

March 7, 2010

Beth Robey Hyde

Isaiah 55:1-9

“Hungry! Thirsty!”

When we are born into this life, we have no way to do for ourselves, or to understand what the world is like. We are given parents, sometimes good parents, some bad, usually a mix, but most of us have some kind of family, some kind of home. We grow up and fit ourselves into the world as we have come to know it; and most of us spend most of our lives trying to earn our way into feeling comfortable with ourselves and our world, making a living, creating new families; always, however, dogged by two things: a feeling of needing to prove ourselves over and over again, and a longing simply to feel at home. Where our values clash with those of the world around us, we may not name it out loud, but we begin to feel less at home and more in exile. When we buy into the values of the world around us, we often feel vague discomfort within ourselves, as though we are no longer at home in our own skins.

Six hundred years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote a poem for a people who were in exile. Having been defeated by King Nebuchadnezzar, Many of the Jewish people had been deported to Babylon, where, over the years, some had assimilated into Babylonian society and adopted Babylonian ways, while others had maintained an attitude of protest. In fact, the great prophet Jeremiah had advised those who had been willy-nilly shipped off to Babylon to do their best to make a life there, and to work and pray for the well-being of the land where they found themselves. But now, said Isaiah, it was time to go home. Home to Israel. Home to the land that God had given them; home to the land of their ancestors; home to the place where their hearts and their very bones would feel like they fit.

One of the interesting things about exile is that people, in their need to have a home, eventually do adapt and become semi-comfortable in that exile.

Theologian and Old Testament professor Walter Brueggemann suggests that in this nation right now, we may be in exile, being bombarded by definitions of reality that are fundamentally alien to the gospel, where the voice of the empire wants to reshape our values, our fears and our dreams in ways that are actually opposed to the Gospel. We have seen how much of Christianity in this nation today has reshaped itself in order to proclaim a gospel of prosperity and to support a society that spends billions on arms and has hardly anything left for schools. That builds prisons as a growth industry and gives next to nothing to rehabilitation and reconciliation.

Are we, indeed, in exile, as we find ourselves almost trapped in this system that perpetuates itself in a cycle of anxiety and frustration? It is not time for the church to look again at this poem, one that in Jesus' time was used as a call to all the people coming to the temple for festivals and reunions? Is it not time for us to hear again the words that we can imagine Jesus calling out to the people as they gathered for worship? Let's come home. Return to God that God may have mercy, and to our God, for God will abundantly pardon. God loves us, no matter what. And God offers homecoming, a feast, flowing fresh water, a community of hope. And God offers this at No Cost. No Charge. We don't have to keep struggling to prove ourselves, we simply have to accept the gift. Everyone is invited.

In the past couple of years, this congregation has been kicked out of its comfort zone. When we get kicked out of our comfort zone, out of our routine, we are pushed to find something even truer and deeper. The ironic twist to suffering loss is that we awaken to find those things that are dearest to our hearts; that we begin to long for home, for a real home. Someone said that longing precedes hope, and longing ushers in hope. Scott Peck says that when we are feeling

deeply uncomfortable, unhappy or unfulfilled, that we, propelled by our discomfort, are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for something even truer than our old ways.

So here, in our Lenten reflection, we can not only accept God's offering of nourishment to us, but as a community of hope, offer spiritual and physical food and drink, fresh flowing water and a new social possibility for those around us. As we learn to become aware of the difference between a semi-comfortable exile and our real home, we can learn to live out of the promise together; to offer a place of nourishment and of life; and in so doing, we may indeed be instruments of transformation that stretches out to help the whole of our society to find better ways of ordering itself; to dare to try new ways, to be a beacon of hope. The little trickle of living water that flows from this place may enrich our whole land.

Let us bring into our awareness our own hunger and thirst, our need for home, our desire to stop having to prove ourselves, our fear of change, and our recognition that God carries us across the desert, and let us bring all those things to the table, so we may be filled with the presence of Christ and the promise of God. Here we recognize that we carry within ourselves the keys to the very home for which we have been longing. In the words of the communion liturgy, "Come, for all things are ready." Or in the words of Isaiah, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."