

AFTER (the COVID) EXILE

Isaiah 40:1-11, 28-31, 42:5-9; Romans 5:1-11; Luke 24:13-35

First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana

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A MOBILE CLASS ON THE WAY TO EMMAUS

Some people are saying the crucified Teacher is alive. The women had gone to the tomb, found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. They didn't know what to make of things. Two strangers told the women Jesus was alive and already on his way to Galilee. But it is all confusing. Even after Simon Peter goes to the tomb, looks inside, and sees only the linen cloth used to wrap the body of Jesus. It's all confusing!

Luke tells us there were two followers of Jesus, later that same day, walking from Jerusalem to the small town of Emmaus. They were talking about "everything that had happened", Luke says. I suppose they were talking about the week in Jerusalem. They talk. There is silence. There is more talk. And then silence as they think things over.

The two men walk and they talk as they try to make sense of things. And, then, as they are walking along, Jesus joins them. They don't know it is Jesus, but Jesus joins them on the road. He joins them, Luke says, on the journey.

Now, the three of them begin to talk. Jesus asks what they are talking about, and they begin to tell him. They're still confused so Jesus walks them through the scriptures. He reminds of the prophets who spoke of the coming Messiah. He helps them see what they have been missing.

So there is this Bible study going on as they walk down the road toward the village at the end of the day. The air cools as the sun drops closer to the horizon. When they get to the village of Emmaus, it seems as if Jesus is going to head on down the road.

The two disciples urge the stranger, who they still do not recognize is Jesus, to stay with them for the evening. Jesus takes his seat at the table. He takes the bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to the two men he has been walking with. It is impossible to miss the similarities with the way Jesus served the disciples in the Upper Room. In that moment, they realize that the stranger they have been walking with is the Risen Christ. In that moment, they realize that the stranger serving them this bread is the same Jesus, the same Teacher and Friend, who served them the meal that night in Jerusalem before the arrest.

Sometimes, it takes awhile for us to see the truth God has for us to see. Sometimes, it takes some time for us to learn what we need to learn.

In the book of Exodus, Moses is with the people out in the wilderness. He is working from early in the morning until late in the evening acting as judge over every dispute the people have with one another. People are lined up all day long waiting for Moses to hear their case and render a verdict.

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, shows up. He has come to visit his daughter and son-in-law. Jethro watches all of this and, finally, he offers some leadership advice to

Moses. He tells Moses that what he is doing isn't good. Not only is he going to wear himself out, but he is not training, equipping and delegating others to lead.

Moses learns new lessons out there in the wilderness.

The two travelers on the way to Emmaus are helped, by Jesus, to learn new lessons. They are helped to understand what they have not understood. They are helped to see what they have been missing.

We are in the second week of our three-week series ***After (the COVID) Exile***. Last week we spent some time lamenting what we have lost over the last two years, as we have gone through the pandemic that is just beginning to ease (in the United States), and we spent some time talking about what we have found during these difficult months. We said, last week, that many of us found blessings in the middle of the hard days...we found that God was at work to wring good out of evil.

Today, we are going to spend a few minutes exploring what it is we have learned during this pandemic. That is why we began with the story from Luke 24 of the two travelers on the way to Emmaus: what was going on out there, on the road, was a mobile classroom. We see that at the core of the Christian experience is a willingness to learn new lessons...be open to new truth.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

What would you say you have learned during the experience we have been through? What would you say we have learned?

First, I would point out that we have learned that God can use hard tough times, painful experiences, to grow us, deepen us, and make us more real.

In the reading from the 5th chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans, the apostle says that he and his church-planting team "*even take pride in our problems.*" This early Christian leader, who would end up being beaten by mobs, thrown in prison multiple times, struggling through misunderstandings with fellow church leaders, being savagely criticized by members of the church at Corinth, shipwrecked and bitten by a snake on the island of Malta, writes of tough times and says this: "*we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope.*"

We've learned that even in the middle of a pandemic, even when things happen we didn't expect to happen, even when the life we are living isn't the life we planned on living, God uses the difficult times to teach us, deepen us, bring us more alive and make us more real.

