**Exile and Release**

**Text: Isaiah 40:1-2**

**December 10, 2017**

The presents were opened, the dinner was cooked, and now the family was gathered around the Christmas dinner table: three generations, holding very different views on a host of issues. The atmosphere was a little tense, but they were making it work…until an unfortunate comment was made and one of the teenagers exploded in anger and stormed-off to his room. There he sulked; sort of. Actually, the solitude of his room was more comfortable than the controlled tension of the table. Besides, as long as he sat there he could nurture his sense of righteous indignation. That is, until his grandfather knocked on the door, and offered him some words of comfort, and gently asked him to return to the table. A part of the young man didn’t want to go. But how could he say no to his grandfather, whom he adored?

The self-imposed exile of that young man is a little bit like the situation of exiled Judah in the 6th century B.C. That time of exile is the context for today’s scripture reading. For more than a century, the people of Judah – God’s people – had descended into idol worship, wickedness, lies and injustice. The prophets warned them of the judgment to come, and they called the people to repent, reform and be reconciled to God, but they refused to heed the prophets’ words. The end came in 587 B.C., when Babylon defeated Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, and forced the brightest and the best of her people into exile.

There they wept, by the waters of Babylon, for some 50 years. Many of the people wept, anyway. Until a new prophet arose. We don’t know his name, but biblical scholars call him 2nd Isaiah. And this new prophet spoke words, not of judgment, but of comfort. He said, “Be comforted, my people.” He said, “God has forgiven us; God is offering us a fresh start.” He said, “We’re going home.”

That’s what the prophet said, but some of the people didn’t want to hear it. They’d made their peace with being in exile. They’d become comfortable in Babylon. They said, “Well, it’s not the best but hey, it sure beats trekking through the desert. And then there’s the hard work of rebuilding Jerusalem. So, I think maybe we’ll stay right here.”

But God can be very persuasive. Speaking through the prophet God says, “Okay, I know that desert trek is going to be a challenge, but I’ll tell you what: I’m going to lift-up those dry valleys and make the mountains low; I’m going to make the uneven ground level and the rough places a plane. I’m going to be with you on that journey; I’m going to do these things for you on that journey; and then I’m going to do one thing more: I’m going to create for you a new and glorious future. I’m going to do this for you, I’m going to do this through you, and I’m going to do this because I love you. Furthermore, I’m going to be with you! So come on; we’re going home. The mouth of the Lord has spoken it!”

They didn’t all make the journey. But some of them did. And they built a new Jerusalem. They built a new Temple. It took a while, and yes it was hard work. But it’s amazing what a determined and organized community can do. Especially when the Lord is working through them.

You know what? We too are in a kind of exile. Mainstream Christianity has been in exile for decades now. There are a whole lot of churches across this country called First Christian and First Presbyterian and First United Methodist and we’ve all been weeping beside the waters of declining membership and declining buildings and declining influence. We speak longingly of the glory days when the sanctuary was full every Sunday, and we talk about how we need to bring in new members, but mainly we just talk. Then there are those days we whine and moan and point fingers and blame. On other days, we just weep beside the waters of exile.

But sometimes it doesn’t seem so bad. I mean, we have each other and we take care of each other and there are still plenty of things that we enjoy doing together. Those activities might not be bringing in new members but hey, were getting by.

You know what? I think we’re more comfortable in exile then we like to admit. Like Babylon, it’s not the best, but it’s what we know. And however imperfect it may be, it’s not nearly as scary as the future that we don’t know.

Perhaps that’s what we’re thinking. Or maybe we doubt the possibility that there really is a new future into which we’re being called. Maybe it just seems too good to be true. Maybe that future is already breaking into our midst, and we just can’t see it. Perhaps our painful past is still too raw and we’re having trouble accepting the comfort that God is offering us.

I’ve seen it happen elsewhere. One of the churches that I served in Canada went through a dreadful time about 10 years before they called me. A couple of years into my time there we were turning things around: finances were stable, younger families were joining, in fact the Sunday School was almost bursting at the seams. But it was like the new people were invisible! Folks were still wringing their hands and talking about how we were such a small, struggling, aging congregation.

Our church, and so many mainstream churches across the land, feel a bit like exiles.

So listen, you exiles, because the prophet is speaking to you and to me and to all of us. From across the centuries the messenger of God is *commanding* that we be comforted. The question is, do we want to hear it? There are voices among us offering hope for the future, offering plans for the future, offering the good news of God’s presence that will guide us into the future. But like the people of Judah, it’s hard to hear them if we’ve made our peace with Babylon. We can’t hear hope if we’ve made our peace with despair. We can’t move into the future if we’re focused on fear. We can’t see the light if we won’t admit that you’re sitting in the darkness of exile.

But God’s Word is proclaimed across the ages: “Be comforted, my people!” God offers us comfort, whether we want to hear it or not. God offers us comfort in these ways:

God says, “You are my people. And I love you very much. And there’s nothing that you can do about it.”

And God says these words to us tenderly*.* These are not words of judgment, but words of consolation. Hear again what the prophet says: “You have served your term. Your penalty has been paid. Your sins are forgiven.” Whatever pain there has been in our past, however much we might be responsible for it or someone else might be responsible for it, it’s over. God says that we can put it behind us. It’s time to move on.

And as we move on, as we leave exile and journey home – even if it does mean a tough trip across the desert – God assures us that we are not alone. God is coming to be with us; indeed, God *is* with us! Whatever difficulties may lie ahead can be dealt with because God has not abandoned us. We can trust that.

Indeed, we can trust the entire future that God is even now creating for us. This is God’s final word of comfort: there is a future for First Christian Church – a glorious future – which is even now coming into being. It’s not here yet; but it’s coming. They’ll be some tough times as we make our way there, but God will be with us in those tough times and no matter what obstacles might be out there in the desert, we’re going to make it home. The future into which God is calling us is a future which ultimately God is creating. Yes, we’ve got some work to do, but God is going to be doing that work through us. As with the exiles in Babylon, so with us: the deepest comfort and greatest joy is the power of God at work in our midst: providing, protecting and guiding us with gentleness. Reading a few verses further in Isaiah 40 we hear the prophet saying, “God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, caring them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (Isaiah 40:11).

And this, my friends, is good news for First Christian Church. God is with us as we journey into our future. It won’t always be easy, but sometimes the seemingly difficult becomes easy because God makes a way for us in the wilderness. And what may seem now like mission impossible will be made possible by the One in whom all things are possible.

So be not afraid. It’s going to be okay. Remember that young man who stormed off from the dinner table? Well, going back to that Christmas dinner turned out to be okay for him too. A little awkward at first, but soon there was love and laughter and comfort and joy. Because God was there. And God is here. Amen.