with Ambassador Saad Al-Hayani.....I wrote in my journal that evening of Jan 14: “The sweetest tea I ever drank!” Ambassador Al Hayani listened to us and said, “Because your mission is a noble one I will give you visas. But please don’t go to Baghdad. Your visit to Rutba to find the doctors who cared for you is good. He added that such people-to-people exchanges will that “Iraqis are not terrorists and Americans are not infidels.” Ambassador Al Hayani also told us that before the invasion and occupation two things were true: ‘We didn’t have terrorists and we didn’t have sectarian (religious) violence (Sunni-Shia conflict).’

Over those 4 days I was aware of my growing disappointment and frustration. Every step we were told to take and everything we tried to do ended up with no visas. In my journaling I realized what was happening to me. As I processed and prayed about that I was given a sense of peace and clarity that none of the people we met or the process we followed was an obstacle or without merit. It all was part of our journey back to Rutba. We told our story countless times. We received encouragement countless times. And when one door was closed God opened another one! That evening over dinner as we processed the day again, I shared that this has been part of the journey rather than obstacle of frustration. Indeed it was all a good part of the journey.

Story from the Jordanian and Iraqi Border

We returned to Iraq on January 15, MLK's birthday!

Jordanian Major Adil....Captain Foster & George and armored Humvees...“I'm a Christian too” to me taking off his designer sun glasses.....I was sharing who we were as the RPT

My question to Logan about Captain Foster's walk and talk, manner and meaning all intended to convey the message: ‘We are the ultimate authority and power! Nothing is more powerful than I am or we are.’ Logan's answer to me: “Of course. That's how we are trained to be for survival.

Stories from Rutba

Checkpoint at edge of Rutba....seeing Captain Foster's ‘double’ in an Iraqi soldier...war as weapons development...training “them” to be like “us.”

Hospital and Dr. Nazir, managing doctor and our host in Rutba along with the mayor.

Gasem Meiry Awaad, Mayor of Rutba welcomed us and invited us to help form a sister city relationship with Durham, NC, where Jonathan and Leah Wilson Hartgrove have founded Rutba House community named after this city in Iraq.

Meeting Tariq Ali Marzoug, nurse and Jassam Muhommad, medical assistant who cared for us and sewed up Cliff's an my head. Jassam to me, “I give you an Iraqi greeting” with a big hug.

Highlight and most emotional moment for me: when Sa'ady Mesha'al Rasheed walked into the lounge at the hospital where we were gathered:Seeing Jesus in Sa'ady on January 16, 2010as I saw a transfigured Jesus in a man who carried me from the clinic to the car on 3/29/03.

The most emotional moment for me came that evening when we were in the guesthouse lounge. I was sitting near the corner of the room to the right of the door. Suddenly I saw a big smile on the weathered face of a man standing in the doorway. Instantly a strange feeling flooded over me, a feeling of puzzlement and recognition as if ‘I know this face!’ He surveyed the room and walked in and said with delight, “I remember you,” pointing to Cliff, “I remember you,” pointing to Shane, and “I remember you,” pointing to me. Then he added to me, “And I carried you.” It took a moment for Sami to translate what he had said to us and another moment for me to fully grasp what he was saying. He told us that his name is Sa'ady Mesha'al Rasheed and that he is the ambulance driver for the hospital. Sa'ady explained that he was at the clinic when we arrived that day and helped us into the clinic. I have told our Rutba story many times but I have never told about Sa'ady carrying me from the car to the clinic because I had not remembered – until I saw his face in the doorway at that moment and heard him speak. Then my body began to remember! With tears in my eyes I thanked him and listened as he told us what he experienced that day.

Back in Amman again

I returned to the Iraqi Embassy to thank Mohamed and Ambassador Al-Hayani

The Rutba story continues

Greg Barrett is writing a book about these two Rutba experiences and Jamie Moffatt is producing a film about it.

Peggy, Shane, Logan, and I are telling and writing our versions of the Rutba story....

