

Exile: God in Exile
Isaiah 53: 1-6, Matthew 21: 1-11
March 27/28, 2010 (Palm Sunday)
Trinity United Methodist Church
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If we left a chicken egg underneath its mama hen, what would happen? There is a chicken inside this egg. Why can't we see it? Its life is hidden not only by the shell but by time and circumstance. We have to see a little differently to see the chicken in this egg.

There are lots of reasons we have eggs at Easter. First, many Christians don't eat eggs, meat or dairy products for all of Lent, so having beautiful eggs on Easter is a way of celebrating the end of the fast. Another is that we borrowed the egg as a symbol of new life from the pagans in the countries where Christians went. Fertility and new life get celebrated in every culture come spring.

One of the reasons we Christians use eggs at Easter is that just like the life of the chicken is hidden inside the egg, so is God hidden among us. We can't just look and see God like you can look and see me. We don't see him with our regular eyes. But he's here all the same. We believe he was here with us in Jesus, but not everyone could see that. Even the people he loved most didn't really see who he was until after the Resurrection.

We're getting ready to celebrate the Resurrection next week, but before we do, we go through Palm Sunday. Because we are also ending our series on Exile, two scriptures stand opposite each other. Isaiah 53, a Servant Song which some say describes the people Israel, and some say describes the church and some say describes Jesus. Let's go with the Jesus interpretation this morning. It says, in verse 2 – there was nothing about him. Nothing attractive. Nothing to draw us in. In fact, in verse 3, it says he was rejected, undesired, despised. Nothing about him. Seen as not blessed. Verse 4, cursed, struck down by God, afflicted.

The Palm Sunday story is the other passage this morning, with its triumphal flavor, crowds shouting Hosanna – save us! – and waving branches, followers covering the path with their own cloaks. Surely they can see it is God at work right before them. But in both of these passages, God is hidden.

Martin Luther says this:

“Hence, in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot however be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception or experience which is contrary to it. Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making people guilty, when he exalts to heaven he brings down to hell, as Scripture says, ‘The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up (1 Sam 2:6). God is in the least likely places and ways.

In the Exile, Israel knew they deserved their fate. They had been told by their prophets that their deportation was a consequence of their own sin. They looked for God, but they couldn't find him. They looked in the past, when they had lived in the Holy City of Jerusalem,

when life was good for them. They looked in the future, when they hoped to return. God was clearly, to them, in the Holy Land. They couldn't see that he had gone into Exile with them.

In the Matthew passage, the people praise God for the coming of the Messiah. They wave branches, patriotic symbols of Jewish nationalism, and put their cloaks on the donkeys and the road, symbolic of submission to his authority. How is it that this same group of people will turn on Jesus by Thursday? How is it that they miss him then, when they can see him now?

It seems like, deep down in all of us, there is a pagan something that loves God when things go well and wonders where he is when things are difficult. They were living in the past – 100 years ago, when Israel was self-governing and their rulers were warriors who drove the hated pagans back. They were living in the future, thinking that, in just a few days, God would sweep in like Superman and save the day. Who can blame them? And when Rome stayed, and life did not get appreciably better? God did not live up to their expectations. Jesus was just another failure, and they went back to their normal lives.

They didn't see God, because God was hidden, hidden behind beatings and suffering, hidden behind humiliation and a cross. God was there, with them in their oppression, but because he didn't remove it, they missed him.

I was thinking about the United Methodist Women's Rummage Sale. I have heard people say that Rummage Sales are just a bunch of junk. In fact, members of my own family say things like that. However, ask Jan Grodnik about rummage sales. She will tell you that they are an opportunity to give people who have life tough a little dignity, as they can come and purchase what they want and look for bargains. They are a way for people who have more than they need to give it away, preventing them from being possessed by their possessions. They are a way that church people can show hospitality to all kinds of people, maybe even as the writer of Hebrews says, entertaining angels without knowing it. God, at a rummage sale? You bet. Hidden under the old clothes and the trash-to-treasure items, God was here.

