

## **6-6-2021 AFTER THE EXILE - LOST & FOUND**

Psalm 137; Exodus 16:1-4a, 13-15; John 20:24-31

First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana

June 6, 2021 The Reverend Dr. Mark Fenstermacher

The prophet, Isaiah, speaks for God and says (43:18-19), *“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness (and create) rivers in the desert.”*

As we make our way beyond the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, this virus storm that turned our lives and the world upside-down, I know we want to move on to the next thing as quickly as we can. That’s how we are as a culture: we move fast.

We tend not to look back at where we have been especially if where we have been has been a painful place. Our tendency is to bury our hurt as quickly as we can and move on.

Here is the first truth of the morning: it is important to remember and look back. Even when we are looking back at something that was hard and that hurt.

The truth is that not only do we know it is important to remember, to look back, but over and over again the scriptures tell us that remembering who we are and where we have been and what we have gone through is one key to growing, to being fully alive, to learning wisdom.

You know this. You don’t need a preacher to tell you, do you?

Remembering is an important part of my life. Several times a year, as I drive down I-69 towards Indianapolis, I pull off at the Upland exit and visit the Jefferson Township cemetery, where two of my brothers’ bodies are buried, to remember. I linger there awhile. I let the loss I carry with me speak to me, and I listen. It deserves to be heard. To be honored. And to know the loss is to know something important and fundamental about who I am.

On the wall in the entryway of my house, I have a picture of me with my granddaughters, Ella and Olivia. I love them more than a bird loves the sky, more than words can say, and there is a collection of pictures of me holding them, cradling them, walking hand-in-hand with them. There is one of Ella -and I later joined her- stamping barefoot in the puddles on the Elkhart Trinity parking lot as a spring rain comes down. I slow down, I study the pictures, and my heart dances as I see the pictures.

In Exodus 13:3, Moses tells the people of Israel to *“Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the LORD brought you out from there...”*

The prophet may tell us to *“remember not the former things”* but the truth is that remembering is something we are encouraged to do. Not to get trapped

in the past, not to get stuck, but to remember who we are and who God is and learn from where we have been...what we have gone through.

In fact, in Luke 22, when Jesus gathers with his friends in an upper room in Jerusalem, he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and says, *“This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”*

So remembering can be a good thing. Remembering can be a powerful thing. On this first Sunday of our series *After (the COVID) Exile*, we want to take a few minutes to remember what we have lost and what we found during this virus storm that turned our world upside-down.

The second thing worth noting this morning is that what we have been through, and what people have been through in almost every corner of the world, has been a major event which will change us -and our world- forever. The pandemic has been -and continues to be- a big deal.

We have been through a life-changing event, a history-shaping event, and it is healthy to recognize the severe and wide-ranging impact of COVID-19.

Standing in the middle of this, it is very likely that we have not yet begun to come to terms with the impact this event. We’re just beginning to realize what this pandemic and our surprisingly divided to it, has had on us.

I suspect we may, oneday, look back on the last two years as one of those dividing markers in history: we will measure time and our lives before COVID-19 and after COVID-19.

So it is worth saying that we have been through is something big, and something that we will discover has changed our world forever. Denying that isn’t being truthful. Denying that isn’t being helpful.

Faith in a loving God helps us face the reality of life honestly. We have a God who is with us in every experience, as the psalmist in Psalm 139 reminds us. We have a Redeemer who is with us until the end of the age, as Jesus promises us in Matthew 28. Faith helps us honestly see the size and scope of the crisis from which we are just emerging.

The third thing we need to say is that many of us have lost a lot. If we have not lost a lot, we have friends or neighbors or family members who have lost a lot...if not their very lives.

When the pandemic first arrived, I was down in the mountains of Mexico serving as the short-term, part-time pastor of an English-speaking church in a city of 85,000. At first, life was normal. The streets and restaurants were full of people. The cathedral on the square continued to be the site of weddings. Then, worship services were cancelled and I began to record the worship services so people could connect over the internet. The streets began to clear and the city grew quieter.

The owner of a small sandwich shop and I were talking, over the noon hour oneday, when I was the only customer in his small store. Usually, the small

courtyard would have been busy but on this particular day there was a sudden hush over things. He told me he had heard the virus was a lie. He told me he had heard it was all really nothing. "Do you think it is real?" he asked me. "The President of Mexico says it is not real."