The story continues, first in our support for the hospital in Rutba and also in unexpected ways and opportunities to tell the Rutba story. Late last Thursday evening, I left Emo, Ontario and the Memorial service for Gene and after sharing an evening meal with Gene's family and friends. I was returning to Saint John's Abbey. It was already 8:00 p.m. with more than a 6 hour drive ahead of me. I intended to drive all the way back home to the Abbey that night. But the Spirit provided other unexpected opportunities. When I left Canada at Fort Francis and got to the US border at International Falls, the border agent looked at my passport and asked the usual questions. Then she handed my passport to another agent who took some time to do a computer search. She also searched the trunk. Then she asked me to pull off to the side and come inside. There I was handed over to another US Customs agent who asked me to take a seat and spent a long time with my passport and the computer. Finally he asked me to come over and to take my jacket off and empty my pockets and turn my pockets inside-out. He began asking many questions until he finally got to his real interest: Iraq. When were you in Iraq? How did you get a visa? Why were you there? Who was with you? Who did you see?

I got to tell a lot of the Rutba story to a very skeptical agent. Do you have a church in Rutba? No, we were visiting Iraqi Muslims. Oh, he said seemingly relieved, so you were converting Muslims? No, we were meeting with Iraqi people who had saved our lives so we could thank them and continue telling the story. None of it made sense to him. Finally he asked, "How did you get a visa?" I said, "Because God opened the door to an Iraqi Ambassador who thought our mission was a noble one and gave us visas." "No", he said, "I don't mean Iraq. I mean our country. How did our country let you do this?" "We didn't ask permission from our country. We did have a very interesting meeting with Captain Foster, the head US military officer at the Iraq border."

Utterly baffled and very skeptical and conveying clearly that he thought there had to be something wrong with this picture, he was determined to keep me until they find out what it is. I had lots of opportunity to tell him what it means to follow Jesus and to be Mennonite and a pastor and peacemaker. Finally the agent asked me to be seated and disappeared for some time and then returned with another agent. We went through the whole baffled skeptical Q and A again. Meanwhile the first agent went out and searched my car.

Finally, they returned my passport, thanked me for my time, and said I was free to go on the way.

Their interrogation delayed me long enough so that I ended up getting a motel rather than driving 6 more hours through the night. As annoying as the delay was three things struck me as I drove away. First, I was in Canada because our beloved friend and mentor Gene Stoltzfus had died much too young and quickly when we still longed for his humor, wisdom, friendship, and inspiring peacemaking witness in the church and in the world. Nevertheless, I could just imagine Gene looking down with great amusement and saying: “Weldon, why didn’t you invite them to join you for ice cream after they have finished asking you questions?” I can hear him say it!

Second, here again as in Amman, a human interaction that seemed like an annoying obstacle, was really part of “the way God is making through the wilderness.” Here is another opportunity to witness to Christ’s way of peace.

Third, it is revealing that the people and places that presume to be benevolently, graciously, and responsibly “doing their job” and representing “our” country are the ones who try hardest to find something wrong with this way of making peace. Our people-to-people connection in Iraq to build relationships between Iraqi and American people and between Muslims and Christians receive the most baffled and resistant reactions: Captain Foster on the Iraq border and these customs agents on the US border. We are going in peace without weapons and are not acting as Americans enforcing our way in the world. It doesn’t make sense so something must be wrong.

Isaiah and Mary for our Lives in Exile under Empire today

God’s question through the prophet Isaiah that we are confronted with today is this: What does it say about the church in exile under American empire -- the Mennonite Church in particular – that people in our own country are so baffled by our witness or see so little Christian witness that it is unintelligible? God’s challenge to us through Mary’s act of loving devotion in pouring oil on Jesus’ feet calls us to live with her dedicated loving devotion and servanthood to Jesus Christ. \

May we hear Isaiah and see Mary as models that give us eyes that see and ears that hear The Way God is making in the wilderness – The Way with Jesus to the cross so that we may truly be God’s Easter people! God is doing a new thing and making a way in the wilderness in Jesus Christ even today. Thanks be to God!