

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 6, 2015
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Do Not Fear

The words we hear in the Old Testament lesson for today from the prophet Isaiah date from the mid-6th century B.C. “*Say to those who are of a faithful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God... He will come and save you...’*” Isaiah was speaking to the Jews in exile in Babylon. The exile of the people of ancient Israel began in the late 8th century BC when Assyria conquered the northern territory of Israel. Judah and Jerusalem lasted another 135 years until they, too, were conquered and deported. In all, some 40,000 people – the best, the brightest, the wealthiest – were sent into exile. Yet now, after about 200 years for Israel and at least 50 years for Judah, Isaiah could see the end of exile, so he proclaimed deliverance, God’s coming salvation.

In the history of the Old Testament, Cyrus of Persia becomes the agent of God’s redemption. He conquers Babylon and decrees the release and return of the Jews to their homeland. It is another momentous event in the saving, redeeming history of Israel. The return from exile follows the great kingdoms of David and Solomon, the conquest of the land by Joshua and the Judges, the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, and the call to Abraham and the patriarchs and matriarchs as events showing God’s power and God’s love.

“*Do not fear ...*” Do not fear slavery in Egypt. Do not fear exile in Babylon. Do not fear Roman oppression. Do not fear “the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God ...” (BCP p. 302) The word “fear,” and those with “fear” as a root – fears, fearful, feared – appear more than 400 times in the Bible, including 35 times in the Gospels. The story of Jesus begins and ends with the words “*Do not be afraid...*” to Mary and Joseph, to the disciples at Easter.

Jesus, throughout his ministry, tries to help everyone he encounters to deal with their fears – especially in the three ways we all experience some degree of fear. First, as we face death, suffering, illness, torture or persecution. Paul writes that “*death is the last enemy*” (I Corinthians 15:26). Jesus heals to release men and women from their fear of illness, suffering and death, as we see most especially in the last great healing recorded in the Gospel of John, the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus encourages those who will face physical persecution, torture, martyrdom. He helps those who are oppressed by Roman authority and Jewish law to find release, to find freedom. Sometimes this means extending forgiveness to those who have turned away from God’s love and denied God’s grace, as we see in the forgiveness and hope extended to the thief being crucified next to Jesus – “*Today you will be with me in Paradise*” – and the forgiveness given to those responsible for Jesus’ execution – “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*”

And lastly, Jesus helps those who feel the weight of materialism, the rich and the poor, to find freedom in God's providential care and generosity. Lessons of stewardship and discipleship help us to deal with our fears and our guilt about not having enough, or having so much more than most in our world today.

Jesus knew that we would have our fears: fears about death, fears about physical health and well-being, fears about the world we live in and threats to our security, fears about what we have and what we don't have. Jesus' way is the way to trust, to love, to peace. Jesus teaches us to overcome our fears.

The beloved disciple, John, knew his own fears, yet Jesus showed John the way forward, the way of love. So many years after the Resurrection, many years after John wrote his Gospel, he then wrote three short letters that we have in the New Testament. John tells us that God is love. "*There is no fear in love; perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in me...*" (1 John 4:18).

So we strive to reach perfection in our love, and we know God is working in each one of us to help us know love, receive love, give love. It takes a lifetime. It takes courage and persistence. This process of trying to perfect love can seem like a roller coaster ride. We can experience our own exile. We might know our own exodus. Hopefully, we will overcome all our fears and know God's perfect love.