

I remember when I was alone with my eldest daughter for the first time after she was born. My husband had gone back to work, and it was just the two of us. It seemed like she slept a lot, but of course as soon as my eyes would close, she'd start squirming and making noises ~ requests and discomforts I could not yet discern. 'Is this motherhood?' I wondered, 'wanting – with every fiber of my being – to provide my child with everything she could possibly need, and yet having no idea what that might be?' I was exhausted, but I wanted to be vigilant lest her diaper need changing or her tummy need feeding, so I did my best to push through. At one point I noticed she was wide awake and quiet ~ two seemingly contradictory states of being for a newborn. Of course I did what any new parent does when the baby is awake and content: I picked her up.

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Isaiah, the prophet of exile, is stirring up the longing of his people with the intention of turning the hearts of his people back to the God who has not, and will not, abandon them. They have been estranged from life as they had known it, from their place of worship, from their homes and workplaces, having to adapt to a new normal during their time in exile. Isaiah reminds God's people – through symbols and images intimately known to them – that they can continue to depend on God: God's Word is God's action. God's purposes will not be thwarted.

We shall go out in joy, he describes, and be led back in peace. Isaiah acknowledges that the created order is not all sunshine and rainbows – there are thorns and briars that are a part of life – but God will transform even these into cypress¹ and myrtle: signs of God's dependability and covenant-keeping.

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I'm not sure babies would describe their birth experience as 'going out in joy.' Perhaps something more akin to, "it's freezing out here!" or "turn off the lights and stop talking so loudly!" This is what I wondered as I held her. Part of caring for another is to want to buffer the harshness of the world, to nurture and encourage the best parts of them, to feed and protect them. Not able to discern her thoughts from afar, I tentatively took another step into motherhood: I made sure she was warm enough, dimmed the lights, and spoke to her softly.

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Israel had a hard time learning an important truth – a truth that all of God's people have struggled to understand through time: in order to return home, to return to an Eden-like communion with God and one another, we have to escape our own captivity. When we get

¹ The cypress is the tallest species of tree in Palestine, it's uplifted branches are likened to arms in praise and the hope of heaven. The myrtle, a fragrant evergreen shrub is a symbol of the recovery and establishment of God's promises.

distracted and lose sight of our core identity as God’s image-bearers, when we get too complacent or competitive, when we focus on ourselves, we must turn our attention back to God.

Like Israel in Isaiah’s day, we too are in a time of exile, experiencing our own time of thorns and briars, when we have been displaced from our places of worship, from our family and friends. Despite months of this ‘new normal,’ many of us still feel that these new rhythms lack familiarity, consistency, and sustainability. Isaiah’s words are just as relevant to us now as they were to his people some 2500 years ago: we are being given the opportunity to reprioritize, to let go of that which holds us back and keeps us bound from meaningful relationship with God and one another; we have the opportunity to unleash our imaginations and embrace a renewed vision of God.

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I checked her diaper. I tried to feed her. She wasn’t fussing, just awake. Not knowing what I was supposed to do with a wide awake, non-fussing baby, I reclined with her propped up against my legs and we simply stared at each other. She was a part of me – *had been* a part of me for a full 9 months – and she was now “Other” ... separate ... distinct in her own personhood. And that’s when I wondered if this stranger that I birthed was measuring me up, trying to decide if I was worthy of her presence. Suddenly I wasn’t quite sure if I was or not. She seemed to be saying, “Lady, you went to a lot of trouble to get me here, so now what?”

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I believe that we have to mean what we say and say what we mean. There is a connection between saying and doing so essential that if this link is broken, a meaningful, life-giving relationship is unlikely to thrive. We have covenanted with God that we will respect the dignity of every human being, and yet we get distracted and conduct our lives and manage our relationships in ways that diminish the Other ... that diminish Christ in ourselves as well as the Christ in the Other.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “those whose lives are lived in love are Christ in respect of their neighbor... We are God through the love that makes us do good to [each other]. Such persons can and should act like Christ. They should bear their neighbor’s burdens and suffering. You must take other people’s wants and infirmities to heart as if they were your own and offer them your means as if they were theirs, just as Christ does for you in the sacrament.”²

Might part of our anxiety in this time of pandemic-induced exile stem from a lack of trust in ourselves, in each other, and in God as well?³

Jesus was the incarnation of what God professed. Do we incarnate what we profess? Might the fragmentation of our larger community be due in part to the disconnect between our promises made and our promises kept? The prophets teach us that when that happens, covenant is broken,

² Bonhoeffer in *Creation and Fall*. Cited by The Rev. Clem Gunn in “A Christian Interlude” July 14, 2002.

³ Is not our role as Christians to ‘be the change we want to see in the world’?

estrangement ensues, and creation suffers. We become once again creatures of exile, bound in a captivity of our own making.

Perhaps God knows all this, and that is why the seed-spreading in Jesus' parable is so profligate.⁴ God knows how well each of us attends to the soil of our hearts.

God's purpose will not be thwarted, Isaiah reminds us. By God's grace, the Word of God that creates, redeems, and sustains us promises to lead us back to God in peace when the time is right.

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As my daughter stared at me expectantly in that holy moment, I wanted to say something meaningful to her. But ordinary words seemed insufficient. I didn't have anything original to offer her, just the same promise that Isaiah reminded the exiles: the promise that God made to creation when the Word was spoken ... that Jesus made to all of us who do the best we can from one moment to the next ... and the promise that the Holy Spirit reminds us of when we meaningfully connect with one another:

I love you. I will always love you.

⁴ Thomas Long in *Matthew, the Westminster Bible Companion*: "The Church is called to 'waste itself,' to throw grace [and mercy] around like there is no tomorrow, precisely because there is a tomorrow, and it belongs to God.