

## March 7, 2010 – Lent 3 “Coming to Life”

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

A few weeks ago, several of us gathered to listen to Nick Reveles, education coordinator for San Diego Opera, for a didactic presentation on the company's current run of Giuseppe Verdi's Nabucco. Nabucco, which is nothing more than an easier way to say Nebuchadnezzar, is the story of the Babylonian Captivity of the Israelites during the reign of that infamous king. We know it to be a time when most of the Jews were forcibly taken from their homeland around 600 BCE and dispersed throughout the Babylonian Empire. It is the supposed setting for the story that was read today from the book of Isaiah. As the story goes, they were held in Babylon for about 40 or 50 years until Cyrus the Great conquered the Babylonians and restored the former political arrangements. The Jews then were allowed to return home.

During their time in captivity a whole lot happened. For example, some of the most memorable portions of the Hebrew Scriptures were written – or, at least, recorded for future reference. We have major sections of the prophet Isaiah and Ezekiel, Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as Psalms all written to encourage the Jews during this season of displacement.

The lament Psalms, in particular, offer beautiful poetic statements of the Jews' longing to return home. In fact, one of the Psalms, that I always remember as popularized in the musical Godspell, says it most poignantly, “On the willows there, we hung up our lyres, for our captors there required of us songs of our tormentors mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’ But how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?”

When I first heard that song performed years ago, listening to the beautiful yet haunting melody, I was struck to the core at how horrible it must have been to be forcibly uprooted and physically forbidden to return home. It all seemed so sad – so unfair.

But Nick opened my eyes to a new possibility – in fact the real probability that the Babylonian Captivity was not really **all** that bad for the Jews.

First of all – most biblical scholars suggest, the period of captivity was not really all that long. Most folks assume that it was an interminable and therefore intolerable period of time. But it may have been as brief as 30 years. Not **that** long – but certainly long enough to make a difference in their lives.

Secondly, and more importantly, this was not a time of slavery or intense persecution for the Jews. While I'm not trying to defend or minimize what happened to them in any way during this period of “captivity,” it is telling that when they were allowed to return to their homeland – not all of them chose to do so. They had become quite used to this new culture and even found it to be advantageous to them in many ways. That's why the prophets were speaking so boldly and compellingly to get them to come back to where they belonged.

They were essentially reminding them that they **were** “thirsty” and didn’t even realize it. They had become so smitten with the things that do not satisfy that they no longer desired real, spiritual food. “Seek the Lord,” Isaiah said, “Let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and abundantly pardon.”

Many if not most had become quite happy in Babylon. They had been introduced to another way of life and had adjusted quite well – even adopting other gods – not a good thing for the God of Israel. The prophets had no option but to decry what was happening in order to try and bring them back to their senses, as well as bring them back home.

The point I am making is that life in Babylon was not all that bad – just different. As they looked back on those years, the Jews would later realize that during that time they had been changed forever. Therein lies the point of struggle in their relationship with Yahweh and their whole identity as faithful beings. Life in a foreign land had an incredible and lasting effect on them.

I’ve never had the opportunity to live in a foreign country for any length of time – perhaps some of you have. I imagine if you have, and if you returned to what you refer to as “home,” you did so as a changed person. You could not possibly be the same person as when you left. You may have adopted some different patterns of living, may have even gotten your language mixed up. Your world view would have changed a bit as your perspective would forever be different. Depending on the country in which you lived perhaps even your religious beliefs were influenced or changed – maybe to the point of even forsaking the religion of your earlier years. All of this may have resulted in your feeling a bit like you didn’t really belong in this place that used to be – home.

While you may not have had the opportunity to live in a foreign country, most of us have left home for some period of time – for one reason or another. College, marriage, job opportunities, the desire to live in a different climate – all these reasons take us to from where we were to where we are. That’s the easy part – the really strange experience is going back home. You know what I’m talking about don’t you?

