

Isaiah 65:17-25
April 21, 2019

The Good Ole Days

There is something in each of us that, from time to time, makes us want to go back to the way it used to be. We want to go back home.

Just a couple of weeks ago I was having a long distance phone conversation with one of my best friends and roommate from college. We were talking about how great things used to be. How we would play irresponsible amounts of video games, how we would get so jazzed about sporting events that neighbors would complain about how much noise we made, and then we talked about our current lives. We talked about some good things, but we mostly talked about our current problems. Don't get me wrong both he and I live great lives, however we were in a state of over indulging in nostalgia.

I could hear the change in voice when we switched from one period of time to the other. There was so much enthusiasm when recalling the "good ole days" and apathetic tone of acceptance when speaking of our current situations. He then mentioned how much simpler things used to be, and without him directly telling me I knew that in that moment, if he could, he would go back to relive those days. Then he asked me, do you remember how much fun things used to be.

I do remember how fun it used to be.

But used to be will never be again, and home is never the same.

I would like to go back to those days, I would also like to go back to when someone else prepared my dinner every night, but instead I usually find myself cooking whatever is the most easy to clean up once I am finished.

I would like to go back to my European excursions, where I would find myself entirely alone, in a country with nothing but my backpack and a tenuous grasp of the language as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "where there was nothing to hide and nothing to hide from... a place where nothing had ever been broken, where there were no chips or dents or scars, a place where everything was still whole and holy and pleasing to God."

Then, I realize that there are two kinds of not having: there is the not having of never having and there is the not having of once having had but now having lost (Did you get that?). It is the latter that is harder to live with.

Thomas Wolfe, a great American novelist said “After you leave you can never go home again, because things are never really the same after that.” Maybe he was right.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God is speaking to a people who once had a way of life that is now lost, and they long to have it once again. Life had been good, or so they thought.

Then the Babylonians swept down upon them, killed many of their loved ones and friends, carried off the youngest and the best into a foreign land, occupied their homes and filled themselves with the produce from gardens that they, the people of Judah, had built. The world they had known and loved, their paradise, was destroyed.

Eventually they were allowed to return. Now they have been back home for a couple of generations. Even though they have lived about fifty years after returning to their beloved Jerusalem, things are not the same as they had been before.

They’ve had half a century to restore the Holy City to its former splendor, but they find themselves still living in the despair that comes when life is not, and seemingly never will be, the same as it once was.

They have rebuilt the temple. But Solomon is long dead, and only Solomon could construct the temple the way it used to be, the way it really ought to be. It’s a rather shabby building, really, with rooms out of square and floors that are not level. They’ve done their best, they suppose, to build God a decent house, but admittedly, it’s not much. At least it’s not what it used to be, that’s for sure.

The walls surrounding the city still lie in rubble, and their hearts and spirits feel the same. Their houses have been given back to them, but they still smell of the hated Babylonians who lived in them for years. It just isn’t the same.

I watched an interview of a South African director as he told the inspiration for one of the scenes he had filmed in his new movie “Us and Them.” He remembered the evening of December 20, 1991, his parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary. They had gone to dinner at a fancy restaurant. Then, they came back to their house, the place

where the parents had raised their three boys. They sat down and the director picked up his video camera that he traded his whole life for. He “interviewed” his parents, asking them about what it was like when they first met, how they first met, how they courted, what they did, how it felt to fall in love way back then so many years before.

It was about 1940 and life, as far as they knew it, was bliss. They had ridden horses together. That was a surprise to him. He clearly never thought of his parents as young and vital enough to have ridden horses. They double-dated with other couples and when given the opportunity rode into town to see what was going on there. But all the while there were storms over Europe and little did they know the war was coming to their world as well. Everything began to change. Some friends left and never came back. Others came back but were never really whole again. Life had to be rebuilt.

It seems that life is always having to be rebuilt. Just ask the people of Judah.

So in our story this morning, here comes Isaiah. Right into the heart of their despair, right into their longing for a different, better, long-ago day, Isaiah shares with the inhabitants of Jerusalem a joyous message of hope. The message is straight from God, and carries with it the kind of gladness that only God can create and only God can give.