Why do we have such a hard time seeing God in times of trouble? It is, perhaps, because we have been schooled to think that if things are going well, we are blessed, and if they are not, we are somehow being punished or cursed. Tom Moon said last night that you often see football players giving praise to God by pointing at the sky after a touchdown, but you don't really see them praising God when they fumble.

Julie was a pretty good self-taught artist, she thought, so she signed up for an art class. The first day, the teacher gave them colored pencils, a blank sheet of paper, and set a regular white chicken egg on a black piece of velvet, artfully folded. "Draw what you see," was her only instruction.

Julie examined her colored pencils only to discover she had every color of the rainbow except white. She looked again. No white. She sat, looking at the egg and her paper, unable to start. When the teacher came and stood behind her, Julie said, "I don't have a white pencil." The teacher said, "I see you are still trying to draw what you know. I want you to draw what you see." Looking at the teacher in confusion, Julie turned back to the egg. She squinted. She turned her head sideways. Then, nothing. The teacher came back, "Julie, draw what you see."

Julie studied the egg some more. Then she realized that the shadow side of the egg wasn't white at all – it was really more of a grey-blue. And the place where the light from the

window hit the egg was peach and gold. She began to draw, and a short time later she had drawn that egg, not using white at all.

I think for us, learning to see God is a lot like that, maybe backwards. We look where we KNOW him to be, not where we see. Isaiah 53 makes it clear he is in the places of hurt and suffering, in the times of defeat and doubt. What do we know that could help us see him?

Do you remember Christmas? Do you remember one of the names the angel told Joseph to call Jesus? Emmanuel. What does it mean? God is with us. Why can we sing it in Advent surrounded by twinkling lights and candles and totally forget about it when the baby has grown up and is riding a donkey into Jerusalem?

Why did they? After all, while they may have been pining for a military, warrior king, right in front of them Jesus was riding a donkey and the colt of the donkey. They understood that as a symbol of his messiahship, but they totally missed the scriptural interpretation that he was coming *humble*. Humility, even humiliation, would prevent them from seeing the God who was right there with them, in that moment.

How quickly we forget when we are at our lowest. In Exile, the people think that God has left them to suffer the consequences of their sin. They are certainly experiencing the consequences. But where is God? He is in the same place he was when Adam and Eve had to leave Eden – with them. He doesn't spare us always, but he never leaves us nor forsakes us.

We think God has abandoned us, but where we are is exactly where God is! At our lowest. We think God blesses us, and we thank him for successful missions, but God is also hidden in the failed attempts. We are certain God gave us our good, but can we not see God hidden beneath the hard times too?

You know by now that Pastor Mark will be going on Sabbatical this summer. My last church experienced the same thing, and it blessed us so much. I have not been worried. I know you will step into ministry to fill the gaps as I step into the role of lead pastor for a short season. Doing dishes the other evening, though, it struck me like a lightning bolt – I am stepping into Mark's shoes. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed by doubt. I am not as good a communicator or preacher as he is. I sit in awe of him nearly every week as he says things I never dreamed in such eloquent ways. He writes with feeling and precision. He faces things head on. He never lets people go. All things I admire about him came rushing into the front of my brain, and I was undone.

I've hung around Jesus long enough, though, to recognize those thoughts as, while true, also from the pit of hell. So I sent them back where they came from and began to talk to God about it. "Ego," was what I heard. Then, because I was working on this sermon all week, I also realized that God would be present, maybe even using me more, if I fell flat on my face. "I don't want to fall flat on my face," I said in dismay! Probably out loud, but thankfully my family is used to these outbursts. I could not complain. I know he will be with us all, I know it, but for that moment in my doubt and fear, I couldn't see it very well. I fell back on what I know – that God is gracious and merciful, faithful and 'with us.'