Pope Francis, back in November of 2020, wrote an article in which he said that a "crisis reveals what is in our hearts."

We've learned that God can use tough times to teach us, deepen us, and bring us more alive.

Second, we've learned that life is fragile and life is now.

We act like we are in charge of all things. We act like we have power over all things. We act like we are in control, but a virus from the other side of the world

-whose origin is a mystery that people are working to solve- turned our world and our daily lives upside-down.

You couldn't argue with the virus. You couldn't threaten a virus. You couldn't deny a virus away. Denial didn't give us a protective covering! The virus came roaring our way and it changed so much!

We learned life is fragile.

We learned that we are not in control.

And we learned that life is now. We're not guaranteed tomorrow. We're not guaranteed forever here. Time is limited, every day is a gift, and if we are going to live our best life then this virus reminded us that we need to live our best life now.

A good friend nearly died last winter while fishing on the ice of an area lake. If he had not been fishing with a buddy, my friend would not have made it. He was airlifted to a hospital, doctors went to work on him immediately, and then follow up bypass surgery a month later -along with physical therapy- gave him his life back.

A week or so ago he went out in his small fishing boat, with the friend who saved his life, and they anchored the boat over the very spot where he had his heart attack. My buddy took a selfie, and in the photo he and his friend were smiling from ear to ear. He was treasuring the gift of the day, the water, a friend in the boat with him, and another chance at life.

The psalmist, in Psalm 90, talks about how we all return to dust. You may not want to hear that this morning, but the truth of it can be freeing. We're not going to live forever and so that very truth sets us free to live fully in the now. The psalmist, in verse 5, says we are swept away like a dream, "like grass that is renewed in the morning" but by the evening it withers away. Then, in verse 12, the writer of the psalm says, "Teach us to number our days so we can have a wise heart."

We learned life is fragile.

We learned we are not in control.

We learned that life is now.

Many of us, during these last two years, have been doing some soul searching. We have been taking our own personal inventory of our lives. *(Next week we will talk together about how we may be different, our the world may be different, after the experience of going through the pandemic.)*

Some people decided to start the business they had always dreamed of owning. Other people, like a famous chief who finally was bone weary of the nonsense in the food industry, closed their businesses and walked away to do something else.

Many people began to re-evaluate their relationships, their family lives, their life choices, their soul lives, their addiction to busyiness and things and power and career success.

Economists are surprised by the number of job openings as well as the number of people who have been slow to re-enter the job market. Some say it has a connection to the government support to families during the pandemic. But other people point out that many people, whether because of childcare issues, concern about poor pay, inflexible scheduling or the danger presented by those refusing to get vaccinated, just are making other choices.

Veronica Chambers, who lives on the East Coast, and worked for a demanding boss with unrealistic expectations, quit her job after -as she put in a column- a

particularly good day at the beach. She was with her husband and children, and she decided she just could not leave the beach to go back to the office. They would live on a less. They would make do with less. And she figured that they would have a richer life.

Thousands and thousands of people made the decision, during something called Dry January, to stop drinking alcohol. They finally decided to face their addiction and, with the help of God and friends and a 12-step program, live a better life.

We learned life is fragile.

We learned we are not in control. We may be able to send spacecraft to Mars, and fly small helicopters in that thin atmosphere, and do genetic engineering, but we are not in control. Nature has a power we cannot match even if the psalmist, in Psalm 8, says that God made us “only slightly less than divine”, crowning us with “glory and grandeur.” Still, we are not in control.

And we learned that time is not guaranteed: if we are going to live our best life now, now is the time to start. **Life is now.**

Tough times can teach us. That’s the first thing we have learned. We can end up being more real, more honest, more alive.

Life is fragile, we’re not in control, and life is now: let’s put those all together as the second lesson we have been taught by the experience of the pandemic.

