

March 18, 2015
Isaiah 48:17-22

Midweek Lent 4
Get Out

*Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Two urgent words are spoken to people in the following situations. Can you guess what they are?

A house is on fire and there are several children stuck inside. A family of five is stuck in their minivan as it plunging into the river after it slides off the road. A talented young man is stuck in a dead-end job. An unsteady building is starting to waver as constructions crews are trying to steady it and seem to be stuck. Can you guess the two urgent words that are spoken to these people? What are they? "GET OUT!"

In August 587 BC, Israel's world caved in. The temple collapsed, the monarchy lay in ruins, the land became a wasteland, and all hope was dismantled and destroyed. Then a massive aftershock brought forth further wreckage and ruin. Seven hundred miles from home, Israel's exiles became trapped in a basement called Babylon. The prophet Isaiah's summons is singular, "GET OUT!"

Easier said than done. With every passing year, the Babylonian god Marduk seemed more and more powerful, while Israel's God seemed more and more incidental. Slowly, but surely, the exiles began to accommodate themselves to their new surroundings. Economic documents unearthed in Tel el Murassu on the Tigris River show that blending in with Babylon brought stunning financial success. Living comfortably in a place of destruction and death became a new way of life.

It was the whole boiling frog syndrome. You know, it is said that if a frog is placed in hot water, it will jump out, but if it's placed in lukewarm water that is gradually heated, it will never get out, but slowly die. The exiles are calling their Babylonian basement the new normal. They ARE IN HOT WATER! If they don't get out soon, they WILL DIE!!

Isaiah's charge, therefore, is to do everything possible to awake Israel out of this spiritual slumber and get them out of Babylon. So he announces that the Lord God "will lay bare His holy arm in the sight of all the nations." His "glory will be revealed and all flesh will see it together." Rest assured, says Isaiah, that "those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength," for a "bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out." And in 51:17, and then again in 52:1 he cries out, "Wake, awake!"

The climax of the preaching comes in our text for today in 48:20, "Get out of Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare it with a shout." And Israel's response? Nothing...nothing! They wouldn't leave! The lights of Babylon, the sounds of Babylon, the religion of Babylon coaxed most of them into staying in Babylon!

That's why throughout Isaiah 48 the prophet calls them stubborn, unyielding, headstrong, prone to idolatry, deaf, deceptive, and stubborn rebels from birth. All this because Israel refused to listen to the Gospel of their salvation; "listen" is the governing verb of the chapter. It appears eleven times in Isaiah 48.

Can't you just imagine the people responding to the prophet? "Isaiah, haven't you heard? Babylon is the political-military-religious superpower of the day. This is the land of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness! Why should we go back to little backwater Judah? Besides, what a huge hassle it would be to liquidate our assets, pack our bags, and pull up stakes just live in a land devastated by famine and warfare. Get out of Babylon? Isaiah have you lost your mind?"

This is like a thirsty person choosing to drink raw sewage instead of water from a mountain stream or a bankrupt company rejecting a government bailout. The exiles are unmoved by Isaiah's poetic claims, alarming narrative, and stunning doxologies.

Our bondage began with just one more drink, one more lie, one more fling, one more glance. But one more always longs for one more, and then just one more. I know, oh God, I know. And then a massive earthquake hits and in its aftershocks we find ourselves trapped in a basement called Babylon. What next?

The boiling frog syndrome unleashes its hypnotic power! Sure, being obsessed with pornography, money, gossip, food, people's approval, or work is a strange place to be in, at first. It's crushing to be trapped beneath tons of collapsed hopes and shattered dreams. But in time we become accustomed to living in destruction and death. With each passing day, it becomes easier to deny that I am stuck on stuff that kills and steals and destroys. We are in hot water! This is why God says, "Get out of Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare it with a shout of joy."

It's in God's heart to call people out of darkness and into His marvelous light. He called Abraham and Sarah to get out of Haran because it was the center of moon worship. He urged Lot and his family to get out of Sodom and Gomorrah because it was the center of sexual perversion. And He called Israel to get out of Egypt because it was the epicenter of a socialization that brought about massive dehumanization. You see, at the core of Israel's narrative is the Lord's ongoing call for His people to get out of decay, decadence, and death. And our response? Too often...nothing!

We don't listen to the Gospel of our salvation. Isaiah 30:10-11 is the classic response of the prophetic call. "Speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions; stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!" But deep down we're thirsty. Not for more of the same. We know it's salt water in the desert. It doesn't quench—it kills.

No! We're thirsty for a clean conscience, a fresh start; for a loving, tender hand to reach into our basement and get us out.

Well, that's exactly what God says to Israel. Isaiah 40-55 is chock-full of good news! Consider these words from chapter 43, "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins" and from chapter 44, "I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist." These great and precious promises are found, fulfilled, and come to fruition in Isaiah's Servant, Jesus our Lord, the one murdered for us.

In the classic gangster stories, when the head of a family has ordered a "hit" (a murder), someone inevitably says, "It's not personal, it's just business." Not so with this murder of Jesus. It was intensely personal. Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus with a kiss. In His hour of need, His friend ran for cover. His countrymen clamored for His death. And His very own Father abandoned Him. It was very personal. But it was personal on another level. Jesus suffered and died for you. He bled for you and sweated for you. He felt the nails and the thorns for you. And because of that, Jesus comes for you in your darkness and sin. He comes to rescue, release, and free you from guilt and shame and regret.

And our response? We get out of Babylon, we flee from Chaldea, and we declare it with a shout of joy!

In Jesus name. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior, our Lenten King. Amen.