The people waving palms can't see him – they are looking for a king who will rescue them from Rome. The disciples can't see him – they are looking for a king who will make their lives great and powerful. The priests can't see him – they look for a king who will require nothing of them. The Romans certainly can't see him – they couldn't have imagined a king who

wasn't of their race. The crowds can't see him – he is a failure, a criminal, humiliated and scorned. People today can't see him. They will say that if Jesus was really a savior, the world would be better.

We can't see him. We can see what we have done, but we cannot see him so often because he doesn't look like we want him to look. He doesn't act like we want him to act. He doesn't give us the path we want. We want a life free from suffering and death, and he tells us that those are the places we will find him. We want happiness for our children, and security, and comfort, and we bend over backwards so far to provide those things that we end up worshiping them and not God, who is often found in sadness, insecurity, and pain.

We live in the past, forgetting that he has removed our sin from us as far as east is from the west. We live in the future, promising to serve him in great ways when we get this or that accomplished, when something turns around, when we get it all figured out, when we have a little more time.

I'm no different. The only way to see him is to die to ourselves, and who wants to do that? Who wants to join him in carrying a cross, in facing death? Do we really want to put down our treasured ideas of ourselves, of others, of the way it ought to be? We do so love to give our opinion! We do love to win the argument, to best our opponent, to come out on top, to look good and successful and courageous. Even if we aren't any of those things. It's so much easier than facing what really is in front of us. Who wants to be so relentlessly open to God in the present?

When I have a discussion about the Holy Spirit with Jr. high students, and we talk about God being with us all the time, invariably one word comes into the discussion. Any guesses as to what it is? Creepy. So far there are no exceptions to this in my ministry. There is an element of God as a stalker that really bothers them. We want privacy, after all. We don't mind letting it all hang out there on Facebook or MySpace, but on the other hand we don't want everyone to know everything about us.

It's funny, but it's true. God with us. Do I want him with me all the time, even when I fail? Am I willing to let him be king of my falling as well as my rising, of my pain as well as my joy? Can I let God be God when I suffer, even if he doesn't take the suffering away? Can I look for him in the pain?

Can we seek him in the only place we can every find him, where we are? Right now. In this moment.

So often we spend our days thinking back over what we might have done differently. Regrets pour through our brains. Or we focus on the future, what we hope will happen, how we will change, what we will do when we get there. We get busy; trying to avoid the present we live in. In fact, busyness is one of the seven deadly sins – it is an attribute of sloth, believe it or not. We use busyness to avoid where we really are, what we are really thinking or feeling, or to evade what we know we need to do.

How many times have you been driving, only to arrive at your destination with no real memory of getting there? How many times have we been so involved in our regret that we failed to love the people right in front of us?

He is hidden in the suffering of the world. He is hidden in the loneliness of a widow. He is hidden in the cry of the needy and the violated. He is with us in Exile, and with us in unemployment. He's with us at the bottom of our addiction, and in the working out of the consequences as we seek to rise. He's with us when our hearts are broken and with us when we ache for the heartbreak of others. He was in Haiti and Chile when earthquakes hit. And he is in the street where the drug deal is going down, in every crack house on every corner, in every basement where someone cooks meth. He's down there, in the lowest place, when you don't see any way out, and he's sitting there at the ball diamond while your kid tries to field. He's there on the court, in the clinic, at the accountant's, in the car.

In all these places and times, God is with us. Not just with us, but WITH us. On our side. Willing good for us, looking for openings to get our attention, longing to bathe us in love and hope, to open our eyes to each other, to see him reflected in the eyes of friend and stranger.

He's here. With us. What will we do with him? All he wants is for us to be as with him as he is with us.

Earthly kings order their subjects around. Apparently, that is not the kind of king our God has chosen to be. He is not primarily interested in how obedient we are, but how present we are. He is not as interested in our perfection in following his commands as he is in our growing in love. He does not order us around. He is with us, he shows and invites and wheedles and cajoles; he entices like a lover and forgives beyond all reason. His justice is always mercy and his mercy is always just. And he just doesn't make sense to us half the time. Will we follow him anyway? Will we let him be king anyway? If it leads to a cross, will we be as with him as he is with us?