



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

Message on Isaiah 43:1-7, 10-12, 18-19

God is Crazy about Lost People

August 22, 2004

By Matt Hook

A few weeks back, I had my 20th High School reunion. It was wonderful to see lots of old friends, and hear how their lives were. Perhaps the most interesting happened the Monday after the reunion. A classmate who didn't attend sent a thought provoking, almost painful, well-written email to the class yahoo website about life and his futility in not attending. I knew him. Here's a much-edited version of what he wrote:

Fellow members of BS High School Class of 1984, (BS - that's Birmingham Seaholm)

I won't be attending the reunion this weekend. But I've been thinking about you. Imagine my surprise a couple of months back when my wife handed me the phone: "Ted Arnstein--? How the heck are you, man?" It just so happened that the recent death of a friend had started me on about all those things that those of us nearing forty are supposed to ponder: *mortality, The Path Not Taken, have I [slept with] enough people?* and among them, was a curiosity about the receding persons of my past. (He got the "receding" part down ☺). We had some nice chit chat....It wasn't until well into the conversation that I realized: this is about the reunion, isn't it? Indeed it was and is twenty years since we were last an accidental aggregate of acquaintances. And since Ted extracted my email address in a moment of weakness, so your names have flickered intermittently through my inbox, sparking little firefly flashes of memory. (Not everyone from Birmingham talks this way!)

I've had this feeling that I can't shake that somehow I share some intimacy with you...a feeling due, possibly, to the wondering that we all do about where we come from and what we once were. That we have no real ties to the past, every cell in our bodies has regenerated ten times over, our identities are simply continuities of consciousness, that there is nothing physical that binds us to our past besides our artifacts... So, when we are pondering the halfway point of our lives, after we've discovered even our spouses and children to be strangers, and I haven't thought of any of you for twenty years, I can't escape this strange feeling of communality with you, a feeling which is of course ridiculous. Some of you will even be voting for George Bush!

When I started receiving transmissions from the reunion listserv (over the computer), I was hoping to hear some adult-type revelations/insights/transformations about the lives you've since led...But I've been disappointed; the irregular influx of "hey whats up"s has left me with the banal realization that adult life is merely an echo of the chatter in the hallways. I hope you'll indulge the following report from the dusk of my thirties.

...High school was and remains a giant blank in my memory. For me it was *junior* high school where my adult neuroses were formed. For example, the...class consciousness ignited by my apprehension of the [expensive] houses that the bus I now rode passed... The sudden inadequacy of my cookie-cutter bungalow neighborhood stood as shorthand for all my single-parent, familial discontents, [listen to this]... and *the lack of any sensible countervailing influence* to disabuse me of such phantom laments is something that to a degree corrodes my subconscious still. (Wow. Where was the church?).

It was also junior high where I found myself susceptible to...conformity... Suddenly realizing after a few manic scans of the playground that I was the only one out of hundreds wearing plaid trousers. Not least of all, those years were a primer of adult cruelties administered with the brutal frankness of children. I'm not exaggerating: I administered some of them. For my part I remain deeply saddened and ashamed. [I might add in self-imposed EXILE?]

High school? The casts cure; here's your diploma. Now what? (*continued confusion, menial employment, existential despair, dead-end psychopharmacology, profligate drinking, suffering for art, tawdry affairs, minor epiphanies, cocaine, etc.*)

I still don't feel like an adult. Let me clarify: I simply can't accept the world as it is. I am yet puzzled that all those sacred promises ([of]democracy, love, the benefits to the consumer from competition) could turn out to be such an inside joke with such very fine print. I am shocked anew at the needless cruelty, the celebrated mediocrity, the pandering venality and willful ignorance of those who seem to make the world....

...And I was worried that God calling the exiles of the world home wouldn't be relevant to us today! (Talk about leading lives of quiet desperation...)

