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From the Pulpit

Sermon: A New Song

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ July 18, 2010

Isaiah 42:5-12

1 Corinthians 15:51-57

In Jane Wagner's play, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, a bag lady named Trudy is helping an intergalactic committee of aliens understand our modern American society. At one point she's talking about the origins of language and the purpose of speech. She says, "I personally think we developed language because of our deep inner need to complain."

While there may be a whining part of us that might resonate with Trudy's words our scriptures have a different perspective on the place and purpose of language. From the very first verses of Genesis, to the prophet's words on God's behalf here in Isaiah, to the apostle's bold words of hope in our New Testament text today, words and language -- speech and song -- both point to *and create* a new reality in the midst of challenging circumstance.

In Genesis chapter 1 the Spirit of God hovers over the formless void of creation. And then God speaks. And the speech brings into being -- creates in the midst of the teeming chaos -- something of substance and reality; something that is good. The prophet in Isaiah 42 stands in a turbulent time in Israel's history and sings a new song about former things passing away. But he sings the song *before* the change has happened and yet sings it as though it has *already* occurred. And, *in his prophetic singing*, he helps usher it into reality. Likewise the apostle in Corinthians 15 proclaims words of hope and resurrection to a community reeling with the grief of loved ones who died.

As fleeting and transitory as words can be -- spoken one moment and the next disappearing like your breath on a winter's morning -- as ephemeral as language can be (only evident to the ear in the moment it is heard then fading into the silence again)... *nevertheless*, we are a people who live by the hope and power of a word that promises a reality not always present in our experience. This is the power of the prophetic word we find in a text like the one we've read in Isaiah.

Some context will help. These verses in Isaiah come out of a section of the book known as 2nd Isaiah. It's written at a time when the people have been carried off into exile in Babylon. In 586 BC King Nebuchadnezzar swept across the land decimating the people of God and

destroying the Temple in Jerusalem. In the process he carries off the best and brightest into exile. Now, here in our Isaiah text, we're maybe 40 years later -- a generation has passed; it's around 540 BC -- and the captive people have despaired of return and have begun to fit in where they are and make a new life for themselves in Babylon. The destruction of the holy city has left them wondering if their God is really powerful. Their deportation to a foreign land has made them wonder if their God really cares. They have found in the city around them -- and in its values and perspectives and even in its religions -- a new place of belonging and they have begun to forget their God.

One of the early laments of the people heading off into exile is captured in Psalm 137 where it says, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps; for there our captors asked of us songs. They said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.' But how can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land? If I forget you O Jerusalem may my right hand wither."

But Israel *did* forget; the song grew faint and they settled in and built houses and took jobs and got married and soon Babylon the foreign land, Babylon the place of exile, Babylon the desert of spirituality became Babylon: home sweet home.

By the middle of the book of Isaiah the prophet faces a Jewish community plagued with amnesia; they have forgotten their God -- they have forgotten the song of faith and the lyrics of hope. They have become so enculturated into the life and world of Babylon that they no longer see themselves as strangers who follow a different way. They wear Babylonian fashions, they listen to Babylonian music on their iPods, they send their kids to Babylonian preschools -- they have even come to appropriate certain aspects of the Babylonian religion. In the midst of it all, exile becomes an excellent way of life.

Isaiah's task is to proclaim to them that God will soon take them home and restore them in Jerusalem and regroup them as the people of God. And so in chapter 42 the prophet stands up and cries out, "Sing to the Lord a new song. Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past; for God is doing a new thing."

Now it's important to realize that Isaiah makes this bold claim about the restoration of Israel *while* they were still firmly under the rule and captivity of Babylon. There's nothing in the political climate that would support his words that new things were coming. His words and song must have seemed ridiculous to those living in exile. Isaiah sings about victory and homecoming when that seems the farthest thing from reality. For Israel in exile there seems to be no other power than Babylon's rule. There seems to be no other alternative except to fit in and try to get along. There seems to be no other perspectives or values or aspirations than those they see presented and pursued by the people of the city. They have become consumed with the culture around them; they have been *subsumed* into the prevailing way of life. During the course of exile, Babylon has accomplished the ultimate seduction of the people of God: they have gotten Israel to accept Babylonian definitions of reality as the only reality there is.

Friends, as Christians our language of faith and our understanding of reality is *not* based on present circumstance but the promise of God. When we gather in this sanctuary for a funeral (as we did most recently for the memorial service of Jeff Fregger) we gather in sorrow and grief and pain and confusion and questions and anger... in all those emotions. *But* we also gather as a people of faith and hope who proclaim and sing a reality that is not yet our experience... *but*

which is our absolute confidence: it's what the apostle says in 1 Corinthians: death has been swallowed up in victory; the truth of resurrection is more true than the sorrow of our reality.

And when our circumstance so burdens our souls; where problems overwhelm our hope - when life seems lost and the future bleak... then others in the community -- people like the prophet Isaiah, yes, but also people like you and me -- others in the community stand around us and they speak of a reality and they sing of a hope and they hold forth a faith that we ourselves cannot embrace in that moment... *But* we are embraced in their faith and we are buoyed by their words and we are strengthened by their hope. And we become a community that refuses to believe that what we see and experience and that the way things are define the ultimate reality for ourselves or our world. No, because the former things will pass away and because God is doing a new thing and because we are not abandoned or forgotten: we gather in worship and we come together in small groups and we meet in homes and we encourage one another as we pass along the way with songs of hope and words of promise and the assurance of faith! And we sing a new song and the new song ushers in a new reality and we move from the bondage of our burdens to the promise of our God.

There is a powerful moment in the film, *Life is Beautiful*, when the Jewish father Guido and his son are first brought into their barracks in the concentration camp that they have been taken to. The father is trying to protect the son from the truth and reality of what is happening and so he tells his son that this is a game -- a part of his birthday surprise and that, in the end, the son is going to receive his heart's desire: to get to ride in a tank.

They have just arrived at the barracks and the German guard comes in and asks if anyone can translate what he has to say about the camp rules. Guido doesn't know a word of German but he volunteers and, while the guard yells at them telling them what will be the harsh and brutal conditions of their imprisonment, Guido interprets these words to his son (and therefore all the other men in the barracks!) as though these are the instructions for a wonderful game that will reward him at last with his heart's desire. It's an incredible scene of taking the reality of a terrible circumstance but translating the tragedy into words of hope. It's about the courage and conviction to speak a new and different reality -- and *in the speaking*, eventually bring it to pass.

For the rest of the movie Guido continues to hold forth this "alternate reality" of hope in the midst of the ultimate evil of Nazi Germany. And though the film is a bittersweet story -- the son does indeed, in the end, receive his heart's desire.

The movie is about the power of others to speak a word of hope and truth into the midst of the lives of those who are suffering and afraid. And the truth is, that despite all of what we may see; despite all of that may seem to be true about our condition -- the people in our lives -- the people of faith -- are able to hold forth for us a hope that goes beyond this life, beyond our illness, beyond our fears -- and which assures us that *NOTHING* will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord! *On this* we stand no matter what we experience. And *in this* is our hope no matter what our situation. Alleluia, Amen!