

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Sin and Grace

March 11, 2018

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Its not easy to admit, but most of us have probably had times in our lives when today's first reading rings true. Times when our walls have gone breached, our self-confidence, even our self respect set aflame, and all that is most precious to us has been robbed from us. And worst of all, in the midst of such failure and humiliation, knowing deep down that we are responsible for it all. Sure others may be exploiting our failure, enemies may be enjoying our fall from grace, but nevertheless we are being punished for our sins, that we are getting what we deserve.

In such times it is easy to think that God has abandoned us, abandoned us because we had abandoned him. In such times it is tempting to despair, to treat ourselves as badly as we have been treated. At such times we too can long wistfully for what was, for what should have been had we only remained true to ourselves—"By the streams of Babylon we sat and we wept when we remembered Zion. On the aspens of the land we hung up our hearts."

But the power of this story for us lies in its being only half of the story. And we know the second half. That appearances to the contrary, God did not abandon his people to their enemies. Rather he stays with them, even goes into exile with them to Babylon. By the streams of Babylon Ezekiel has a vision of a fiery chariot transporting the ark of the covenant from the now burned temple in Jerusalem to God's people in exile. This time of suffering and humiliation ends up being a time of purification and rededication. It is at this time that the Jews gather together their sacred writings, take down their history, and produce the beginnings of the Bible. We know it is at this time, with the temple razed and being unable to rebuild it, that the synagogue is established—a place to gather and to hear those sacred writings, to remind themselves of who they were, and still are, appearances to the contrary. And it is at this time of exile that there comes down to us those haunting prophecies of God's suffering servant, a quiet and gentle man who will not break the bruised reed or quench the flickering wick, who will take the suffering and the sins of the people upon himself, who dies that we might live.

The Jew's time of suffering and humiliation, their time of exile ended up being a defining moment in their history—a fiery crucible in which their identity was forged anew. A time that helped to make them who they were to become. And a time that prepared them for later exiles. For they returned to Jerusalem, they rebuilt their temple, only to have it destroyed once again, this time by the Romans. But the institution of the synagogue, created during that first exile in Babylon would see them through the next two thousand years. And once they again return to the land of their forefathers, the synagogue had become so much a part of who they are, that they decide not to rebuild the temple, decide that they no longer need a temple, for God can be found anywhere, and everywhere where God's people gather to call upon him.

So too with us. Our times of suffering and humiliation are not the end of our story. We too can look back at such times as defining moments in our own lives, decisive times when our own purpose, our own calling was purified and strengthened. The lessons of such times cannot be forgotten, for we may need them again. The lessons learned in such trials can see us through the trials that lie ahead. For we continue to stumble and wander. Particularly in times of ease and plenty we can again become distracted, wander astray and set ourselves up for another round of affliction.

Not that we are totally responsible for the evils that befall us. Even the Jews were hardly responsible for the rise of Babylon. But neither are we ever sheer victims of circumstance. We have played our part in what befalls us. And it is only in learning what our trials have to teach us, that our curse can be exorcized, become even a blessing in the long run.

Christ follows us into our own exile. Christ is that suffering servant who does not break the bruised reed, or quench the flickering wick. In our times of affliction it is to Christ that we must turn to learn and to heal. As I like to quote from Meister Eckhart: we must never think of ourselves as far from God. Even if in our sin we cannot imagine ourselves close to God we must still never think of God as far from us. If he cannot be inside our house, he is but on the porch, knocking at our door.