

## **“Look to the rock from which you were hewn”**

This sermon is based—not on our scripture readings—but from the portion of scripture which is represented by our Call to Worship this morning which is from Isaiah 51:1-2.

Now, this week, I convened, for the very last time, one of the national committees of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, known as the Committee on Church Doctrine. And so, as of General Assembly in June, I will no longer be on that committee, and I’ll have no further responsibility towards it—which is a relief. And now, another person can take on that convenership.

The Committee on Church Doctrine is composed of members, whose expenses are paid, actually, to go to those meetings. And then, there are corresponding members. There are also persons from our theological colleges. So, for example, John Vissers is on the committee, and Richard Topping, who is currently in Vancouver, who was the minister of the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul—he is on the committee; and Charles Fensham, the professor of Systematic Theology at Knox College is also on the committee.

There is a span of ages on the committee. There are people, maybe in their early- to mid-forties, and up to into their eighties. In fact, Dr. William Klempa is on the committee, as well as another former moderator of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Rev. Alan McPherson, from Central Presbyterian Church in Hamilton, who remains a minister emeritus of that congregation.

Now, Bill Klempa was not able to be with us at the meeting; he wasn’t feeling well that day. But certainly, his heart is in this sort of activity; and he fully intended to be part of this conference call, which is what it was—it was “shrunk” from a face-to-face meeting into a conference-call meeting. But Bill, unfortunately, could not be part of the meeting. But Alan McPherson was there.

The interest of persons like that of Dr. William Klempa and Rev. Dr. Alan McPherson in the work of the church, at their age, way beyond the age of retirement, is testimony to the reality that persons who—in the eyes of some, who may be advanced in age, according to them—nevertheless have a great deal to offer. After all, as the book of Acts tells us, old men dream dreams and young men sing visions; and we could include the women and the girls there as well. But the point is that, when we grow old, it does not cease to mean that we cease to have dreams, visions, of what God would have our lives be and do. And, indeed, persons whom young people might think are advanced in years, have a great deal to offer and make a significant contribution.

Now, our passage from Isaiah 51, is just a snippet of a larger block of material, which really goes from Isaiah 40-55; and then, that large block is part of the much larger book as a whole, which is some 66 chapters—a very large and influential book for the people of Israel and also for the Christian Church.

But, when you read Isaiah 40-55, you get a certain idea—or you can project into the text a certain idea—of the context out of which this was written. In fact, many scholars currently believe that Isaiah 40-55 comes from the period of the Exile, after B.C. 587.

So, the people of Israel, shrunk to one tribe, the Jews, from Judah, were in exile in Babylon. And, while they were in exile in Babylon, of course, they didn’t have the usual sights to remind them of their own faith, their ancestral faith. Instead, what they saw around them were

temples to the god, Marduk, for example, or Bel. They had nothing of what they had previously held on to, in terms of visual signs in the countryside. There was no temple; that temple had been laid waste by the Babylonians. And, in fact, the furnishings had been taken into captivity, as well, by the Babylonians.

So, these people might be excused, one could say, for forgetting their ancestral faith, for giving it up as something that had been surpassed by this powerful empire, which was Babylon. But, in Isaiah 40-55, we hear words such as the words that began this service,

Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who bore you, for he was but one when I called him; but I blessed him, and made him many.

So, in the midst of this exile, which is believed to be the period when this passage of scripture was written, people were called to re-join, re-connect, with the faith that was central to them—a faith that came to them via Abraham and Sarah.

Also, in this section of the Book of Isaiah, there is an effort to connect people to God who is Creator, because God, who is Creator, is not God just of their ancestral land, the Promised Land of Israel; God is the Creator of the whole earth, before whom kings are relatively insignificant; in fact, they are like grasshoppers on the earth.

Well, our situation as the Christian Church, is not entirely dissimilar to the situation of these Jews in Babylon—namely, we live in a society where there is ample opportunity to forget who we are, whom we are connected to. If we look on the main page of an internet server, we are not going to find an encouragement to pray. We are encouraged, maybe, to buy a car or some other thing. The world we live in frequently has not much to say to us about the faith that is ours—the Christian faith. Indeed, even if we might consider ourselves advanced in years, we are not to forget either. We have a whole life experience to offer that is connected to the faith that we hold.

Now, in fact, in Babylon, one hypothesis has it that much of the Bible—the Old Testament, as we know it—was collected during the Exile in Babylon, by the Jews. So, when they were in exile, they took it upon themselves to become more connected to their faith, by compiling many of the materials that we have in our Bible—the Hebrew section of that Bible. They also, during that period, emphasized things such as synagogue-worship; there was no temple. They also emphasized Sabbath observance, circumcision, and the like. In fact, according to one theory, that one portion of scripture read from Genesis (Gen.17) concerning Abraham, was a version of the saga of the patriarchs that was produced at the time of the Babylonian captivity. And, in fact, if you read the context of Genesis 17, there is an emphasis on circumcision and the like.