The third thing we learned is that truth matters. Lies are destructive. Lies wreck relationships, ruin churches, and weaken nations. When we insist that a lie is true, we have detached ourselves from reality and the consequences can be disastrous.

We have learned that truth matters.

Truth matters in science.

Truth matters in politics.

Truth matters in relationships.

Truth matters in navigation.

Truth matters in education.

Truth matters in the law.

Truth matters in medicine.

True is true whether I like it or not.

The prophet, Jeremiah, lived during difficult days. There were preachers, prophets and politicians who didn’t have the courage to tell the truth. And so, in the 6th chapter of Jeremiah, he goes after deceitful leaders who would rather lie to the crowd than tell the truth to the crowd.

From prophet to priest, he says, each trades in dishonesty. Jeremiah says those who refuse to tell the truth, who insist that everything is okay and the crisis facing the nation isn’t substantial or real, “treat the wound of my people as if it were nothing. ‘All is well, all is well,’ they insist, when in fact nothing is well.”

Jeremiah goes on to say they should be ashamed of their detestable practices. These false prophets, these leaders and preachers who lie, “have no shame.”

We have learned that truth matters.

When we begin to navigate through life on the basis on lies, we are on a path to destruction. When we begin to pay attention to what is true, we are on a path to life and a better future.

Fourth, we have learned that science matters. Good science matters.

Time is short, but as a follower of Jesus and a representative of the faith I need to say this: faith in God and science are not enemies of one another but they in fact should be working together. Ignorance about good science, the willful disregard of good medicine, almost seems to be a badge of Christian honor in some circles.

Good science is never a threat to the very idea of God, to the concept of faith, but good science actually reminds us of the glory of God.

As I read about the elasticity of time and the different theories about the universe, I feel like I am standing on holy ground, The more I know about science, the more I feel like singing the Doxology: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

God made all of this, and Genesis tells us that God stepped back, studied it all the way a good carpenter might study and appreciate a cabinet she had just finished, and God said, "It was good."

That means that **science is good.**

Good science doesn't diminish God but good science gives us a holy reverence for the One who is Creator of all that makes life possible.

It's all a gift: even science.

Christians should not act like bad science is good. **Christians should not think that ignorance of science and good medicine are a badge of faithfulness.** The truth is that generations of Christians have been passionate advocates of higher education, good medicine, and good science.

We have learned that science matters.

Fifth, we have learned that unity, whether in a family, a church, or a nation, is precious and also fragile. The fabric we thought would endure is easily torn by hate and fear.

We see this struggle in the early Christian community. Jesus prayed, near the end of his earthly ministry, that we would be one. Over and over, again, Jesus prayed that we would be one even as Jesus and the Father were one. Our Lord must have known how quickly and easily congregations and denominations would come apart over questions of baptism, communion, worship styles, sexual ethics, and who gets to control who steps into the pulpit.

The church, from the very beginning, was tempted to dissolve into chaos and division. So Paul, in the New Testament, reminds us (2nd Corinthians 12:15-26) that though we are many, though we may have different spiritual gifts and different opinions about different issues, we are still a part of one body. The hand can't say to the eye, I don't need you because you aren't a hand. The head can't say to the feet, I don't need you because you aren't the head. We are different parts but we need one another...we are a part of one body.

This is a good thing for us to remember as a nation. The East Coast can't say to the Midwest, I have no need of you. The South can't say to the West Coast, I have no need of you.

Black, white or brown, straight or gay, rich or poor, conservative or progressive, male or female or transgender, Fox or MSNBC, Christian or Muslim or Jew or Hindu or Buddhist or Sikh or atheist, we are all a part of one body.

We have learned that unity is fragile, it is a precious gift, and each one of us is responsible for taking care of this gift. We have also learned that fear, hate, and disunity can be terribly destructive.

There is a church in the city of Jerusalem known for its acoustics. The building is rather modest in size. It isn't one of the great churches of that Holy City. But when a group of people goes into the church building, and they begin to sing, the shape of the room, the materials used in its construction, have a way of blending the voices together. The acoustics are somehow very special. People who really can't sing very well together, when they go into St. Anne's Church, are surprised that they can make beautiful music together.

