



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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The Normalcy of Exile

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 28, 2012

The Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Mark 10:46-52

Almost from its beginning to its finish, there is to be found in the scripture we call holy a sense of being exiled. From the moment of the mythical fall of Adam and Eve through the New Testament's yearning for the return of Christ, life for us, at least on some level, involves a desire to be somewhere we are not. It is a sense of being a part of the world and yet somehow not part of it, a sense that seems to be inherent in the Christian story. I would argue it is true for a serious spiritual journey in any faith: all of us who seek immersion in the life of One who is beyond live in one world even while feeling beckoned to another, perhaps an erstwhile one, one to which we long to return. Whatever this state of longing is, it is easier to feel it in our gut than to explain it with our words; but most of us, if we let our hearts and mind go there, know how it feels to long to be somewhere else. I remember as a child being homesick a great deal. I think I have told you that I never made it past Wednesday at camp. Eventually, the counselors would call my parents to say, "Oh, for God's sake, just come get him." What was odd about that was that home was complicated and not without lots of issues, ours on occasion putting a capital "D" back in dysfunction. But it was mine, and I wanted to be there. Wherever home is, even now on the far side of middle age, has enormous pull for me.

Jeremiah admonishes his hearers to pray, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel." And in response God promises, "With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back; I will let them walk by brooks of water in a straight path in which they shall not stumble." Such beautiful language these words are; they derive from a three-chapter portion of Jeremiah, known as the "Book of Comfort" or the "Book of Consolation." And though the context in the book of Jeremiah is the return of God's people from Babylon, they do indeed console the heart of anyone who has been away from his or her center, away from the widest opening in her soul for God, away from a place where he is known by name. It is comfort indeed to come home from exile!

As you all know, we are in the final days of the national campaign. Last week one my colleagues prayed that we will be able to endure the remainder of the campaign. Among the themes that have made it a hard election cycle to endure is the suggestion, perhaps not in these words, from both candidates that this is a crucial time for Americans to return from exile, the "locations" being different but the tone being similar. In fact each candidate can—and certainly some pundits on both sides do—sound messianic. Although it creeps me out quickly to travel far down the road of biblical imagery in reference to political campaigns, to ask soul questions about the nation as well as about ourselves is the legitimate domain and concern of people of faith. The way we answer some of those questions, which I do not need to list, not here not now, will no doubt affect our choice, a choice which rightly belongs to each of us alone.

Returning from a long stay in a place that is not our spiritual home is complicated. It is complicated by the fact that despite our vague awareness that we are not where our hearts and souls most deeply want us to be, the odd fact is that we often are quite comfortable in the home of our temporary sojourn. This was certainly the case for the people of Israel, an amazingly adaptive group. While Babylon wasn't home, it wasn't all bad either; in fact, some of its wiles and amenities were deeply appealing. That should ring a bell of familiarity for us. For those of us on top—and globally many of us who are far from the 1% are very definitely on the top—returning to a land where the poor are not just endured but valued as children of God, where the orphans and the widows (and the groups they represent) receive provisions beyond sustenance alone, where the high shall be low and the low shall be high is not always a trip we hanker to take. We often choose to live with the mild discomfort of having so much

while others have so little, rather than to willingly change what it would take to end the exile we feel from what is most challenging and fulfilling about our faith.

It is complicated, and often we are unwilling to see what it takes to come home. Whether metaphorical or not, the story of Bartimaeus, the blind man, is an account of a man who was in a sort of exile, separated from the seeing world, knowing only a life of darkness—neither of his making nor of God's, but in this case a fluke of nature. But fluke or no, metaphorical or not, he knew he didn't want to stay blind. And so he kept his ears, which were just fine, open for any sign of a way that he might be sprung from the exile of blindness. When he heard that Jesus was coming, he created a very non-Anglican ruckus—which, by the way, might on occasion help us get a bit unstuck as well—because he really wanted to be in a different place. “Son of David, have mercy on me,” he said more than once, just in case it was missed the first time! Jesus said, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus replied, “Let me see again.” And, lo and behold, as the story goes, the Son of David did indeed have mercy on him, and he could see again.

What a story for us to hear! Spiritually we often stay blind because we want to or are too afraid to risk seeing. Although the only promise I can make about being cured would not win me any friends, I can absolutely guarantee one thing because I have known it on occasion in my own life and have the chance to learn it over and over again nearly every day: If we don't want to be spiritually blind, we don't have to be; if we don't want to stay in spiritual exile, we don't have to. We just have to be willing to call out for help and to get up and to go toward what we want. It is not as easy as this story makes it sound, but it is certainly as sure.

In fact, leaving exile in our lives and times rarely means that we have to leave anywhere physically. I suppose it might; it could take us to a new job, a new life, a more honest and genuine one. But arguably it simply means that we have to be willing to look honestly at the truth to allow a reordering of our lives right where they are. But neither way is easy. Seeing with eyes open may be the greatest act of courage in which we shall ever engage.

In our common and public lives, it is also true that we must be willing to see to be truly capable of seeing. Sightedness moves us to support places like St. Bart's, imperfect places but places whose very presence signifies our desires to find home and sanctuary in the midst of exile. Sightedness makes us struggle with interests other than self-interests in making political decisions. Sightedness makes us aware of things that hurt like hell, even as it makes us love with the passion of heaven.

One reason we often opt for spiritual blindness is that it allows us to live in our cocoon-like life of exile without seeing either the pain in our own souls or in the life of the world around us. In one of my favorite of his books, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, challenges the blind comfort we get from simply standing by and not seeing. Bartimaeus could have chosen to remain comfortably blind; but choosing to see and to follow Jesus probably means that he saw much that a lesser man might have wanted to miss, including perhaps being very nearby when Jesus was murdered. Seeing is never easy, but the alternative is a lot worse.

Some sense of exile may be inevitably human, but life is too short to choose again and again not to see a way home. With all my heart, I believe God is ready to lead us back.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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