Do you remember that Barbara Brown Taylor quote of a moment ago... where she speaks of paradise as being “a place where nothing had ever been broken, where there were no chips or dents or scars, a place where everything was still whole and holy and pleasing to God”? Well for the people of Jerusalem place doesn’t exist anymore. But God is now giving his people Israel a vision of a new kind of paradise, a restored paradise, where there are once broken things, and where there are indeed chips and dents and scars. But in this paradise all such things are mended and restored and given wholeness and purpose and meaning once again.

This is not a message of despair; it is a message of hope and redemption! Something new is coming this way! Do you believe that? Do you believe life is always needing to be rebuilt? Because this is as good a place and as good a time as any.

As Christians we do a lot of talking about believing the Bible. Well, if you believe the Bible, then believe that the very God who came to his people Israel hundreds of years ago comes to this place as well. And the message he gave to his despairing

children then is as real and vital and alive today as it was four centuries or so before Jesus walked this earth. We need to take this message and make it very personally.

The people of Judah were living in what once was. They were clinging to what the past held instead of embracing God's plans for the future. When I read this story I cannot help but see a parallel in the lesson in this story and one we find in the new testament.

There is this fascinating interaction in the account after Jesus' life. It comes right after his resurrection, so it is this central event in human history. In fact, this isn't just the biases of the holiday we are celebrating today, but the biases of our entire faith. The first person Jesus sees after this event is Mary Magdalene. The first thing He says to her, this woman who has devoted her entire life to his service, this woman whose life has undoubtedly been shaken into uncertainty, this woman who surely is wishing things were the way they used to be, is "don't hold on to me." Without a doubt, this woman, Mary Magdalene's life has been drastically changed because of this Jesus that she has met.

Maybe a little background will help. We read about a group of women in Luke, who followed Jesus around. They cared for him and even paid his bills, and we know that Mary Magdalene was one of these women and that she had 7 demons in her when she met Jesus and he saved her from them.

Imagine having that kind of relationship with someone, spending that kind of time with someone and then watching that person killed in a humiliating public execution. She was one of the ones who stuck around after He was dead, she was the one who went to his tomb and found it empty, she was the one who went looking for His body, and she was the one who found the body as a man who she thought was a gardener. And she was told "Mary, don't hold on to me." The story is told as if Mary goes to hug Jesus, this divine embodiment of love only to be rejected. He says don't.

Surely Mary assumes he is back, He is alive, and things are going to back to how they always were. Back to the good ole days. But Jesus hasn't returned to make things the way they were. Much like the people of Judah, things are never going to be the same for Mary as they once were.

So after Jesus talks to Mary, he appears to his disciples, the ones who deserted Him. He tells them that it is time to take His message to the ends of the earth. He tells them that it is a whole new world, that everything has changed, and that God is going to give them everything they need.

I don't know why, but we all have this impulse to long for the way things used to be. The older couple who recalls the way things were when they were first starting out and they retail the same stories over and over again because they don't have any new experiences. We all know the former star athlete who tells stories from 20 years ago with this far away look in their eyes. So when you're talking to them you get this impression that they believe their best years are behind them. We naturally gravitate to this desire for things to be like they were when they were new.

But they're not. Things aren't new. We aren't who we used to be and things aren't how they used to be. How much energy do you think people spend wishing things were how they used to be.

If you need to celebrate how good it was then celebrate. If you need to remember how good things were, then remember, and if you need to grieve then grieve. If you need to make peace with things then do it, but move on. There is a certain kind of despair that sets in when we believe that things were better "in the good ole days." When we are stuck back there, when we aren't fully present.

When we are still holding on to the way things were, our arms aren't free to embrace today. We know from what we read in the book of James that we don't even have a guarantee of what things will be like tomorrow. So if we can't go back to the good ole days and we have no control over tomorrow, then all we have is today.

What the scripture reading this morning teaches us is if we live in this fantasy that we will get to it tomorrow, we will wake up and it will not be tomorrow. It will be yesterday and we will have missed it. What Easter is all about, is not freezing things in the way it used to be, but being so fully present in the now that you don't miss a thing in this day. Easter teaches us that God's plan is not static.

When Jesus finishes telling Mary not to hold on to Him, he tells her to go. To tell everyone else what happened. He gives her a part to play, there is a role for her in the now. So as we celebrate today, ask yourself, is Jesus telling you right now; about anything, about anybody, about any time, let God. And receive a new spirit. I hope you can accept the past for what it is. I hope you can celebrate what needs to

be celebrated and grieve what needs to be grieved. Then may you receive from God a new spirit. One for the here, the now, one for today. Amen

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