

“Awake! . . . Depart!”
Sermon for EFM Graduation (Isaiah 52:1-11a)
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More than anything else, what I value about EFM as a pastor, priest, and especially as a preacher is the intentional focus on Biblical literacy. I especially love the year-one materials which help the Old Testament come alive because so many of us have grown up knowing next to nothing about it. I know there is lots to appreciate in EFM and each of you might name something different: small groups where discipleship and accountability and love can occur and where spiritual growth is possible. Perhaps for you it is the fellowship, or even TRs. But for me, above all else, the reason I am a mentor and that I value having EFM as part of the ministry of the parish I serve is that it is the best program I know of for combating Biblical illiteracy.

The texts we heard read this afternoon are those appointed for tomorrow for the Feast of St. Mark. I don't have any idea how lectionary committees in fact work but I imagine a committee in search of an appropriate Old Testament reading for commemorating the writer of Mark's Gospel, and someone saying: “well, how about Isaiah 52, where it says . . .

How beautiful upon the mountains,
Are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
Who brings good news (i.e. gospel, or glad tidings)
Who announces salvation . . .

. . . that would be cool because it is an example in the Old Testament of using the word “gospel”—the very word Mark uses to describe the narrative about Jesus of Nazareth, who came to announce salvation and to preach the Kingdom of God!” (That is how I imagine it unfolding, anyway.)

I have this on-going quarrel (that borders on an obsession) with the lectionary committee, even though I have no clue whatsoever how to share it with them or who they are or if such a thing still exists! It is that we tend to reduce the Old Testament readings in our worship (and to a lesser extent the Epistle readings) so that all neatly converges on the Gospel for the day. It's like a well-planned three-course meal where the Old Testament is the appetizer, Paul serves up the salad—but always the entrée is served by Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.

Yet, as you know, to put it that way is to border on heresy. It isn't what the Catechism says and it isn't what orthodox Christianity teaches. Four years of EFM helps us to clarify that a bit better, but our liturgical life is still somewhat at odds with what we say we believe.

Enough on that: but I wanted to explain why I've taken the preacher's privilege and “overruled” the lectionary committee today by extending the Old Testament reading today in both directions. I want us to look for good news in it, quite apart from Mark's Gospel or tomorrow's feast day. I want to ask: what was going on in this text when it first arose almost six centuries before the birth of Christ?

I know it was a long time ago for today's graduates, but I hope you recall that Isaiah 52 is not Isaiah of Jerusalem, the prophet who had announced the coming exile and the destruction of Jerusalem. When it came to pass, the leaders were carted off to Babylon, where they laid up their harps and wept. For how could they sing the Lord's song in a strange land? So they settled down in Iraq, where Jeremiah told them to seek the welfare of the city and settle in because it was going to be a while—according to Jeremiah it was going to be something like 70 years.

Now it turned out to be a little less time than that, but not by much. And here's the thing: people are survivors and most of the time people do get beyond their grief. Time may not heal all wounds but time does allow for life to go on. The first generation of exiles may not have learned to sing the Lord's song in a strange land but their children, and most certainly their grandchildren did just fine. Think about the refugees who left Cuba when Castro came to power fifty years ago and headed for Miami. If Castro died tomorrow do you think their children and grandchildren who have been raised in Miami are dying to get on the first boat back to Havana to start their lives over?

So that is the situation when *Second* Isaiah steps onto the scene in chapter forty of the scroll of Isaiah to announce that it's time to go home. Speaking tenderly to Jerusalem, he says: "Comfort, comfort my people." He says the penalty has been paid and that a superhighway is being built through the desert. Now that is amazing poetry, but it is quite likely that some of those exiles may have stifled a big yawn and said, "who cares?" They had grown accustomed to life in Babylon, and the truth is it really wasn't all that bad once you got used to it.

And so, in the 52nd chapter, Second Isaiah says: "Wake up!" (Awake, awake—twice for effect!) He knows that exile has dulled God's people and made them inattentive. The verbs are all imperatives: awake / put on / shake off / rise up! And then a biggie: *remember*. The language of the Exodus re-emerges. *Remember* that you have a God who liberates. Remember that you have a God who led you from slavery to freedom once before. Remember that God can do it again. Remember that there is more than one kind of slavery and that your captivity to the trappings of Babylonian society is not as different from the bondage you faced in Egypt as you might think. It's time to go home, for God is doing a new thing and it will make you think of the Exodus. Again, we are going through the desert, and again you need to live into the Covenant of Sinai.

