

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE

Lent IV–Midweek (members of St. John's Kimball, Grace Pine Bluffs, Zion Grover also present)¹

March 18, 2015

Text: Isaiah 48:17–22

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The theme for this year's midweek Lenten services is "Singing with the Exiles." Over the past three weeks, Pr. Melms and I have proclaimed portions of the Isaiah's prophetic message written for the exiled Jews who would be living in Babylon after the apocalyptic destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple.

Isaiah's prophetic ministry lasted from 740–700 B.C., mostly in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. He warned God's people that judgment was coming, in the form of Babylonian captivity, if they didn't repent and turn back to the Lord their God in obedience, faith, and love. Those warnings went, by and large, unheeded. And at the same time, it appeared that his prophesy of judgment was, shall we say, off the mark.

The Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BC. The reason for their destruction? According to II Kings 17:7–8, God's people feared other gods and walked in the ways of the surrounding unbelieving, pagan nations. Idolatry was the reason. They did not fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

Those same Assyrians surrounded Jerusalem six years later in 715 BC. It certainly looked like Jerusalem would be destroyed. But these are Assyrians not Babylonians. Isaiah encouraged the Judean King Hezekiah with these stirring words, "He (Sennacherib, Assyria's king) shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it...For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David" (II Kings 19:32, 34).

By God's grace, Judah, Jerusalem, and the Temple were spared destruction. It seemed Isaiah was wrong about judgment and exile. God's holy city and God's holy Temple

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will never be destroyed. And yet, Isaiah's warning remained unchanged: judgment would come if they abandoned faith and fidelity to the Lord.

Time went on. Jerusalem and the Temple went on...until 587 B.C. Some 113 years had lapsed since Isaiah ministry and his warnings about exile. In late 587, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, the Temple, laid waste to Judah, and carried off their nobility and leading citizens into captivity. Isaiah's warnings did come true after all.

But Isaiah not only spoke words of warning and judgment but of hope and restoration. Those words of ultimate victory have been the focus for Pr. Melms and me over these past few weeks. No matter what form of devastation your life has endured: physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, medical, mental it doesn't matter, God's word to you is that victory awaits all of God's people. This is the time to hear, to repent, and to believe.

Hear again Isaiah's words of hope written initially to Jews in Babylon but also to Christians living in western Nebraska, southeastern Wyoming, and northeastern Colorado. "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go'" (vs. 17). The Lord is yet your Redeemer; He remains your God. He could never cast off His beloved people. Even in their exile, surrounded by pagan gods and sacrilegious customs, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remained faithful to His afflicted people. He leads them to profit and in the way they should go.

You and I don't live in ancient Babylon. But we are surrounded by pagan gods and sacrilegious customs. What are the gods of America? You know the culprits. The devil isn't very imaginative: money, power, sex, comfort, health care, autonomy and individualism, entertainment, materialism, national security and safety, you name it.

What are our sacrilegious customs? You know these as well. We allow women and girls to abort their babies often at tax payer expense and call it health care and women's rights. By contrast, regulatory agencies will shut down or restrict industry, burdening the company and their employees with lost profits and wages, in order to allow some wild animal undisturbed access to native nesting habitat. (I experienced this with mining company I worked for in Wyoming!). The sacrilege is that our society doesn't have the will or the courage to require that pregnant woman or young girl to give her baby undisturbed access to his or her native habitat: the mother's

womb. But the full weight and fury of governmental might will come crashing down on a company whose legal, moral, and beneficial activities disturb a nesting bird in its native habitat! Numerous other examples could be given regarding marriage, family, education, religious freedom, etc.

You didn't come here on a beautiful Wednesday evening to listen to me harangue on the evils of our American Babylon. Every society has had its false gods and shameful practices. But you must know that Isaiah's message of judgment and hope still rings true down through the centuries into our day. Though surrounded by a fallen, corrupted world influenced by hellish demons and humanity's sinful nature, God remains true to us. We heard Sunday from John's gospel that God loves this world. And this loving God leads us in the way we should go, as Isaiah proclaimed 2,700 years ago. And that loving way has been revealed to you: the way of Jesus' cross and empty tomb. That is the way of salvation, redemption, true fulfillment, lasting joy, and eternal life.

But Isaiah has something else that must be heard. Prophetically, he told the Jewish exiles, "Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, 'The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob!'"

The time of their exile was temporary. The Promised Land was still theirs. In 538 B.C., after some 70 years of exile, the Persian King Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to return back to their homeland and rebuild their Temple. This was the Lord's doing from beginning to end. Living in the promises of God would require sacrifice and courage, however. It meant leaving the relative security of Babylon, after 70 years homes and families had been established. Following the Lord meant returning to a conquered, devastated land with little or no security, a land needing arduous work and commitment. And the only assurance you have is God's promise: I will lead you in the way you should go but it begins by leaving the comforts Babylon.

The Lord is not calling us to leave our country. But He is calling us to leave the relative safety of our comfortable American lives and follow Him in the risky path of righteousness, obedience and faith. Or to put it differently and somewhat provocatively...the Lord of heaven and earth is calling us to be Christian first and foremost. Other designations and descriptions come only secondarily.

Several months ago, I had the privilege of studying some of the ancient martyrdom accounts with a bible study group. In those earliest accounts, there was almost always one, common element. The martyrs, those men and women who died for their Biblical faith, made this same confession of faith: I am a Christian. When asked who they were...I am a Christian. What god do you worship? ... I am a Christian and so I worship Jesus, the Son of God the Father almighty in and through the grace of the Holy Spirit. I am a Christian.

Those early saints who also happened to be Romans or Greeks or Jews or Africans or any number of nationalities had fled the idols and sacrilegious practices of their day. And when asked why they would do such an unthinkable thing, they said, "I am a Christian."

Dear saints, you are Christians, the redeemed of the Lord who are more precious to Him than heaven and earth. Walk in the Lord's way. Abandon the wide road of the world's glory, the pride of life, and the lust of the flesh (I John 2:16) and seek the Lord to live in His ways. Having been cleansed by Jesus' blood and filled with the Holy Spirit, our mouths can then sing the high praises of God. For we are the singing exiles on our way home to our true country, to our home being prepared by the Lord Jesus Himself. May "the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ...restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen." (I Pe 5:10-11)

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.