- The first thing that struck me about Chris's letter: the darkness, pain, and loneliness of it.
- The second thing that struck me was his eyes of mercy and empathy for people,
- were it not for the 3rd thing: It was extremely self-absorbed and ego-centric.
- (But how could it not be? Apart from Christ, we don't have the spiritual resources to move from self-centered to others-centered).
- When I pulled it back up on my computer screen a few days ago, a fourth thing struck me:
- Chris's worldview is that of someone in exile – almost in bondage; and he's not alone, is he? (Although he feels painfully alone).
- You may be here today feeling like you are living in exile.

An exile is: a prolonged living away from one's homeland, usually enforced. In its verb tense, it means to force one into living away or to banish. The number of exiles, or displaced persons in the world is amazing – estimated at over 35 million people right now. But I think the number of spiritual exiles living away from their homeland is way more. Besides Chris, I'm talking about some of my neighbors, some of the weddings I performed last week, friends in the gym, and all around us. Walking in the Dexter Daze parade handing people a flyer about our church's activities, I could feel it. Why do so many people feel exiled from church? Or God?

The Exile is not new. In the Scriptures I see that exile has always existed. It is our human nature. (My friend Chris (and some of you) might doubt my sources) And I would say the Bible speaks of truth – truth beyond the Middle Eastern culture in which we received it. The Bible is not a self-help guide packed with helpful pointers. It is a door that brings self-absorbed humanity face to face with self-giving God. (And if you haven't signed up for the Walk Thru the OT, do it today!)

Our passage was written by the Prophet Isaiah. A prophet of God doesn't predict the future like a fortune teller, a prophet is one to tells it like it is, past, present, or future. Isaiah was such a prophet. He lived when Israel had already split into the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel and the 2 tribes of the southern kingdom of Judah. Early in Isaiah's ministry, about 722BC, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the

invading Assyrians. Isaiah spent the rest of his ministry prophesying in Judah, warning them of the Babylonian invasion and captivity. Out of the 66 chapters in the book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39 focus on the former things: What Israel is, in all her sin and disobedience. Chapters 40 – 66 focus on the latter things: What Israel will be. Isaiah introduces the new thing God intends to do:

Isaiah 43:1-7, 10-12, 18-19

1 But now, this is what the LORD says-- he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

3 For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead.

4 Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life.

5 Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west.

6 I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth--

7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

10 "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.

11 I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior.

12 I have revealed and saved and proclaimed-- I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "that I am God.

18 "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.

19 See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

After years and years of prophets calling people to repent and remember God's covenant, God sends his servant Nebuchadnezzar, (What a devastating statement![Jer. 43:10]) Israel has been so unfaithful God had to turn to the King of Babylon, emperor over huge armies, destroyer of God's temple to destroy His children and drag off the survivors. God's-own-children lose their family, friends, wealth, heritage, history, and faith. This is the exile. And as far as the Israelites knew, they would never return. It compares to the modern Holocaust, when people were dragged off, never to return. Exile.

Why would Judah be so judged? After all, God promised them that this land is their gift. He would keep them safe. They were given houses they didn't build, vineyards they didn't grow, land they didn't tend. But these were given these things *dependent on the covenant*. The conditions were not numerous, but they were important. God promises to bless his people. Israel, in return, was to remain faithful to God and to serve as a channel through which God's blessings could flow to the rest of the world. But Israel failed. Israel chose to fail.

By the time of Isaiah, they chose popularity over integrity, self-indulgence over self-sacrifice. Pouring themselves out before false idols. They defied and defiled God in every way. Isaiah asked “How can you add to it?” What was left to do?

YAHWEH JUDGED HIS PEOPLE. Because his people were guilty. But hear the first of the Good News: **judgment is never the entirety of God’s plan.** The exile is not the end. He speaks through Isaiah the message of restoration.

What will it look like? Return from the exile. We are exiles. We live like exiles. We think like exiles. We relate to each other like we’re exiles. Isaiah is saying:

Don’t think like you’re living in exile: DO NOT FEAR: You are redeemed.

