

Disciplines of Readiness: Remember
Isaiah 51:1-2

There was once a people—a good people, a people who believed in fairness and equality and justice and compassion. They built a whole country together around those beliefs. They were committed to being a beacon of light to the whole world.

These people had long believed—there was reason to believe—that their country was special; that its history and foundation, its core values and beliefs, its technology, its essential faithfulness to what is true, meant that no matter how much the rest of the world got shaken, they would be all right. Their goodness, they believed, insulated them from harm.

In their life together, there had always been promises of security and opportunity. The people relied on those promises. In fact, those promises were the foundation of their life together. The security of living in safety freed them--to educate their children and advance their technology, to allow art and beauty to flourish, to expect health and happiness. Not everyone got to live in the safety of those protections. From time to time the people were reminded that their country was not working well for everyone, that widows and orphans and people who seemed like foreigners were forced to fend for themselves, left out of the benefits that living here was supposed to offer. But still, they knew, these were people of good intentions. God was with them. That was a guarantee they could count on *forever*.

And then something happened. From outside, something they'd never imagined, something stronger than their defenses, attacked them. Insidiously, it made its way into their communities, their institutions, their sense of connection with one another. It disrupted every aspect of their lives. Literally, every dimension of their life was thrown into upheaval: the way they did work, and connected with their neighbors, the way they practiced their religion, their trust in their government—all those things that had *always been there*.

It made no sense. This kind of thing didn't happen to *them*. It *shouldn't* happen to this country. What did it say about order, and trust, and faith, if vulnerability to danger was what they now had to live with daily? It was an unfamiliar and unnerving feeling, this sense that the systems they had trusted could *not* keep them safe from the most serious dangers in the world.

Does that story sound familiar? Does it sound to you like it describes our country in the last year? I think it does. But it also describes the people of Israel—a tribe of Middle Easterners who thousands of years ago established a kingdom where they could live freely as God's people. And then, in the year 587 Before Christ, the Babylonian Army attacked their country, and ransacked their capital city Jerusalem, and burned to the ground the Temple that was not just the center of their civic life; it was the place *where God lived*. The God who had always been stronger than any opposing force. The God who was supposed to protect them from harm *forever*. The God who had once pronounced that they were chosen, special.

Who were they now?

Almost identical words would describe the events of the last year in American life. Who would have imagined that a virus could outrun the most advanced medical system in the world? That our businesses and economic life, our gatherings in church, our schools, even our connections with our own families, could be brought to a halt? Who would have predicted that in the 21st century, people of color would still have to take to the streets to claim citizenship and safety, and that white supremacists would rise up, violently, to resist? Why *now*, this year, would climate change accelerate enough to spark uncontrollable fires in California and unleash relentless cold in southern Texas? Who might have guessed that our tested, reliable political system could be shaken to its core; that the values we assumed every American holds close—truth, and order, fairness to all, peaceful democratic power—were so fragile, so *not* assumable?

Who are *we* now?

In Old Testament times, almost 2500 years ago now, when the period called *the Exile* began, there was no language with which to talk about the failures of medical technology or national security. There was no expectation that the government would take care of *all* the people. To them, political chaos signaled cosmic chaos. When the Babylonian Army swept through Israel destroying its sacred places and demolishing its institutions, they called it the anger of God, the failure of God. Maybe even the absence of God.

Prophets rose up in that time, a few people who were wise enough to connect the dots and see a bigger picture. These terrible things that are happening now aren't random, those prophets said. They're the consequences of years of our inattention to something essential. Maybe our arrogance and self-indulgence have contributed to our problems. We forgot that the promises of God's faithfulness and protection required something of us too. Somehow, we've wandered a long way from being a people characterized by attentiveness to God and love of neighbor. It turns out, those prophets said, that those things really do matter; that there are consequences to ignoring them.

We are in exile, those prophets said, far from the home and the life we love, because we are a people who have lost our way.

Now I don't believe that God punishes humanity by stretching out an arm and pointing at the earth either invading armies or pandemics. I don't think the decline of religiosity in America explains racial injustice or political discord. But let's not be stubborn or dogmatic about our scientific and socio-political explanations for the conditions that are imperiling life right now. Maybe there is meaning—some deeper message—in the confluence of all these things that have happened to our country in the last year.

- A global pandemic that has shut down our institutions of learning and commerce and health care
- An eruption of racial unrest that has exposed decades of unacknowledged injustice and resentment
- A crumbling of the democratic processes that we thought were bedrock in this country
- The suddenly unavoidable truth that the effects of climate change are already strong enough to overpower our capacity to protect people from nature

In another age, prophets might have looked at the earth in 2020 and 2021 and said, ‘Something is deeply wrong.’ I think if they were among us today, they might say exactly what they said centuries ago: ‘We are in exile, far from the home and the life we love, because we are a people who have lost our way.’

Can we be as wise and attentive, as searching for wisdom, as those people who looked around 2500 years ago and noticed a pattern?

Those Old Testament prophets were often regarded by the people around them as voices of doom. A message that says, ‘Maybe we’re living with the consequences of our own actions’ is never welcome. Denial, blaming forces out of our control, cynicism that anything will change no matter what we do—all those reactions are much easier for us to turn to. They come to us naturally. But none of those attitudes, the prophets knew, will carry us home.

We need something else. We need many things, actually, but among them we need the power of memory. Memory that even people of God have gotten lost before. This is not the first time that good people have wondered if they would ever find their way home again. This time it’s just us.

This is the season of Lent, a season when we are preparing for Easter, anticipating, hoping, for a day when we will be at home again, living the fullness of our lives, flourishing. It’s our work in this season to be thoughtful and self-reflective, as honest about our situation as those prophets were. To be realistic and hopeful at the same time. To practice, with intention and a willingness to be changed, new disciplines, as though we are training for a new life. To make ourselves ready for a home we will recognize, but that will be different, because we know now that the old ways simply do not work. Those old ways did not create a world in which *everyone* can flourish.

Maybe our first work is to remember.

Listen to me, [the prophet Isaiah said for God]
you who look for righteousness,
you who seek the Lord:
Look to the rock from which you were cut
and to the quarry where you were dug.
Look to Abraham your ancestor,
and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
They were alone when I called them,
but I blessed them and made them many.

[I will do it for you too.]

When we remember, we are bearing witness. This is what God does, our lives and our stories say: God works life in the face of death; God creates newness out of nothing; God moves us from hopelessness to faith in the power and resilience of life. The memories we need now are the ones about the most embarrassing, helpless, even shameful moments of our lives. Abraham and Sarah’s barrenness, the long years when they could not have the child they wanted more than anything in the world. The days it felt like our sorrow or fear would swallow us. Our failures to

be the people we thought we were. These are the memories that will lead us to knowing that finding and re-claiming those who are lost, broken, even culpable, making a path home for them, is God's work. That this has always been God's work.

What are those memories for you?

The poet Mary Oliver wrote, in a poem called *The Uses of Sorrow*, "Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift." Richard Rohr says, 'There are only two things that have the power to transform us: great love and great suffering.' Maybe now, we stand in the presence of both.

This time of exile, of suffering, of darkness, can be our greatest gift, the moment of our most profound transformation. It—the hardness itself—will take us home. If we remember.