

## ***A Redemptive Story***

Text: Isaiah 43: 1-7; Luke 1: 1-4

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**"I wish someone could tell me something good for a change."** She spoke from within and behind her very burdened eyes. "I'm tired of it all - the news, the wall, the threat of economic instability, the stalemate of our government, and the way this is all creeping into everything, everywhere. It has me exhausted."

She went on. "And get this. I don't usually remember my dreams but I had one the other night that I was being chased by reporters wanting my comment on how to fix all that is wrong. When one of them finally caught up with me the most valuable thing I could offer was 'please stop and leave me alone.'"

I am running the hunch today that a good number of us are feeling some of these things, too. And though the long arc of history has presented lots of dissonant eras this particular thin slice of life assigned to us right now is sure pushing the limits.

**So let's name it right up-front.** My friend is feeling overwhelmed by an experience of exile; of being cast out, banished from her best dreams of what life could be; of longing for a return to a better place of wholeness and restoration and rest. And though she is not alone in this, it feels awfully lonely to her to be in that place these present days.

The truth is, all current reasons aside, it's not anything new to experience exile in its many forms – individually or collectively. In a nutshell, it's the struggle – imagined or known in real time – of feeling dissonant or disconnected; of being thick in confusion and thin in hope; of being cut off in body or in spirit to the unsettled longing for home.

It is for the likes of my friend that I speak today. Though I bear no specific expertise on the matter, I take as my guide a companion named Isaiah. He was an expert and knew the experience of exile bone-deep such that we cannot begin to fathom. In the midst of his own troubled times he offered his wise counsel, still spot-on for us today.

**Isaiah first reminded his contemporaries of an overarching promise, a meta-story from the very heart of their Maker, "I have redeemed you."**

Curious and instructive: the Hebrew verb for "redeemed" here is much larger than our accustomed English reveals. It refers not to a single over-and-done-with-event, but one that transcends place and time. It blends past, as in something already done; present, as in something here and now; and future, as in something that will be. It's not a moment but an active, ongoing, unfolding process.

I find it so true that God is interactive and dynamic far more than fixed or static. And I think that God most often redeems us by opening hardened hearts and closed minds, and inviting us

to remember and live a larger narrative. As Marcus Borg notably said, God opens us to be of the larger mind and story to equip us for today and tomorrow.

Which is also to say that in the midst of whatever may be, ours is a redemption faith at heart; a narrative of the dawn; a promise of a newborn day. And for those of us who follow the particular name of Christ, that has its beginning through a newborn in a manger.

**And then Isaiah, still speaking for God, reminded them of more: "I have called you by name and you are mine."**

Here is the holy truth: smart as we may be, there are times when we forget who we are. Really, we do. Times when we become confused about our essential identity as God's beloved.

A frustrated traveler was once stranded at an airport due an ice storm. He pushed his way to the counter, "I need a seat on the next flight." The agent said, "Sir, you need to wait your turn." He shouted back, "Do you have any idea who I am?" Without a flinch the attendant spoke through the PA, "There's a man here who doesn't know who he is. If anyone can help identify him please come forward!"

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann affirmed it just right when he said: "Even if I am lost to myself, I am never lost to God. Even if I give up on myself, God never gives up on me."<sup>1</sup> For those feeling bereft and in exile, this is amazingly revolutionary! And it's quite like the choir sang, "Ain'a That Good News!"

**The prophet, still speaking for God, said more: "I will be with you."** "Though you pass through the waters they shall not overwhelm you; though you walk through the flame you shall not be consumed."

Etty Hillisum<sup>2</sup> was imprisoned in Auschwitz where she later died there. She struggled daily to keep her faith in the midst of that horrific circumstance. Her words: "Dear God, it is sometimes so hard to take in and comprehend what those created in your image do to each other. But I still believe that beautiful dreams can exist beside the most horrible reality – and I continue to praise you and your creation – despite everything."

"No matter what comes to pass, grant me the resilience I need to bear this day." In the end, "it all comes down to the same thing: Life is beautiful. And I believe in God."

**Once more, God says this through Isaiah: "You are precious in my sight, and I love you!"**

I had another birthday this week - strange how they seem to come faster with each year. And at our house, birthdays are times of affirmation and stories about how special each of our beloveds are to us.

Tim likes to hear how he arrived on a Sunday morning and that our Vermont congregation sang

the doxology over the phone and into the intercom in the delivery room to welcome him to the world.

Karen loves to hear about how I broke the front doorknob clear off in my haste to get to the hospital and how our Granby congregation decorated the church sign with pink ribbons and balloons.

Henri Nouwen collected up these affirmations from God's redemption story that holds all of us: "You are my child. I have molded you from the secret places of the earth. I have knit you together. I am yours and you are mine."

**So back to my friend, remember?** "I wish someone could tell me something good for a change. I'm tired of it all - the news, the wall, the threat of economic instability, the failure of our government. It has me exhausted."

If you suffer, even in the smallest of ways, with the fatigue of which she speaks, I pray that some modicum of the Good News be with you today – whatsoever be the shape or place or experience of your life.

And I pray that we all allow ourselves to linger with what is good and gracious and grand and purely of God. Isaiah says it so clear: "I have redeemed you. I have named you. I am with you. I love you."

May we renew our belief that it is really so! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Moltmann. The Source of Life. Fortress Press, 1997, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> ETTY Hillisum. An Interrupted Life. Owl Books, 1996.