



**Third Sunday of Easter**

**Sermon: Exile & Return**

**As we move through this season of stewardship, we ask that you spend a few moments in thoughtful reflection each day. Find a quiet moment, center your heart notice the world around you and pray this giving prayer as we build “a future with hope” together.**

***Prayer:** Holy One: Over and over, we become scattered and separated. Over and over, like a good shepherd, you find us and bring us home. For all the togetherness you’ve granted us at FCC Birmingham, thank you. For the gift of faith that gets us through times of separation, thank you. For the gifts of connection and community, mission and ministry, hope and commitment, thank you. In your generosity and grace, O God, grant me the wisdom to see what I can give to deepen our faith, strengthen our community, extend our witness, and build a future with hope. Amen.*

**Monday: Read Isaiah 43:1-7**

The verbs here are telling. The first, "created" (*bara'* in Hebrew) is the first verb found in the Hebrew Bible. Genesis 1:1 proclaims that Yahweh is first revealed as "creator" of sky and earth. But the second verb, "shaped" (*yatser* in Hebrew) is found in the second creation story of Genesis 2, where Yahweh is described as an artist, using a moistened lump of clay to form/shape each human being and animal. God creates and God shapes the creation with skill and finesse and beauty. This God is no distant and disconnected creator; this God is with us, intimately shaping us and sustaining us. The prophet reminds these people in exile how and why the God of Jerusalem is different. Surrounded by people and powers they didn't understand, Jews were afraid, life was changing, they were unsure. Often, we can relate. We know what it is to be afraid—afraid of what is happening in the world, afraid of economic hardship, afraid for our children, afraid of the future. There are moments of exile when we too, need to hear, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” How have you experienced exile in your life? What are you afraid of? How can these words from Isaiah offer you a promise of a future with hope? What will you do in response?

**Tuesday: Read Genesis 37:1-33; 50:15-21**

While Joseph's brothers tried to murder him by throwing him in a pit, their jealousy and envy seem somewhat justified by Joseph's holier-than-thou recounting of dreams in which he is lord and king over his brothers and their father's preference for their little brother. Joseph—exiled and forgotten—and in an even more bizarre set of circumstances finds himself governor over the land of Egypt when his brothers come looking for food during the famine, and a family divided by strife and rivalry is reunited. What began as a terror-filled betrayal by those who should love him most, Joseph's journey from Canaan to Egypt becomes a story of God's faithful presence for all of Israel. Joseph's exile becomes the means by which his family is restored. In what ways have the experiences and circumstances of your life shaped you? Your relationship with family? With God? In what ways have you experienced God's faithfulness in times of exile? How have you returned "home?"

**Wednesday: Read Ezekiel 37:1-14**

Many of us have our own "valley of dry bones." We have circumstances, relationships, communities, and groups that are torn asunder and falling apart. We have families shattered by betrayal and anger and abuse and addiction. We have churches divided over theology or worship style or ministry goals. We have a country separated by partisan politics and rhetoric. We have a pandemic that swept across the globe changing the rhythm of our lives. Sometimes it's hard not to think this is the end of the story. This may have been the same kind of thinking that many of the Judean exiles may have been feeling in Babylon when Ezekiel shares his vision of the valley of dry bones. The prophetic vision Ezekiel shares here is one of restoration, of recreation, reconciliation, and return. Ezekiel's vision is not one that is regulated strictly to some distant time past, but one that speaks in the face of all places of spiritual and emotional exile and death. Restoration is possible as God breathes new life into our dry bones. Then we shall live and we shall know that "I, the LORD have spoken and will act" (v. 14). In what way do you need God to breathe life into your dry bones today?

**Thursday: Read Esther 4:1-17**

The story of Esther is a complicated one. In Judaism the story is the heart of the festival of Purim ("lots"), a festival characterized by joy and feasting and usually the presentation of a play based on the tale, often done by children, dramatizing the division of the world into evil and good. Evil is the character Haman, a Persian official who detests the Jews of his country and who is hanged on the very gallows he had built for his archenemy, Mordecai, uncle of the beautiful Esther. She and her uncle are the good Jews who, through risk and pluck and with the help of the wine-soaked, slightly stupid king, are able to save the Jews from destruction. It is a story that provides hope in the midst of despair for Jews and for us. Mordecai's words to Esther in verse 14, "If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place...

Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this," kindle a spark of hope reminding us that all is not lost. All of us, in whatever exiles we find ourselves, need stories like Esther's to remember that God is always near, and return is promised. When have you found yourself without hope? In what ways do you see Esther's story in our world today? How can Mordecai's words inspire you to hope and your hope to action?

**Friday: Read Isaiah 42:1-16**

As Israel returns home for a fresh start (after a massive failure that resulted in exile), the prophet reminds Israel of her God-given vocation—to be a servant-people who bear God's blessing, God's promises, and yes, even God's glory, to the very ends of the earth. Isaiah is deeply concerned about and committed to justice (in Hebrew, the word is *mishpat*). Failure to practice *mishpat* in social and economic relations was long a concern of the prophets of Israel. Amos, the earliest of the classical prophets, cried out that God is not interested in forms of worship that do not change the hearts and behaviors of the worshipers. "I hate, I despise your feast days... Take away from me the noise of your songs... But let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream" Prophets like Amos and Micah and Isaiah reminded Israel again and again of the Servant's essential work: to bring forth or establish *mishpat*—God's justice that cares for the poor and seeks well-being for all. How will you respond to this call from Isaiah? In what ways has God changed your heart and behaviors? What can you do in your small corner of this world to establish *mishpat*?

**Saturday: Read Acts 1:6-8**

The disciples ask the risen Jesus: "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Here they identify the very heart of their concern. We frequently skip over their question and hurry over to Acts 1:8 where Jesus declares that they shall be witnesses to the uttermost ends of the earth. But let us hear their question: "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" It is not a stupid question or an irrelevant one. Over 500 hundred years earlier the prophet had spoken of God's people Israel, broken in spirit, living in poverty and hunger, captive in a foreign land, in exile, and had promised liberation. They would return home to their own land, to worship God in freedom and peace, and all the nations would rejoice in Jerusalem as a center of peace and justice. God's reign would be restored to Israel. The vision of this kingdom is one Jesus proclaimed and one to which the disciples held fast. Surely this was it? But once again we see God's vision is so much more that we can imagine. Jerusalem? Yes, but not just Jerusalem. Judea? Yes, but not only Judea. Samaria? Yes, but not only Samaria. To the ends of the earth? Yes. That will be far enough. In what ways have you placed limits on God's vision? What might be keeping you from dreaming bigger dreams with God? Where might your "ends of the earth" be this week?