Family or school reunions, coming back for weddings, anniversaries, or just a week of vacation can quickly turn into a rather distressing experience when you begin to realize that, “I don’t quite fit here anymore. I’ve changed. I don’t know when or how it happened, but being back here makes me realize this is no longer where I belong.

The season of Lent, from one perspective, is almost like shining a spotlight on that realization and beckons us to sit with that understanding and those feelings for a while. But it does so specifically from a spiritual vantage point. Our reflection ought to encompass both the psychological and the theological realities that have occurred in our lives. Among other things it invites us to ponder how have we changed in our desire to follow Jesus more than the lure of this world? How have we or better still – **have we**

become salt and light, grace and peace, compassion and hope to a world that screams in need? Are we content to live in Babylon or do we have the desire to come back to a renewed relationship with Yahweh? Do we even know we are thirsty? Are we prepared to receive the food – the only food that can satisfy? Or are we content to live with little regard to things spiritual?

Too often the season of Lent is thought of as a season of judgment and the need to repent in order to prepare for the holy event of Easter. I think that's a cop-out. It's easy to say we've done wrong, to seek and receive forgiveness, and to celebrate the grace of God as we readily embrace that. That's the whole premise of "judgment theology" which many preachers still use quite effectively today to frighten people into submission to an all wise and powerful God.

I think the invitation of Lent is much more complicated than that. Look carefully at what is being said in these passages. I believe in both Isaiah and Luke the message is that of invitation. An invitation to self-examination – not at the fact that we are doing so many things **wrong**, but rather that we are not doing anything at all! We've become so much like the dominant culture that Isaiah says – we no longer even realize that we **are** thirsty – Luke says that we don't even realize that it is important as a fig tree to – guess what – produce figs! Imagine that?

Using judgment theology the message is get your buns back to Judah – that's where you belong. That's where God lives and that's where you need to be – no questions asked. But that's not what Isaiah is saying. No Isaiah says, "Come on home. The door's open wide. God knows your thoughts are not like God's neither are your ways like Gods, but don't fight it. We've got a lot of work to do. Don't waste your time on things that will never satisfy – there is so much more I want to give you.

Using judgment theology Jesus could have said – see, those Galileans got their just desserts for fraternizing with Pilate, and those 18 who were killed by that tower that fell over in Siloam – that didn't just happen, you know. But he didn't say that, did he? Oh, we'd like to find blame and reason when karma seems to meet out justice the way we think is inevitable and correct, but we know from experience that life doesn't always work out that way. In fact, Jesus makes the case for our understanding that both good things and bad things happen to both good and bad people.

In fact, he doesn't come down on the side of judgment at all. NO, he goes on to insist that we worship the God of second chances. "Don't cut down the fig tree just yet. Give it another year. Dig around it, put some manure on it. Give it the resources it needs in order that it might begin doing what it is intended to do. See if it doesn't produce some figs next year.

This isn't judgment, rather it's inviting us to a time of self-examination – to really take the time to think long and hard about who we are, who we are meant to be, and what have we become in this foreign land?

We're rapidly moving out of existence – we who call ourselves Christian. While this church is a huge exception, the norm of is of dwindling memberships, shrinking budgets, decreasing programs and the frightening reality that most of our children are not regular in church attendance if they go at all. Why? Because most don't see anything different going on in church than they do in any other organization. We've assimilated quite nicely in order, we believe, to be attractive to world around us.

If repentance is needed – that's where we have to begin. And God is inviting us. Don't go scurrying after the things that will never satisfy you – healthy stock portfolios, a big bank account, a steady job, lots of stuff in our closets – nothing wrong with that, but they will ultimately never satisfy. And, if we are being held captive by those things – we will never be free to produce the fruit that we were intended to produce.

Take time for some self-reflection, self-examination. Is God moving in your life? Or have you lost touch with the presence of holiness that dwells within you? No judgment here – rather an invitation – you who are thirsty – come to the water. You who are not producing fruit – well, a healthy dose of manure is available to you – embrace it and thrive. And may this be a time in which you sense the Spirit of God in whom you live, move and have your being.

Amen.