"It is real," I said quietly. "It is not a lie."

When were you first aware of the virus?

We've lost a lot. As of last week, approximately 33 million Americans have had the virus. Over 595,000 have died.

The number of deaths nationally over the last week of May was the equivalent of two jumbo jets going down every day of the week. And we are in a far better place than we were several months ago.

We've lost a lot.

Some of us have lost friends and neighbors and co-workers and family members. My sister has had COVID-19 twice. The first time she was in a Virginia ICU for five days. One night, there was a question about whether or no she would make it. She was alone. In a room by herself. Attended to by a courageous, exhausted team of nurses and physicians and therapists who would put on special suits before entering her room.

She was scared. She was so scared that one night. And alone. I spoke to her on the phone for an hour even though she was on oxygen and her rates were sagging. Late in the evening, she and my siblings began to text one another. We joked with her. She told us she was scared. We began to call her Jedi rather than Heidi, and she laughed. We told her the Force was strong and that the Jedi would come through. We texted with her, like some kind of electronic relay team, until around two or three in the morning.

My sister made it through the night. She told us all that our love and our texts and our voices brought her through. Now, she has survived a second bout with the disease but we suspect it has done some major damage to her body.

A friend and former parishioner is an ICU nurse. I can't begin to tell you what the last year has meant to she and her colleagues. Working to the edge of their ability to endure, exhausted beyond words, holding the hands of dying patients whose families were not allowed to be in the room, and being hassled by those who refused to mask or to believe that the pandemic was a real thing. Lindsey, my friend in the ICU, spoke of being with patients who were dying and who had insisted all along that there was no such thing as COVID-19. Even as they were dying, some would insist it could not be COVID but the disease must be something else. "How did this happen to me?" one asked. "I didn't believe this was real."

Some of you have people you love who didn't make it. There are voices we will not hear again, and faces we will not see again, because of this disease.

And it's not just lives lost but so much more.  
We've lost a sense of normalcy.  
We've lost a sense of security.  
We've lost time.

We've lost ground, in terms of education and development, with many children for whom remote learning never did work well.

We've lost experiences. High school students lost what once would have been a normal homecoming, a normal senior year, a normal graduation ceremony. College students will tell you about some of the positives with remote learning, but they will also tell you it wasn't the same as being on campus. I spoke to a recent law school graduate this week who said he managed the last year but it wasn't the same experience he had planned on having...hoped to have. The interaction with his law school colleagues, both in the classroom and outside the classroom, wasn't close to what he wanted it to be. He's looking forward, he's preparing for the bar exam, but he knows he's lost something... missed something.

We've lost -many of us- economic security. A recovery is underway and that is good, hopeful, but it won't erase the businesses lost, the homes lost to foreclosure, and the lost income. People who were barely hanging on, working two low wage jobs in a desperate attempt to support themselves, are now living on the streets or in their cars.

Now and then I get back to Bloomington, and every time I am there I end up on Kirkwood. For those of you who know the city, Kirkwood is the rather iconic street that runs from the courthouse square up to the Sample Gates. My friend, Mike, ran a little shop on Kirkwood called The Bloomington Sandwich Company. Mike is an amazing man. One of the most hard working men I have ever met, and a person of deep faith. Always kind. Always good food. Always there. He hired college kids and he taught them how to provide outstanding service to everyone who walked into his shop. Now and then, he would slip over to First Church to join us in worship. Mike ran an independent little sandwich shop, and he made a go of it...despite the big, national chains all around him.

At some point, during the past winter, Mike closed his business. Now, when I walk down Kirkwood, I walk by that empty storefront. The space is for sale or lease. After a lifetime of effort and work and outstanding service, my friend lost his business.

We've lost -or are in danger of losing- any lingering belief that we are one nation, indivisible, facing crises and threats by standing united shoulder to shoulder. For a few days after COVID-19 arrived on our shores, you could tell we were together in the fight. We knew we faced a common enemy. We were all in it

together. Some of our elders reminded us of victory gardens in World War II, rationing, and how everyone contributed to the effort to defend freedom and overcome tyranny...fascism.

