

A friend recently said to me, “I don’t want to be in a dying Church. The only thing worse would be a dying church that doesn’t know it’s dying.” I’ll leave it to your imagination to determine which denomination and which church this friend was speaking about. Truth is she could have been talking about any number of churches in North America that find themselves in the fearful position of decline.

If the history of the relationship between American culture and the Mainline Protestant Churches were a story, I imagine it could be told in three chapters and a prologue. The prologue would cover the “prehistory” - that period up until World War I when this nation’s foundational institutions – colleges, hospitals – were largely dominated by the major Christian traditions. It would be a rare thing, prior to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for anyone to be unfamiliar with the Christian story, symbols, or ethical systems – they were simply part of the social fabric and this was largely unproblematic. In theological parlance this is what we refer to as “Christendom” – a culture largely shaped by the rule and authority of Christian institutions.

Chapter one might be titled, “Separation”: it would tell the story of the faculties of Church-founded universities that fought to wrest control of their disciplines from ecclesial authorities. It would describe state and federal legislators that began to cast a more critical eye upon church-state issues. Meanwhile, churches would begin to jettison some of their theological particularities for the sake of preserving their institutional influence so that within a few decades it would not be uncommon to have a similar worship experience whether one attended a Methodist, American Baptist, Presbyterian, or Lutheran congregation.

The plot and action of chapter two would be caught up with the drama of the social turbulence that marked the latter third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That chapter might be called “Whirlwind”. The sexual revolution, the civil rights marches, the naturalization act of 1965 and the Vietnam War changed American moral discourse in a way previously unheralded.

All of that brings us to chapter three – the chapter being written right now. If I were writing the story, I might call this chapter “Exile” - the period in the church’s life when it realizes that it no longer has the power to sustain social cohesion. Whereas in the prologue and in chapter one, the church’s cultured despisers were a relatively small fringe group who largely kept quiet, they are often vocal and admired members of society by chapter three. Whereas it could still be assumed in chapter one that your neighbors, friends, and family attended regular Sunday worship, by chapter three the chance is less than fifty-percent. The denominational bodies that preceded the creation of the PC(USA) in 1983 hit their membership peak in the mid-sixties, sometime during chapter two, and have been slowly declining since.

The Mainline has become the sideline. I was reminded just how far to the periphery the church has been pushed when, not too long ago, over coffee I was discussing a difficult decision with my friend Kevin and he offered to pray for me in the middle of a crowded

cafe. My eyes must have said, “You mean - here? In public? In Carytown?” His prayer reminded me that I am a Christian and that no place is without God’s presence, but my reluctance reminded me that we are a church in exile.

It may require a leap of the imagination, but I want to invite you to come along with me for a moment. I want to suggest that our situation is not remarkably unlike that of Israel in the world of this morning’s Old Testament lesson that Charlie read. The Anglican clergywoman, Fleming Rutledge says that Israel’s exile to Babylon would be a bit like all of the church being carried off to a place like Las Vegas.<sup>1</sup> But I think a more accurate description might be that the church has remained in place, but Las Vegas has bought up all the surrounding land.

Israel has been in exile, trying to live a life that doesn’t make sense in Babylon when Isaiah invites them to see something new springing forth in their midst. He offers the invitation to return, the hope of a second exodus from a terrible bondage. A journey back to the land that was promised and lost. A return to the status of being chosen, blessed, free. Sort of like the church in chapter one.

For decades they have walked the hard path of exile. In captivity, away from their homeland, away from their traditions away from the customs and rituals that provided them with a clear sense of calling. They were an odd people in a foreign land who could barely remember what it was that their ancestors had left behind. When Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, nothing less than the faith of Israel was at stake.

