

Midweek Lenten Worship
March 18, 2015
Isaiah 48:17-22

“Singing with the Exiles: Get Out!”

Many of the hymns we know and love have fascinating background histories, and this is true for that opening hymn we sang this evening, “When Peace, like a River” (Lutheran Book of Worship #346), whose theme is rooted in tonight’s Scripture reading from Isaiah 48: **“Oh that you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea...”** (Isiah 48:18). “On the advice of his family physician, Horatio G. Spafford planned a European trip for his family, for [the sake of] his wife’s health. At the last minute he had to remain in Chicago [where the family lived], but he sent his wife and four daughters ahead as planned on the S.S. *Ville du Harve*, intending to follow them in a few days. The *Ville du Harve*, however, was struck by the English ship *Lochearn* on November 22, 1873, and sank within twelve minutes, taking the lives of his four daughters. Mrs. Spafford and the other survivors landed at Cardiff, Wales, on December 1, and Mr. Spafford wrote this hymn aboard ship as he sailed to meet her” (*Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 398. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981). In the midst of overwhelming grief and loss, Horatio Spafford penned these words: “When peace, like a river, attendeth my way; when sorrows, like sea billows, roll; whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.” That is faith, tried and tested in the storms of life and yet steadfastly clinging to the promises of God. When disaster or tragedy strikes, we tend to move quickly, dropping whatever we are doing and getting out in order to be with loved ones who need us. It is that idea of getting out that forms the basis for the message this evening as we continue with our midweek Lenten theme, “Singing with the Exiles,” from the prophet Isaiah. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Some of the saddest words in any language are, “You might have had...” I wonder if Horatio Spafford had thoughts like this after the loss of his four daughters. Through his servant, Isaiah, God tells Israel that they might have had peace, righteousness, many offspring, and an enduring name, but they did not. Why? They would not hearken – they would not listen – to the voice of their Lord God. Even after their world had collapsed with the destruction of their city, homeland and temple, even after they had been exiled hundreds of miles to the east in Babylon, they still refused to listen. Why? It was the frog-in-the-kettle syndrome. It is said that if a frog is placed in a kettle of hot water, it will jump out, but if it’s placed in lukewarm water that is gradually heated, it won’t get out, but will slowly die. The Judean exiles began to think of their captivity in Babylon as the new normal. They were becoming so acclimated and accustomed to their new surroundings and life that they were in danger of abandoning their faith. They were that frog in the kettle, and if they didn’t get out soon, they would perish. That’s why God speaks so strongly to them: **“Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy...”** (Isiah 48:20). At this particular point, far from needing consolation, God’s people needed confrontation. Get out! In truth, it is quite likely that the Judean exiles *couldn’t* get out; they couldn’t leave Babylon. They certainly would not have been allowed to do this by their Babylonian rulers. But the problem was that they were becoming all too comfortable. They were more than willing to compromise their faith in the Lord God and blend in worship of Marduk. Why not? In throwing away their special relationship with God as his chosen people, the exiles were also throwing away God’s gifts of peace and righteousness. They were in danger of becoming as deluded and corrupt as Babylon! Those who settle for false gods forfeit “peace like a river,” because apart from God there is no saving peace.

What about us today? Are we listening to what God is telling us, and heeding his call to “get out?” Like the Judean exiles, we can get trapped in our own Babylon. The frog-in-the-kettle syndrome is alive and well in the world today. We may have no intention of becoming ensnared or entangled in gossip, money,

selfishness, sex, food, work, relationships, seeking approval or any one of a myriad of false idols. It is crushing to be trapped beneath the burdens of such things, which come upon us. But the real danger is that over time we become accustomed to living in these places and under these conditions. Over time, our senses become dulled and it becomes easier to deny that we are stuck in that kettle as the heat gradually increases until we are destroyed.

God called his people of old to get out, and he calls his people today to get out – get out and get away from everything that leads us away from the light and love of the Lord. In tonight's lesson from Isaiah 48, the Lord God reminds his people that he led and sustained his people in the first Exodus when he brought them out of slavery in Egypt: **“They did not thirst when He led them through the deserts; He made water flow for them from the rock; He split the rock and the water gushed out”** (Isaiah 48:21). And now God promises to his exiled people in Babylon a second Exodus, even greater than the first one! He will deliver his people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm (Deuteronomy 4:34, et. al.) as he did of old. Not only will they see this and glorify him, but this message of deliverance will go viral: **“... send it out to the end of the earth; say, ‘The Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob!’”** (Isaiah 48:20b).

If there was a first Exodus from slavery in Egypt, and there was a second Exodus from exile in Babylon, there is a third and even greater Exodus which God has accomplished. This third and final deliverance was one which is not just for a few people, but for everyone and for all time. It occurred when Jesus the Son of God entered into our Babylon, who snatched us out of that boiling kettle, who offered himself on the tree of the cross to break the power of sin and deliver us to the kingdom of our Father, wrapped in the robe of his own righteousness (Isaiah 61:10). Jesus is the fulfillment of what Isaiah wrote so very long ago. He has come to rescue and release us from sin and guilt, from shame and regret. He has come to make all things new (Revelation 21:5). It is only because of Jesus that we are able to get out, and it is only because of Jesus that we can sing with the exiles. Thanks be to God. Amen.