Then, something cracked and we turned on one another. Rather than facing the disease we turned on one another and that, in its own way, seems more devastating than the virus itself.

The people of ancient Judea went through a devastating experience that turned their lives upside-down and changed them forever: the Babylonian exile. The Babylonian Empire was just to the East of Palestine, and was always a threat to the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judea.

Around 598 B.C.E., the Babylonians swept in, defeated the small Judean army, and captured Jerusalem. The invaders carried the Judean king, King Jehoiachin, his family, and many members of the political, religious and business elite into exile. The truth is that, over a decade or so, there were a series of deportations to the east. Tens of thousands were carried away into exile, and yet much of the population was left behind in Judea to struggle along beneath Babylonian rule.

Psalms 137 (Common English Bible) is a corporate lament. It shows us the heartache and despair and bitterness of the people who would end up spending more than 50 years in a strange land. And, at the end of the psalm, there is a twisted cry for vengeance against the oppressors.

Verse 9, which we are usually careful not to read in worship, tells us how when we are wounded, oppressed, and treated with unusual cruelty, the thirst for revenge can poison even a person of deep faith. You see the Edomites were neighbors of the people of Judea. They often regarded one another as cousins...members of the same family...sharing some of the same history. And, when the Babylonians invaded, the people of Judea were shocked to see their friends Edom joining the invading force. The people of Judea were betrayed, were stabbed in the back, by their neighbors and friends. When a friend betrays you, the wound is much more painful than if a stranger has insulted you or taken advantage of you. So here in the psalm we see how exile in Babylon so damaged, so embittered, the people of God:

***1 Alongside Babylon's streams,  
there we sat down,  
crying because we remembered Zion.  
2 We hung our lyres up  
in the trees there  
3 because that's where our captors asked us to sing;  
our tormentors requested songs of joy:  
"Sing us a song about Zion!" they said.***

**4 But how could we possibly sing  
the LORD's song on foreign soil?**

**5 Jerusalem! If I forget you,  
let my strong hand wither!**

**6 Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth  
if I don't remember you,  
if I don't make Jerusalem my greatest joy.**

**7 LORD, remember what the Edomites did  
on Jerusalem's dark day:**

**"Rip it down, rip it down!**

**All the way to its foundations!" they yelled.**

**8 Daughter Babylon, you destroyer,  
a blessing on the one who pays you back  
the very deed you did to us!**

**9 A blessing on the one who seizes your children  
and smashes them against the rock!**

We've lost a lot. It's okay to cry. There is a place for lament, for looking back and grieving, at what we have lost over the last two years.

Here is the fourth thing I believe God wants you to know: God has been with us even in the darkest, most difficult moments of the last two years.

Even though the psalmist is in despair, in Psalm 137, broken by the strangeness of the exile and the mocking laughter of their Babylonian neighbors, the people of God. -in this corporate lament- are speaking to God confident that God hears.

Another psalm, Psalm 139 (Common English Bible), reminds us that there is no place we can go, no experience we can go through, that is beyond the presence and love of God: Where could I go to get away from your spirit?

***Where could I go to escape your presence?  
If I went up to heaven, you would be there.  
If I went down to the grave,[a] you would be there too!***

***If I could fly on the wings of dawn,  
stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean—  
even there your hand would guide me;  
even there your strong hand would hold me tight!***

Not only is God with us even when our world is turned upside-down, even when our hearts are broken wide open by fear or death or grief, but Romans 8 reminds us that God is always at work for good. Even in the tough stuff of life, God is at work for good. God doesn't cause evil. God doesn't send us sickness, death or economic disaster to teach us, to test us, to grow us, or to pay us back for some evil we have committed. When tragedies come, when disaster strikes, when our heart is broken and life unravels, God is at work -as Pastor Adam Hamilton says in a beautiful way- to "wring good out of evil."

The resurrection appearance of Jesus in the 20th chapter of The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus shows his wounds to the disciples. Jesus is teaching the disciples and us that the resurrecting power of God is able to overcome the power of death. Even when we are wounded, even when we are scarred, God can bring new life.

