

“At Home--Even In Exile”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

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Isaiah 51:1-6

*Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the Lord.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.
For the Lord will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her;
thanksgiving and the voice of song.*

*Listen to me, my people,
and give heed to me, my nation;
for a teaching will go out from me,
and my justice for a light to the peoples.
I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,
my salvation has gone out
and my arms will rule the peoples;
the coastlands wait for me,
and for my arm they hope.
Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats;
but my salvation will be for ever,
and my deliverance will never be ended.*

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you,

you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

I'm so grateful and honored to be here today. When David called me earlier this week to say he had to be away to be with his family, I was really grateful that he called, and I was grateful that I could say, "yes". And I'm grateful to be a colleague with Karen, so thank you so much for allowing me to be here with you today. And thank you, too, for your long-standing support of care and counseling and the work that we do. Because of you, a lot of things are made possible. Today's scriptures are really about identity. Who are you? And who are you going to be? And it takes place in the Isaiah passage in the context of exile. The Jews were away from Jerusalem. This was the time of the Babylonian exile, and they were away from the place and the people that grounded them. It was the intelligentsia and the people who had power and influence, they were the ones sent to Babylonia. And they were there for a long time, for 50 years. It was about 900 miles away from Jerusalem. It took them four months to get there. Today, the place that they were is in modern-day Iraq, about 550 miles south of Baghdad, a real place where real people were left to be on their own and cut off from all that had meaning to them. I think of refugees today, those who are exiled due to political war all over the world, and certainly in this same part of the world, refugees also from violence in Central and South America, refugees from natural disasters. I suspect that few of us here in this room have known this kind of exile, ripped from our homes in a time of war and any other soul-wrenching fear and violence that has occurred to make us have to leave the place we call home.

The word refugee, whenever you hear that now, I hope that you will remember that the word refugee is almost always synonymous with horrific human tragedy. So without minimizing or cheapening the profound loss of this particular exile, most of us, however, do know another kind of exile, when we have become lost and separated from our own self, our own soul, our own mind, and spirit. Jesus asks Peter, "who do you say that I am?" This is less a question about Jesus than it is about Peter himself. Peter, who are you? Who are you going to be? What will you stake your life and identity upon? What do you believe about yourself and me? My own identity has been formed by many aspects of my life. One, I'm the youngest of five children. I was raised on a farm in central Michigan. I grew up going to a small country church that was the center of my family's social life. My grandparents lived next door on the farm, and their influence is profound on my life. I have almost zero preschool memories in my own home. They're all at my grandparents' house. And when I would leave after spending a good part of, it seemed like, every day there, my grand mother would say, "Come again when you can't stay so long [laughter]." And when she was saying that to me when I was three and four-- it just went over my head, I didn't really pay any attention.

By the time I was about eight years old, I realized what she was saying. It didn't matter [laughter]. I love to learn and think. I love to solve real-life problems. I'm more intuitive than logical, but I think my intuition is quite logical. So I'm often baffled when others don't see things the way I do. I used to be very competitive about just about everything, used to mostly. I am a Christian, someone who finds profound meaning and purpose in Jesus and the Christian story. And I am devastated by the way too many others present Christianity as a tool for exclusion and hate. I am called to ordained ministry. And sometimes I really do wonder honestly, what the heck God was thinking. And at times I wondered in my life if God had rescinded my call when my path of ministry was not what I had planned. And an aspect of who I am is that I struggle with depression and anxiety off and on since my young adult years. Like millions and millions and millions of Americans, I have a somewhat chronic, usually manageable mental health condition that flares up now and then much like the herniated disc in my back, my allergic skin condition, and the good old family arthritis.

So in many ways, my mental health conditions are much like my other health conditions. They come, and they go. It's not usually too big of a deal. But in a much more profound way, they are very different than my physical ailments. Rarely does my back condition make me question my self-worth. Rarely do my allergies interfere with my sense of self and purpose in life. My depression and anxiety can make me question the most basic fundamental, existential truths. Does God love me? Does my husband, could he really love me? Have I really messed up my young adult kids? Can I solve any problems? Does it really make a difference if I go to work, or church, or the grocery store? Then maybe I begin distancing myself from those who love me the most because I feel so unworthy or feel that anything I do isn't good enough. Then before I know it, my simple garden-variety depression or anxiety has begun eating away at the very foundations of my life. I am no longer at home in my family, in my own mind, in my own skin, or with my own God. I am in exile from meaning and purpose, and I need help to find my way home. I know I'm not alone. You know I'm not alone. You know you are not alone. All people, including you and everyone you love, can expect to find a home within yourself. You can expect that you would be at home in your own skin, in God's own image, regardless of the troubles of this world, regardless of the troubles in your own family. A home in your own mind, body, and spirit. But sometimes we get lost.

I always imagined that my ministry would be based in congregations, but God had other plans. And 15 years ago when I was living in Appleton, Wisconsin, I got what seemed like a random call to help out a pastoral counseling center, which was in a heap of trouble, for one day a week while they figured out their next steps. I went from offering spiritual care and support to the frail and dying to balance sheets and HIPAA regulations to the daily experiences of God's Holy Presence to lines of credit and negotiating with insurance companies. God has a very wicked sense of humor [laughter]. So here I am, sometimes still feeling a little like I'm in exile from my expectations of my ministry, but always trying to head home within myself and in God's love and care. I am grateful to you, First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood, for your long and faithful support of all the people who walk through the doors of Care and Counseling, who are trying to find their way home to themselves, to their marriage, to their families, and often to God or wherever they find their deepest selves and meaning. Together we have a role to play in making this homecoming possible for each person looking for their way. Thanks to your help, last year Care and Counseling was able to provide \$1.2 million in unreimbursed counseling services to the St. Louis Community.

In total, we helped over 1,000 people find their way home to their own hearts and minds and souls. And you are our partners and we are grateful. I know that when people make that first call to Care and Counseling they are scared. They have already tried a lot of other ways to find their way. And they've probably come to believe that they cannot do it, but they've got one last desperate hope, that an expert in their care could help them. When they make that first frightened call to Care and Counseling, we want to always be able to say "yes" to them regardless of their financial situation. And you help us do that. In the Isaiah passage today we hear repeatedly, "Listen to me, hearken your ear, for the Lord will comfort Zion. He will comfort her in all of her waste places and will make her waste places like Eden. Her desert like the Gardens of the Lord. And joy and gladness will be found in her thanksgiving and the voice of song."

God never leaves us. Whatever place we're on our way to, whether we're on our way into the exile, living there, on our way home, God never leaves us. And with your help at Care and Counseling, we help people remember that. Together all of us, you at First Presbyterian Church and Care and Counseling, we are reminding, encouraging, comforting, and healing each other and everyone like us who needs a place of expert care to find their way home. Thank you for being a part of that. Amen.