

The Structure of Faith, Part 3

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Isaiah 11:1-9

Pity the people of Israel. Once again, there was trouble. Assyria threatened, and destruction loomed. But the LORD's prophet delivered these hope-filled words.

A branch will sprout from Jesse's stump, a shoot from his roots will bear fruit. The spirit of the LORD will rest on him — a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of purpose and strength, a spirit of knowledge and reverence for the LORD. And he will savor reverence for the LORD.

He will not govern by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear. He will govern the needy with justice and make fair decisions for earth's poor. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and kill the wicked with the breath of his lips. Justice and faithfulness will wrap him with strength.

The wolf will live with the young ram, the leopard will lie down with the young goat. And a little child will lead the bull-calf and the young lion and the fatling together. The cow and the bear will share pasture, their young will lie down together. And the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play near the cobra's hole, the weaned child will reach its hand into the snake's den.

They will do no harm or injury anywhere on my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Colossians 1:15-20

Paul the Apostle wrote to the young church in Colosse to anchor their hope, for now and forever, in one place: the beloved Son of God the Father, Jesus Christ.

He is the image of the unseeable God, the firstborn of all creation. Because everything in heaven and on the earth, the seeable and the unseeable, was created in him — whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities. Everything has been created through him and for him. He is before everything. Everything holds together in him. He himself is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might be first in everything. Because God in all his fullness was pleased to dwell in him and to reconcile everything to himself — whether on the earth or in heaven — through him, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Children's Story

Beavers are always building dams. Usually no one notices. But two springs ago, Barry the Beaver and his family built a dam that no one in the Great Forest will ever forget. It was at the east end of the Great Forest, on Cripple Creek.

Barry and his family chewed down one tree after another. Slowly their beaver dam grew longer and taller, and their beaver pond grew deeper. Then Barry chewed down one tree too many.

It was a gigantic tree: straight and thick and tall, and it crash landed on top of the dam. But it didn't break the dam. No. Instead it made the dam even longer and even taller — so long and so tall that Cripple Creek would flood the entire Great Forest!

Barry tried to move the giant tree off the dam, but he couldn't budge it. He tried again with his mother and father and his sister helping him. But all of them together couldn't budge the giant tree. So they went off in every direction to get more help.

Rabbits came first. But they weren't much help, so they left. Crows and chipmunks came next. They put their paws and their wings into the effort. But they weren't enough help, so they left, too.

Early that evening a big group of animals gathered, plenty of animals to move even a giant tree. But they couldn't do it either.

Some of them wanted to move the tree this way; some of them wanted to move it that way. They couldn't agree. So they didn't do anything at all.

It was hopeless. Before long the entire Great Forest would flood and all of them would lose their homes.

But when they woke up the next morning, there was no flood. And when they went to the beaver dam, the giant tree was gone. Somehow, in the night, it had been moved.

Nobody knew how. Some said it was the water; some said it was the wind. However it happened, the giant tree was gone. Something that all the animals couldn't do for themselves had been done for them. I wonder how.

Sermon

Faith begins by acknowledging the mess we're in. A whole collection of words can be gathered together, each of them partially describing that mess. Words like brokenness, alienation, and misery; evil, corruption, and enmity; ruin, despair, and depravity. Perhaps the best word, though, for the mess we're in is exile.

We're away from home, far away. Not by choice, but by unavoidable necessity. Now, we've done our best to settle in where we are. We've managed to get comfortable with life and all its ups and downs. If not comfortable, then at least accustomed to it all. But there's another place, and we know it. Somewhere else. Somewhere we would rather be. Somewhere we're meant to be. But we're not there now. In fact, we don't remember ever being there. And we don't belong there either, not any more. We're in exile. We're in a refuge camp. We're in Guantanamo.

More than anything, we want to go home. Faith is about how we go home. **The way home is Jesus Christ. He is the way.**

Now, it's not easy to go home. Palestinian exiles have been living in camps for decades. For many, life in the camps is the only life they've ever known. There's never been much hope of a home-going. Arguments and battles and protests and negotiations and resolutions have accomplished nothing. Except perhaps to reveal how impossible the problem is to solve.

It's not easy to go home. And so, when Cyrus ended Judah's exile and said, "Go home!" only a few went. The journey was difficult, the prospects uncertain. The exiles who did return found no milk and honey waiting for them, only hard work and a doubtful future, with the home they had returned to in ruins.

No, it's not easy to go home. We can't get ourselves back to the garden. Never mind the journey, the garden itself isn't there any more. Left untended for so long, it has become a tangled mess of weeds.

It's not easy to go home. For us it seems impossible. To go home, the entire human exile needs to be undone. Nations need to find better ways to live and work together. Human institutions and organizations need to put the common good first. Agreements made need to become agreements kept. But what hope do we have for any of that?