So, in the middle of the pandemic, some of us have managed to find blessings...gifts...unexpected surprises. This is the 5th point of the message today: in the middle of the crisis, the uncertainty, the loss, we found some blessings.

In the middle of the stress brought on by the pandemic, and the need to develop new ways of working and going to school and accessing health care, many of us have discovered **a reduction in the stress** that over-scheduling has caused in our lives. Person after person told me how relieved they were to watch their calendar clear as one event after another was either cancelled or shifted to a Zoom meeting.

One of the things many of us found is that we really did okay in our business, or at school, or in the church with far **fewer administrative meetings**. It was like the pandemic was a forest fire that cleared out the underbrush of meetings and commitments that weren't really essential...or helpful.

There was, for many, a reduction in stress. Life seemed to slow down. There was room on the calendar.

Many people discovered -especially **families** with school-age children- what it is like to spend a weeknight evening or a Sunday afternoon together. Families running children in two or three directions every night began sitting down and eating dinner together. People talked to one another. Some people even made sure that everyone put down their cell phones and began an ancient tradition we call "conversation."

Surprisingly enough, people walked away from their electronic screens and began playing **board games**.

During the beginning months of the pandemic, last summer, I noticed children playing in playgrounds in a way I hadn't seen in years. I observed kids riding **bikes** when in the past they may have been so heavily scheduled they

didn't have time to even look at the bicycle leaning against the wall of their garage.

Some of us used the additional room in our daily schedule to **bingwatch** Netflix shows or Amazon Prime. We watched *Queen's Gambit* or *Outlander* or *The Great British Bake Off*. We watched old episodes of *Friends* and *Seinfeld* and *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*.

Others of us finally started the **garden** or the **book** we had long planned. A friend of mine took up the **guitar**. Practicing that instrument has now become a part of her daily routine just like praying. Many have learned to cook, finding their way around the kitchen at home, and some began exercising.

Vincent, of Ghana, lost his job but returned to his first love: painting. And so now he is all about creating works of art.

Ryan Ferguson, of North Richland, Texas, talks about learning to eat healthy and making a commitment to daily exercise.

Natalie Bartels of San Diego, California decided, last January, to stop drinking. She, like thousands of others across the country, observed "Dry January" and stepped back from her addiction to alcohol.

**During the pandemic, many of us ended up finding ourselves.** We began to get in touch with who we really are, and we became courageously honest.

**Some of us discovered our neighbors.** More than 56% of all Americans found ways to help their neighbors. That might be grocery shopping for a friend, mowing a yard, or intentionally ordering food from a local restaurant that was fighting to survive. Churches all across the world began to do what they had talked about doing for years: reaching out to serve those in need. Food pantries, paper pantries, and weekly community dinners were started from one corner of the country to another.

**Some of us discovered or found God.** At Church of the Resurrection UMC in Kansas City, they did a congregational survey and found that more than 72% of their members said they had grown in their faith during the pandemic. People missed in-person worship but they were more intentional about living out their faith. People were praying more. People were more deliberate about reading the Bible. People were more focused on looking out for their neighbors, and finding opportunities to give.

Here is what I have heard over and over again from people: I can't wait for the pandemic to be over but I don't want to go back to what was "normal" before. I want to hang onto what I have found during the pandemic, and I want to create a new normal going forward.

The sixth and last truth I believe God wants you to hear today is this: there is life ahead. There will be a new normal. We will, individually and together as a community, decide what that will look like.



As difficult and painful as the past two years have been, there is life ahead. Years ago, terrible fires moved through Yellowstone National Park. The devastation was shocking.

Our family went out there two years later expecting to find a recovering -but largely blackened- landscape. What we found, though, was new growth. Fields of wildflowers. Buffalo grazing on wide open grasslands. Life recovers. God's creative process continues. It refuses to be defeated.

One of my favorite pictures is a picture of wildflowers beginning to grow through the ash left behind by Mount St. Helen's. I keep that picture among the photos on my cell phone: its a good reminder for me that life recovers, that life goes on, and that we have a God who wrings good out of evil.

We've lost a lot.

Tears and lament are the right response.

But, then, we have found blessings in the middle of the pain. Our God works for good...even in the middle of tough, heartbreaking times. That's a good thing to remember as you and I lean into the future God has for us.