And Isaiah begins to speak of return -of a new thing. It’s enticing and hopeful, yet the journey may not be a safe one. They may encounter dangers on this road. There is a risk in going back. Will the old place be as we have been told by our ancestors? Will we find the promised land or a place of plunder and destruction? Will the new be good or is it better to stay in this foreign place which is at least familiar? Better not to risk having hopes dashed for some prophet’s promise of new life. And will guilt and shame be part of this journey? Will return to the land haunt rather than heal?

The prophet says

Do not remember the former things,  
Or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I make a way in the wilderness  
And rivers in the desert.  
The wild animals will honor me,  
The jackals and ostriches,  
For I give water in the wilderness  
Streams in the desert,  
To give drink to my chosen people.

---

<sup>1</sup> She makes the comparison in her sermon “Exiled to Babylon” in the collection, *The Bible and the New York Times*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Erdmans, 1999) pp. 111-117

But how does one learn to “see a new thing” while in exile?

Perhaps it begins with the charge to “not remember the former things”. It’s the most natural thing in the world to see these empty pews and think about the good old days when purchasing land ensured that a church plant would succeed.

The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann tells the story of a church he pastored in New York City that was nearly defunct. Every year in the spring, the church had a strawberry festival. In prior years they used to fill up the church basement with excitement, delight and a host of people – congregants and visitors alike. Now only about twenty four people came; all the others had gone. But in either an act of nostalgia or a refusal to face the facts, they kept up appearances and prepared the basement for two-hundred. There were many uneaten strawberries.<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah speaks his prophecy to those who are so enamored of the glory days that they have been inattentive to the present. In exile they seem to pine away, remembering the story of God’s intervention in the exodus event, but are apparently unable to see that God is going to do something altogether unexpected.

And so through the prophet God says to them, “Do not remember the former things”. Do not become so chained to the past that you cannot conceive of a future that is any different! “I am doing a new thing”. Writing a new chapter, a new part of your history.

Tell me is God not also speaking to us?

Is God doing a new thing among us? At my seminary graduation Brian Blount, who is now the president of Union-PSCE told us “The world that we have prepared you for is being taken away from you, by the grace of God.”<sup>3</sup> What he was saying is that it will do you no good to wish and hope and pray for a Christendom world that looks like chapter one. That world is gone and we had better pay attention. Instead we will have to find a way to listen and watch for the new thing that God is doing. The days are gone when we could assume that if we’re friendly enough, people will come to worship with us – they are gone and they are not coming back. “Do not remember the former things” because they no longer have any power. Make no mistake, the loss of the old is a frightening business. And that loss often makes us act crazy – we do selfish, mean things to each other and make decisions from a place of fear, forgetting that God is the one telling this story.

But I think Dr. Blount was right. It is the by grace of God that the old is being stripped away from us. It is grace because we are called in this time and place to watch God do something powerful in our midst. Clinging to this promise we are called to travel this beautiful wilderness called life. The good news is that God will not abandon us - God make a way in the wilderness and streams in the desert, so that we can be satisfied.

---

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1996) p. 59

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Blount made this remark during the commencement address at the 2005 Baccalaureate Service at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ. The quote is not exact – time and memory have obscured the details, but the impression is accurate.

It's an interesting promise. You'll notice, God doesn't promise to subdue the wilderness; only to make a way through it. God doesn't promise to take away the desert, or take us out of it, only to provide water in it. God doesn't promise to tame the wild animals - the only promise is to make a way and to find the water, so that even the threatening things can stop and see the new thing, and honor God.

I think that is the promise for us, for all of us. God will do a new thing. Though chapter three of our story might look bleak, a new chapter can be written - God will do a new thing. No matter how exhausting the process of waiting it is God who will do a new thing and not us. No matter how mundane the routine, or sleepless the night, or painful the argument, God will do a new thing.

For Israel, the new thing was more than a return to the land of God's promise. It was the fulfillment of all her hopes and dreams. It was none other than Jesus. Having gone before us, and prepared a way for us, we know whom to look toward in anticipation. We have the comfort that the new thing God does in our midst will look a lot like Jesus. That's good news indeed.

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