

Third Wednesday of Lent: Waiting and Listening in Uncertain Times

Isaiah 5:1-13

Psalm 13

Matthew 24:1-14

Even though these readings for tonight were selected by my colleagues months ago, they seem uncannily appropriate for tonight's worship. Tonight we will have our first experiment with worshipping primarily online. When I decided to join my colleagues in exploring the theme of exile during Lent, I never would have imagined this sort of collective exile we are experiencing now. We are keeping ourselves out of many of our familiar spaces and away from large crowds. We are physically distancing ourselves out of love for our neighbors. We are learning and creating new rhythms for living in this season as we try to make a safer space for our vulnerable brothers and sisters. Our theme for tonight is "waiting and listening in uncertain times." These changes certainly put us in an uncertain time, but we have had reasons for uncertainty even before the corona virus. We have been faced with changing cultures, families, health, and more for far longer.

And it is hard to be apart. Genesis 2 teaches us that humans were not made to be alone, but we are made to serve and love. So how hard it is when the act of love separates us!

And it is hard to be away from places that hold so much meaning for us. Places that have been gathering spots for our celebrations and our sorrows. Gathering spots for our communal worship, for fellowship, for service.

How much more so for the ancient Judeans, I wonder. When they were forcibly taken from their homeland and place of worship. For them, there was one place to offer communal worships, to bring their offerings. And that one place was in Jerusalem. If they could, they would make pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem, to the one place they could make their offerings. Until the exile. When no one taken could return to the temple. For the last two weeks, we sang Psalm 141, "Let my prayer rise up as incense before you." This psalm comes from the time when they could not go to the temple to light incense or to burn a sacrifice. Their prayers were all they had to offer, so they prayed that God would accept them.

And centuries later, after the temple has been rebuilt (twice), Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem. And the disciples are amazed by the temple. Look at the stones! And the

buildings! And the colors! And the robes of the priests! And the scribes! They're in awe of the physical stuff they see around them. But Jesus replies that not one stone will be left upon another.

Understandably, these disciples are aghast. That's not what they thought the messiah would do! The messiah is supposed to kick Rome out, not proclaim *another* exile. But Jesus doesn't stop there with the bad news. Not only will the temple be torn down, there will be wars, persecutions, famines, earthquakes... But hope at the end. Through this time, many will be saved. The good news will be proclaimed. Jesus expects his disciples to persevere in these calamities. Jesus promises that God is not absent in the midst of these times. Jesus proclaims that God is hard at work in the midst of them.

Like the exiles we have heard of throughout the Old Testament, this new exile Jesus describes for his followers will be a wandering in the wilderness. It will be a time of learning to rely on God. It will be a time of learning about the surprising abundance God has prepared.

Isaiah was called to proclaim to the people, "keep listening but do not understand." I feel some sympathy for those people right now! There is so much to learn and try, and so much I don't understand right now. We are trying out this new format for our Wednesday services. And we might need to try other things as well as we move forward. There will be more experimenting, more attempts to make this worship a more worshipful experience. I found that when I listened to these texts today, they sounded very different than they did a week ago. I thought I had my sermon almost done last week! I had to let go of my understanding of them to hear the new things they had to say this week. But one thing has not changed: I do know that God was with our spiritual ancestors through all of their exiles, and God is with us now in this exile and the other ways we feel exiled. I believe God will use this time of exile and wandering to do amazing things. The corona virus is a tragedy, and God does not abandon us in times of tragedy. God is continuing to work in us and guide us. So let's use this time of discomfort. Let's use it to pray more for the victims of this virus. Let's use it to remember those who are isolated all the time. Let's use it to spend more time in discernment, more time listening for the ways the Holy Spirit's is urging, encouraging, and challenging us. And let's celebrate the ways God is continuing to hold us together and guide us.