



“Renewed & Revived”
The Rev. Dr. Chris Keating
Sunday, February 6, 2021
Isaiah 40:21-31

Isaiah confronts Israel’s exile-identity crisis by reminding them of God’s presence in life’s most trying moments.

Just a few weeks before our seminary graduation, the phone in our seminary apartment started ringing. Up to that moment, our life had been filled with studying for finals, making final preparations for our move to Colorado and spending as much time with friends as possible.

But the phone call interrupted all that. A dear friend of the family was calling from California with the news that my father was failing. “I think you need to come,” she told us. Dad had been battling cancer for eight or nine months, and the situation was grim. Neither he nor my mom wanted to interrupt our final weeks of school, but this friend had the foresight to call.

More than interrupting my life and Carol’s life – we found ourselves on an airplane the next morning – that gut-churning phone filled us with the uncertainty of grief. And if there is anything that young, soon-to-be-graduated seminarians do not like it is uncertainty.

After all, we knew things. I could recite long sections of the Book of Confessions. I had nailed my ordination exams on the first try. I knew enough Greek to have passed. I had written papers and sermons and taught confirmation classes. I had mastered divinity and was about to get the degree that proved it.

But I did not know grief. I did not know the intensity of grief that squeezes you like a wet washcloth and leaves you to dry. I did not know how joy could evaporate, how unsure you could become about hope and faith. Suddenly, I was enrolled in the toughest course I have ever taken: encountering grief.

That class has continued to be part of my life, just as it has been part of your life. It’s homework is hard, and its quizzes and tests agonizing. Moments encountering grief always remind us of something we do not know.

When he was secretary of defense, William Rumsfeld was widely known for his many press conferences. These often included forays into extended and meandering philosophical monologues, including a moment in 2002 when he described the limitations of intelligence reports. “There are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.”¹

In her recent book “Wintering,” writer Katherine May describes the experience of grieving along those sorts of lines. May calls grief a “yearning for that one last moment of contact would settle everything.” She describes the experience of losing her grandmother at 17. In her youthful naivete, May had not considered that her grandmother might die. “There are just some things that I would say now that I didn't think to say when I was seventeen,” she writes. “There are just some things I know now that I did not know now.”²

In a few weeks, it will be a year since we last had what we nostalgically refer to as “normal” worship – worship in person, in church, no restrictions, no distances, no facemasks. Worship with hymns we sing and communion we eat together, and of course donuts. We are weary from this road we have been walking, but we have adapted. We have learned new definitions of success, i.e., “Every Sunday I do not have the camera focused on my waistline is a success.” There have been many things we did not know that we do know.

But there are also things we did know that we have come to remember. And it is this sort of knowing that Isaiah offers us this morning. The exiles have been languishing not just for a year, but for generations. They are broken and lost, grieving a homeland that has been destroyed, and unsure of their identity. Singing the Lord's song in a foreign land has not been easy, and grief is rampant. And now even as the return to home seems immanent, they wonder, “Is God with us or not?”

They are lost. They do not remember the faith that has held them steady, and they have forgotten the words to the hymns of their hope. They were broken, weary from pain and wondering if God even cared. In other words, they may be feeling a bit like New England Patriots fans today as they watch Tom Brady play in the Super Bowl.

In reflecting on the process of grief, David Kessler suggests that of all the levels of suffering a human can endure, re-imagining a future is perhaps the hardest. He notes the suffering endured by concentration camp survivors, and how the internal suffering of not “knowing when they would get out, if ever, was even worse than their other tortures.” “But as long as you are a live,” he continues, “you have a future, and the promise of release from your current pain.”³

¹ See <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/rumsfelds-wisdom/>

² Katherine May, “Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times.” (Riverhead Books, 2020).

³ See <https://grief.com/about-david-kessler/>

It is this memory which Isaiah stirs within us today. The prophet calls Israel, and all who have been filled with grief and suffering, to remember the center of their hope:

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their
strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall
walk and not faint.”

Some may hear in these words the familiar strains of the hymn “On Eagles’ Wings,” which was written by Michael Joncas. He is a Catholic priest who has written more than 300 hymns and songs of faith, but is best known for this one hymn that has become a favorite of Catholics and Protestants and even those of no faith around the world.

It’s lines lift up the image of the ever-creating God whose protection and presence can be trusted. It mirrors the images Isaiah proclaims: a God who is more vast than the universe, yet who also comes close to give power to the faint, and who walks alongside of those who are filled with grief.

This is the God who will raise you up, cries Isaiah. Not the false gods of the culture who entice with promises of power and prestige. But the creator God who knows the depth of pain, and who says to us, “I will lift you up.”

It is this God who causes us to sing. Singer and songwriter Carrie Newcomer rights of this sort of faith in her song, “You can do this hard thing.” It is a song for those who are grieving, a song for those who have forgotten what they need to know. Some call it an invitation to resilience:

There at the table
With my head in my hands.
A column of numbers
I just could not understand.
You said "Add these together,
Carry the two, Now you."

You can do this hard thing.
You can do this hard thing.
Its not easy I know, But
I believe that its so.
You can do this hard thing.

At a cold winter station

Breathing into our gloves.
This would change me forever
Leaving for God know's what.
You carried my bags,
You said "I'll wait For you."
You can do this hard thing.
You can do this hard thing.
Its not easy I know, But
I believe that its so.
You can do this hard thing.

Late at night I called,
And you answered the phone.
The worst it had happened,
And I did not want to be alone.
You quietly listened,
You said "We'll see this thru."
You can do this hard thing.
You can do this hard thing.
Its not easy I know, But
I believe that its so.
You can do this hard thing.⁴

You can do this hard thing.

It is in this table, shared wherever Christ's people gather, that we hear Jesus saying to us: You can do this hard thing. Remember that. and be at peace. Amen.

⁴ "You Can Do This Hard Thing," words and music by Carrier Newcomer, 2016.