We live in the midst of a society that calls us to forget. This scripture—and the example of the Jews in Babylon—tells us to remember, to take it upon ourselves to become familiar—very familiar—with the sources of our faith, certainly in Jesus Christ, and in the Scriptures that bear witness to him. And worship, Sunday by Sunday is certainly one way in which we remember, and connect with our faith, and live out of our faith.

Now, the Jews, who went to Babylon, were part of a society that was much stronger than they were, apparently. And there were people who mocked them. There is one famous psalm, Psalm 137, which [records words of the Babylonians to the Jews], “Sing a song of Zion!” But they wouldn’t sing a song of Zion in a foreign land, in a strange land.

There was this tendency to make fun of these people who were now in exile. But the Jews, who felt that this exile was at least partly as consequence of their sin, felt also that God, who is the source of newness, who knows the future, who is in charge of the future, could also bring what was new into human situations. And so, there are the words from Isaiah 40, “All who trust in the LORD will renew their strength; will renew their youth like that of an eagle’s.” And, surprise of surprise, Babylon fell. And, wouldn’t you know it? There was a ruler who came after that actually allowed these Jews in exile to their land; and that ruler was Cyrus of Persia. So God is indeed in charge of the future, and can bring what is new into our lives—can forgive our sins, can give us visions of what the future holds in store for us.

So, in our own situation, in the midst of—maybe—discouraging circumstances for the Christian Church as whole, for our own congregation even, God can bring new vision, new hope. God can do amazing things, that one might not anticipate at all. And even persons advanced in years can dream dreams, and can live out of those dreams what God wishes for them to do in the world, as a witness to their faith.

Now, this segment of the book of Isaiah has another element to it, which is perhaps its most famous element. And that is the reference to the Servant. There are a number of passages of scripture in this segment of Scripture—Isaiah 40-55—which refer to the Servant of the Lord.

Now, looking at the book of Isaiah as a whole—looking at Isaiah 6—there is a reference to how the people will be cut off, and only a stump will remain, and that will be burned; but “the holy seed is in the stump”. So go the words from Isaiah 6. And then, we hear in Isaiah 11, words of promise associated with a king, a Messiah: “a shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse”. And then we hear, in Isaiah 53, words that have similar reference: “Who has believed what we have heard? For he grew up before him like a young plan, like a root out of dry ground.”

Amazingly enough, at this low point in the history of the people of Israel, who became the Jewish people—at this low point, when they were in exile—for whatever reason, they had this vision of a Servant, a Servant who would be attentive to God’s call, who would open his ears to what God would have him do, a Servant upon whom God would place his Spirit, a Servant who would bear the sins of many, in fact. And that all came out of this difficult period of the people of Israel in their exile. Remarkably enough, it is through this one, this servant, that the kings will be startled; it will amaze the nations.

And, of course, we see in this Servant a precursor, or an indication, of the one who became the Servant of all, namely Jesus Christ our Lord, whom we believe died for the sins of the many.

Now, older folk—shall we say—who may think that they have very little to offer, but, in fact, have much to offer—can contribute in a way which brings reconciliation, brings people together. You may, for example, have heard of that group of former world leaders called the “elders”, among whom is Nelson Mandela and Jimmy Carter, and others. Or think of that woman who was jailed for I don’t know how many years in the country formerly known as Burma, and is now released. And she seems to be doing what she can to bring that country back together. She is not insisting on her own way. She realizes—especially in oriental culture—the importance of “saving face”. You don’t shame your enemies; you help them “preserve face”. That woman, who has received the Nobel Peace Prize, is not a young woman. But there is a person doing significant work for peace in that area of the world.

God calls us into this service, the life of the Servant—of course, the life following in the pattern of Jesus Christ our Lord—attentive to the call of God, attentive to the Spirit that God would place upon us, and called into a form of relating to our neighbour that brings reconciliation, brings people together.

So this passage of scripture, which many believe to be written out of the period of the Jewish exile, where people were tempted to forget their faith, to feel that the future was closed to them—it was a shut door—to feel that the promises of this new shoot coming from the stump of Jesse were not going to be fulfilled. That scripture challenges us to live in hope—no matter what our age—and to remember, to attend to our roots, through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as they witness to Christ; and to live, following the pattern and example of Jesus Christ our Lord, who came as a servant of all. We too are called into that service, by the power of the Spirit, who gives us the dreams and visions that motivate us on into the service of the Lord.