

From Exile to Re-union

First in-person service of worship in the sanctuary in 14 months!

Jeremiah 31:7-14 Ezra 1:1-4; 2:1
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Welcome back! I've been waiting to say these words for an extremely long and difficult 14 months since we last gathered together in this sanctuary as a community of faith. After preaching directly into a video lens six feet in front of my face during all that time, it may take me a while to readjust to looking around at actual people sitting throughout the sanctuary. And unlike our Saturday video sessions over the past year, there will be (perhaps unfortunately) no retakes!

It was at the May Session Meeting, almost exactly a year ago, that we officially formed what we entitled the Re-union ministry team. This team, so-well moderated by Todd Redding, kept the church on track, leading us to this day of re-union. There's an intentional dash in that word – re-union – to remind us of our former times together in union, and the work it would take to study and explore the time when we could re-unite after a time of basically forced separation. It also reminds us of other kinds of reunions, like family reunions, or graduation class reunions. But unlike those, the good thing about this church re-union is that it isn't a one-time or even occasional event. Rather, it is something to be experienced each and every week ahead, especially after we're able to open up the entire sanctuary seating again when more and more will be returning.

Speaking of words that begin with the letters re, **the word "religion" is believed to have originally come from the Latin, religare, literally meaning to bind together again. In other words, to reconnect.** The Latin word is about mending what has been broken, recovering what has been lost or misplaced. **It's about reconnecting with God and with each other.**

Christian author Diana Butler Bass, the speaker at our Harold L. Hill Lecture Series in the fall of 2019, released an article less than two weeks ago entitled, "Religion After Pandemic". In 2012, she released a very important book entitled, *Christianity After Religion*. Therefore, she is constantly being asked about what's next, especially in the church after a year of exile due to the pandemic. Her response is spot on, "I don't know. Nobody knows." That means, of course, that I don't know either. But together, we'll work to figure that out.

She states that at this very moment in which we find ourselves, **the most important thing to focus on is now.** While it has its place, long-term planning isn't where we need to primarily focus most at the moment. I'm more concerned about what needs to be done, and how to do it, this coming week. And let's face it, we don't really know where we are in the course of the pandemic. Butler Bass suggests the best way to understand this moment is that "*we are nearing the end of the beginning.*"

So, while we continue our best to navigate the unknowns as they occur, "it seems wiser to focus on what we do know. And what we know is what we've been through – and how we are continuing to struggle." Many have lost loved ones during or due to this pandemic. Not being able to gather together to say goodbye, or later to

grieve with friends and family, have only added to our sense of isolation. We've lost a sense of security. Many have lost their jobs, financial holdings, or even their business. We've lost the ability to move freely about.

There is indeed much for which we need to lament and grieve, including the illusion of civility we thought we had with others with whom we disagree. This morning, however, **I want to turn the focus to the gracious and joyous opportunity to reunite as we are inching our way out of isolation.**

My usual approach to preparing a sermon is to start with one of the assigned lectionary passages from the Bible for that week and let that guide me to a particular theme. Given the particularity and the historical nature of our re-union today, I realized I needed to start with that theme and then find scripture to help provide guidance. That wasn't too difficult a task. Where would you turn in the Bible when it comes to the theme of returning from exile? A major portion of the Old Testament, including most of the words of the prophets, deals with what is known as **The Exile** – before, during, and after. The Babylonian Empire began conquering the Southern Kingdom of Judah around 597 BCE and carried many, mostly the religious, political, and social elite, into captivity in Babylon. That captivity, that separation from Jerusalem and their homeland, lasted about 70 years, according to one tradition. Their sense of dislocation from all that they had known is most likely beyond any of our comprehension. But as you heard in the passage from Jeremiah 31, he prophesizes about hope and the joyous day when God will gather the people back as a shepherd does a flock.

Jeremiah proclaims, "...their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again...I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow...and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty (vv. 12b-13). Please hear those as words as if spoken directly to you and I, to us, as it appears we are coming out of the captivity of COVID-19. And the passage from the book of Ezra explains, and is actually subtitled, "End of the Babylonian Captivity".

In his transformative 2003 book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg explains his understanding of the human condition and what is needed to address those issues. Using the story of exile in Babylon, he sees one of our human problems as exile itself. He writes:

A story of separation from one's homeland and longing for home, it is marked by yearning, grief, loneliness, anger, and despair. Psychologically and spiritually, **exile is a condition of alienation, a sense of being cut off from a center of meaning and energy.**

The solution is a journey of return, a journey that God both invites and energizes. The journey, "the way," once again leads through the wilderness, and in the wilderness we are nourished by God. The story of salvation is a story of reconnection with the one in whom we live and move and have our being, the one who has always been here even though we have been estranged.

How wonderful it must have felt to return home. But there's a lot more to that exile story beyond a joyful reunion. This, too, is something that can apply to us. **Things had changed back in Jerusalem while they were away. Things were not the same as when they were last there. AND, things were obviously not the same with themselves either.** Most obviously, the Babylonians had destroyed the temple, which now needed

to be rebuilt. **Is life ever the same after a long separation, especially a difficult one like we've just experienced, in its own way a time of exile for us?** That goes back to the answer, "I don't know" – but that's more about **not knowing exactly what will be different while still acknowledging that there has been and will be change.** Doing a live-streaming video of our service each week is indeed a major change in and of itself. But we know this can expand our ministry outreach to those who can't be here in person. And as we've learned, that includes many outside Tulsa itself. A huge thanks primarily to Chris Newsome for exploring, setting up, and videoing with our new system. A team will be trained so others can bear that important responsibility.

Let me return to Diana Butler Bass' article at this point where she engages with the definition of religion. She writes: "**What is the future of religion post-pandemic? Well, it depends.** It depends if we continue to insist on the other definition of religion – as obligation to a particular order of things (like doctrine, polity, or moral action – a "bounden duty"). If nothing else, the pandemic has revealed that particular orders of things can be upset, overturned by the most unanticipated of things. If religion is about maintaining a certain order of liturgy, dogma, or practice, well, then, we can consider religion one more pandemic loss.

"If we think of religion in terms of [that Latin word] *religare*, however, the task of the post-pandemic church – the work of finding, repairing, and relocating – is clear. We must reconnect ourselves and others with time, history, physicality, and relationships. In this sense, the future of religion has never been brighter – our lost world needs finding. Pandemic dislocation calls for guides and weavers of wisdom. **We don't need to return to the old ways, we need to be relocated. We need to find a new place, a new home in a disrupted world.**

"And at the very heart of finding our lost selves is relocating our hearts in and with God. There is a journey beyond the pandemic, and we will find the way a step at a time. We haven't been to this particular future before. And we will need one another to get there."

So, welcome back to this unique time of re-union.

Amen.

Resources:

Diana Butler Bass, "Religion After Pandemic: Lost means gone – it also means dislocated", *The Cottage*, April 26, 2021.

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 2003.