It's a word of hope—literally it is a word of gospel—that says that God is not done yet. There is new stuff on the horizon that will rock their worlds. Second Isaiah imagines the sentinels on the walls of the ruined city of Jerusalem, looking out and eagerly awaiting the return of the exiles, ready to spread the word and to tell of what God is now up to...

Now there may well be a highway being built in the desert, but it still requires the eyes of faith to see it. To the naked eye the valleys and hills still seem to look more or less the same. They appear to be barriers to what God is doing. God may be making a path, but *discerning* the path takes prayer and courage and trust and hope.

So the text concludes: depart! (And again, for emphasis, a second time, so it's: "depart!..depart!") In other words, like Abraham and Sarah before you, like Moses and Miriam before you, like people of faith throughout history: "Go." Awake! And then, depart! And God will be with you as you make your way home.

This text calls upon God's people to exhibit the same hallmarks of Biblical faith that are needed in every generation. There isn't Old Testament faith and New Testament faith: just faith. In those days when a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled, Mary and Joseph woke up from their dreams and their encounters with angels to go. It's the faith that is required of the earliest Christians in places like Corinth and Rome and Galatia and Ephesus, and the faith required of people like Martin Luther and John Calvin and Thomas Cranmer. It is the faith of our fathers (and mothers) but it is a faith *living still*, if we let it be—the faith needed at a time when the Church is captive to an imperial culture characterized by the intertwined values of militarism and consumerism. We, too, are called to "awake...and then depart."

Biblical faith as I understand it isn't about seamlessness, or tidiness, or about little a-historical moralistic nuggets of truth. It is about the good news that God is alive, and that the divine power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. It is about a God who is never finished, or settled—a God who is found amazingly enough in the mess of our lives—renewing us as Second Isaiah says elsewhere so that we might "run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint."

That is after all at the heart of what these Fifty Days are all about. We are called, here and now to "wake up" and then to "depart:" sent into the world as heralds of these glad tidings to announce God's salvation.

When I think about the context into which an EFM graduate is sent I don't think first and foremost about the local congregation. There is, of course, plenty of work to be done there and any parish that has an EFM graduate in it can find ways to use those persons to build up the body and to further equip the saints for ministry, to be sure. Hopefully over four years you have been identifying gifts and developing skills for ministry. As we heard in today's epistle, written to one of those early Christian communities in Ephesus, our job is to "... equip the saints for the work of ministry." That is at the heart of what Education for Ministry is of course all about. But the catechism insists that the ministry for which we equip lay persons is "to bear witness to Christ *wherever they may be* ... according to the gifts given them ..." (BCP 855) So the real question is not about how EFM makes us better church volunteers, but rather better evangelists who have been entrusted to preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary to use words.

I know there is a lot of worry these days about the Episcopal Church USA and the Anglican Communion. But I want to tell you I've come to a newfound peace about it all, and figure there are people whose job it is to worry about it all and help us find a way through it all. I'm a part of all that, to be sure. But I gave up worrying about it all for Lent, and this Easter have come to a new recognition that God is bigger than our institutional Church. If the Babylonian army's destruction of the temple in Jerusalem didn't defeat God, then we have nothing to fear.

If the events of Good Friday didn't defeat God, then we have nothing to fear. If the Holocaust didn't defeat God, we have nothing to fear. If the pettiness and silliness and immaturity on both sides of the events ripped from today's headlines about the ECUSA haven't defeated God, then we have nothing to fear.

Or as that old Advent hymn has put it—far better than I can:

Sleepers awake! A voice astounds us, the shout of rampart guards surrounds us!

Awake, Jerusalem, arise!

Midnight's peace their cry has broken,

Their urgent summons clearly spoken; the time has come, o maidens wise:

Rise up, and give us light; the bridegroom is in sight.

Alleluia!

Your lamps prepare, and hasten there—that you the wedding feast may share!

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