What hope do we have, when the Supreme Court can't tell a corporation or a union from a person? And when it confuses free speech with artificially-amplified speech? You can speak all you want. But if I buy a 1.21 GigaWatt sound system to amplify my voice, no one will hear a word you say. And that's what we get when the court declares that money is speech.

I can't imagine that opening the floodgates wide for even more money to pour into our politics . . . Does no one believe Scripture any more, that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil? And we all love money far too much. Individuals, corporations, unions, political parties, all of us. And if somehow we did manage to keep our own love for money in check, then there's the love that money has for us. Money loves to own us. And it will own us. And it will seek to ruin us. Or don't we believe Scripture any more?

As if our politics, and our feeble attempts to build a better world through politics — as if our politics weren't messed up enough, what will this injection of even more money do? And it's not just politics. It's any way and every way we imagine that we'll build a better world, that we'll end our eternal exile and make our way home at last. No, we don't have a way to do that. The way is Jesus Christ.

The problem, the roots beneath our human exile, is the "powers and principalities." Those are mysterious-sounding Bible words for sin, for our own corrupt nature, and for the devil and evil spiritual forces — realities against which we are nearly powerless.

But Jesus has disarmed those powers. He has faced them and faced them down. He has pursued them all the way into the darkness, into the darkness of death. And he has emerged in life, victorious. Through this victory, Jesus is undoing, and will completely undo, brokenness, alienation, and misery; evil, corruption, and enmity; ruin, despair, and depravity. In a word, Jesus ends our exile.

As Paul puts it, through Jesus God is ending our primary exile, namely our exile from God himself, and when this exile is ended, every other exile ends along with it. Through Jesus, God is reconciling everything to himself, and all things that are truly reconciled to God are reconciled to one another. That is the end of exile.

This is the vision of Isaiah the prophet, and it's huge. The prophet's vision is a vision of divine intervention. The God of the prophet is not the deist's god: remote, unconcerned, unaffected by creation's plight. No, the God of the prophet acts on the world's stage. In this case, God will send his Spirit to David's house, the royal house, send his Spirit upon the one who rises from the ruins of Jesse's lineage. It will be a spirit to restore all that human sin and exile have lost. A spirit of wisdom and understanding, to discern what is right and good. A spirit of purpose and strength, to meld proper intention with the ability to carry it out. A spirit of knowledge and reverence for the LORD, to ground everything in the fundamental human relationship with God.

One like this, this sort of leader, arises only due to the action of God. It's certainly not the outcome of a military coup or a revolution or even a democratic election. Only the action of God. So the prophet's vision is a vision of divine intervention.

At the same time, it's also a vision of justice. Even when we human beings agree on the goal, we never agree on a just and fair and effective way to achieve it. But this leader, anointed by a spirit from God, will not be distracted by what comes first to his senses, by the loudest, most effectively-amplified voice or by the most striking visuals. No. Nothing will turn this leader aside from justice and fair-dealing and integrity. A leader uncorrupted by the process . . . Imagine that! It's a vision of justice.

The prophet's vision is also a vision of reconciliation. The entire creation will be reconciled: wolf and leopard and lion and lamb and little child. "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson), with all its rending and tearing of flesh, will give way to an unimaginable peace and harmony. Unimaginable because we only know wolves and leopards and lions through their teeth. But the dream is of complete reconciliation between all creatures. Even between human beings and the rest of creation, with which we too often find ourselves at odds. But that will all be in the past.

Because, finally, the prophet's vision is of an entire world rightly related to God. "The earth will be filled with knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." As the waters cover the sea. Cover the sea? The waters are the sea. The waters are no veneer over top of the sea. They are the sea, totally, down to the depths. And so "the earth will be filled with knowledge of the LORD" not as a veneer, a thin skin on top. But all the way through, God will be known. Known not only with the mind, but also with the heart and with the spirit. And not known as in merely recognized or acknowledged. But experienced and loved. This knowledge is intimacy, intimacy with God as wide and as deep as the earth. As I said, the prophet's vision is huge.

So, in a broken world, where every structure of power and influence is twisted . . . Do I need to say this again? Every person, every family, every people, every nation, every business, every school, every art, every prison, every farm, every factory, every neighborhood, every army, every political party, every church, every emergency relief agency is corrupt, a blend of both good and evil in varying degree. Faith begins by recognizing this.

Then faith moves on. Faith is about how we go home, about how we return from exile. Not so much return to the place we belong, as return to the One to whom we belong, return to God. Which is to say, faith is about Jesus Christ. He is the world's true hope, for justice and fair-dealing, for reconciliation and peace.

We're waiting for him to complete what he has begun. Meanwhile — this is important — we, too, have the Spirit. And so we do what we can in this world to anticipate what's coming, to give life here now the shape of things to come. And while we're busy with that, we use our free speech to declare his praise.