43:1 – **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you.” REDEEMED:** Gay-al. (“to buy out of slavery”) word study. Even in the midst of their wretchedness God claims Israel as his own. Like the man visiting Louisiana who saw a slave auction and outbid all the other men on a beautiful young woman. After he “bought” her, he paid the large sum of money it cost to free her. She couldn’t believe it, but after she understood what he did, she fell at his feet and cried “You bought me to set me free! You bought me to set me free! All I want to do is serve you, because you bought me to set me free!” It’s an amazing story, but not a new story. Abram redeems Lot. Boaz redeems Ruth. Hosea bids on his prostitute wife Gomez in the public square. People thought he was crazy. But what he was doing was showing that God’s crazy about lost people. This is what God promises his people. He will pay to ransom the wayward child. He will buy back Israel. He will bring them home. Church, you’ve been redeemed! Don’t subject yourself to the slavery of exile any longer! Let God change your thinking.

Don’t relate to people like you’re living in exile: DO NOT FEAR: You are loved.

Ezekiel sees the presence of God departing from the people. As far as the people know, God is never coming back. V 3-4 – God loves you because God chooses to love you. (He takes your sins and throws them in the sea of forgetfulness. Why? Because God has a bad memory? No. Because he chooses to. You can repent and say “I’m sorry...” and it doesn’t mean anything. But if you say “Look, I know I’ve blown it. And I’m really sorry. I need you.” And God does it! Being “uncruddy is so cool.”) There is a place in God’s heart only you can fill. Do you believe it? Let God’s unconditional love for you permeate every relationship.

Don’t focus on the old things like you’re living in exile - DO NOT FEAR: You will witness a new thing. What about this new thing?

It is the rescue of the Judeans from the Babylonians. 10s of 1000s were dragged off. 70 years. Only Judah came back. Israel never made it. Only 1/10th of the people of Jerusalem came back (20,000). Judah wound up as a just province in the empire, nothing more. The others remained Jews in Babylon – *living in exile*.

Make ready the way of the Lord. Bring those exiles home!!! The new thing that Isaiah was talking about, the restoration is about to begin. That is why it is critical that Jesus be King of the Jews. The 12 disciples reflect the 12 restored tribes. 12 new representatives of the restored Israel.

God had a much bigger plan than getting 20,000 Judeans out of Babylon. Not just them, but the exiles of Eden, the Garden of Eden, will come home. John 3:16. We sit here today as testimony that the lost daughters and sons were not all Jews, but that every tongue, every tribe, every nation would know that God is Lord. Our Creator, who formed us cries out “don’t be afraid. I’ve redeemed you. You can come home now. You are no longer exiles!”

- **For some of us, the journey home took so long we’re only just arriving.**

- **For some of us, we had gone so far, that we had to hear it over and over and over that we've been redeemed.**
- **You may be struggling to think that you've done something that leaves you beyond the message.**

“I will not remember your sins” (43:25). If that's you, remember what the prophet Isaiah says *“Don't recall the things of the past. You and I are the new Israel. We have experienced God's amazing grace.”* Like them, OUR actions have driven us into exile. We have been saved for a reason. We've experienced God's grace for our salvation. **But it's not about us, folks. It's about him.** So that we could serve as witnesses. There are still many sheep who are not a part of this fold. **1000s upon 1000s are still in Babylon.** Just like the 10 lost tribes. They haven't heard the message of the prophet. They don't know it's safe to come home. They don't know he's given His own Son in their place. The new thing is ongoing, folks. The story continues. How can they believe unless they hear? 1000s of years ago and he says it today. You've seen it SO THAT you may be witnesses. It was GOD who served as a vision and hope for us.

Let me commission us today. Tell them. Go tell them that it's safe to come home. To my old friend: Chris, it's alright. You're not alone. There's a place in God's heart only you can fill. And when God comes in, you'll see there's no need to worry. It's not about you. It's about him, and it's about sharing. And it'll change your life.