I find myself praying that God will help us learn how to sing together, again, and live together...again. Maybe the acoustics of grace, the acoustics of self-giving love, the acoustics of caring for our neighbor, can help us find a new unity and sing together.

The list could go on and on, couldn't it?

We've learned heath matters.

We've learned self-care matters.

We've learned care of creation matters. The destruction of habitat, the stress we are putting on the earth, the warming of the seas and the air: all of this puts us at risk of more and serious pandemics. We need to care for the earth: that is not only what we owe God since this garden belongs to the Creator, but taking care of the earth and addressing global climate change is in our self-interest.

We've learned less can be more. We don't need all the stuff we once may have thought we needed to have a good life. We can live on less and actually be happier.

We've learned we can slow down and life is better.

We've learned to find joy in small things and little moments. We didn't need to go to Cancun, after all, but walking trails at Pokagon on a Fall day, and coming back to the house for hot dogs, and watching the movie "Sandlot" with the kids, can be pretty amazing.

And last two lessons we have learned: **we have learned the importance of community and relationships.** We need one another. Somehow, in all sorts of ways, we have learned the lesson that we need one another.

In the account of creation in the Hebrew scriptures, the writer observes that the first person was placed in the middle of the earth to farm it and take care of it.

The first person was alone, though. Even if you are surrounded by rivers and mountains and great plains and the oceans, even with gold and sweet-smelling resins and gemstones all around you, its not enough. You need someone.

In verse 18, God observes, **“It’s not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him.”**

Several weeks ago, when we recognized our graduating high school seniors, I had to fight back tears as they entered the sanctuary in their cap and gowns: I realized how much I had missed the things we do together. When I prayed at the pre-school graduation ceremonies, I stood at the back of the sanctuary and watched the children and teachers come down the center aisle in their yellow cap and gowns, and again I felt almost overwhelmed with gladness.

We were made for community. I’ve noticed, over the last month, that I have slipped into Five Lakes or 9th Street Coffee not so much for the coffee but just so I can sit there and hear -again- the hum of voices around me. I’m not listening in on other people’s conversations: I’m just letting the music of conversation, of people talking, of people being together, dance and move around me. I drink my coffee, I work on a sermon, and then I lean back and am blessed by the very fact that people are around me.

My own father was in a retirement community in another city. I would drive over, pick him up and take him to doctor’s appointments. We would stop for lunch at his favorite Italian restaurant. We would talk. Then, COVID arrived and so things get very strange. I could not enter the facility, but he would come outside, get in his car, and we would pull our cars up side-by-side, roll down the windows, and we would talk. Then, as cases of the virus increased, that was only not allowed.

The safety precautions made sense, in many ways, but the isolation was crushing. So we moved him in with my brother, and now he is in the middle of the family...and a very sociable group of dogs. Life is not easy but it is so much better.

We have learned how important community and relationships are.

We were not made to live alone...we were made to live in community. Maybe, knowing what we know now, we will take better care...of our relationships...of one another.

Lastly, we have learned again that God is with us. We belong to God. The Bible is full of stories where God found people lost in a wilderness: God finds Hagar out in the wilderness; God finds Joseph down in Egypt; God finds Jacob out in the wilderness; God finds Elijah hiding in a cave; God finds Moses in the wilderness; God finds Jeremiah when the prophet is drowning in -to use a line from Eric Clapton- a river of tears; God finds David when he is on the run; and Jesus finds guilt-ridden Simon Peter up in Galilee on the water.

One way or another, God has found us. We have discovered that in all sorts of ways.

We have learned that God is with us. We are not alone.

There is more to say about that, but then that is another sermon.

We have learned some lessons, haven’t we?

What are the chances we will remember them, carry them with us and weave these rediscovered truths into fabric of the new lives we are about create? How will we live out these lessons...?