



Sermon for Diocese of British Columbia

Christ Church Cathedral, February 7, 2021

Bishop Anna Greenwood-Lee

Let there be peace among us and let us not be instruments of our own or others' oppression. In the name of God: Creator, Liberator and Sustainer. Amen.

In today's first reading from the Book of Isaiah, the prophet is speaking to a people who are exiled, who are weary, who are beaten down. The whole Biblical story up until this point has been about Israel becoming a great and mighty nation. The promise, the covenant, that God makes to Abraham and Sarah takes a very long time to come to fruition. But eventually—eventually—the people escape slavery in Egypt, survive the 40 years in the wilderness, cross the Jordan and enter the promised land. It's not quick or easy but eventually a temple is built. The nomadic people, who had an ark that they carried with them all those years, are finally able to well and truly say, we have arrived. We have a nation, we have a king, we have a temple. Our God is a great and mighty God.

How difficult then when it all, quite literally, comes crumbling down around them. The great city of Jerusalem is sieged, sacked and destroyed. The people are carried off into exile in Babylon. The whole trajectory of their history as God's chosen people seems to come crashing down. They sit down by the waters of Babylon and weep.

It is to this downtrodden and discouraged people that today's words from Isaiah 40 are addressed:

40:21 Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

40:22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in;

40:23 who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

The prophet Isaiah puts the people's transitory problems, problems which are not insignificant, into the context of the whole sweeping arc of creation history and the inexhaustible power of God.

Yes, the Babylonians might have the upper hand. But it won't last, says the prophet. God is after all, the one who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

40:24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

Yes, you might feel like God has abandoned you. But that is not, in fact, the case, it just feels that way.

Before long, the Babylonian empire will fall, Trump will be scrambling to find lawyers to defend him at his second impeachment, vaccines really will arrive. None of this, as bad as it is, will last forever.

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.

Yes, there are times, in exile, in an epidemic, when even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted.

Like the ancients, we are experiencing what it is to have the trajectory of history, a trajectory we liked to think we could control and predict, spin out of our or anyone's control.

Isaiah speaks to the ancients, speaks to us. He does not dismiss our suffering, but he calls us to stand before the raw holiness of God in a world that, despite our best efforts, cannot be tamed.

He calls us to trust that despite our weariness and confusion, God is with us and our strength will be renewed. We shall mount up with wings like eagles, we shall run and not be weary, we shall walk and not faint.

There are catastrophes and calamities, pestilences, and plagues, throughout the Biblical narrative—throughout the narratives of our collective and individual lives. But they are always and everywhere outflanked by the goodness and power of God. It's not that they never happen, it's not that the suffering is not real, that death does not occur, but there is always also restoration, redemption, and resurrection.

Notice how Isaiah doesn't solve the problem of the exile. What he does is recontextualize the current struggles. He puts us back in touch with the bigger story.

COVID has laid bare our illusion of technological certitude. COVID has made it clear to us that as 'powerful as we are' there are threats that are beyond our understanding and control. And then even when we achieve great things, like vaccines, there are pesky problems like production and distribution that again, are beyond our control. COVID has made it clear that even great wealth, cannot necessarily assure us of security.

We are, once again, as people of God, at a juncture in history when we need prophetic imagination. We cannot be captured simply by our current reality, by what we see in front of us. Nor can we spend all our time and energy looking back at what once we treasured.

What we need now is the moral imagination of the prophets. What new world, what new ways of being, is God calling us into? What 'new normal' is God calling us to? How can we co-create a new normal that is more life-giving, more just, more compassionate, more loving, more sustainable for all God's people and for the earth, air, and waters of creation?

Walter Brueggemann, in his recent book *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, says that at this juncture in history “what is required of us is not simply fantasy but moral imagination to express historical possibility that is congruent with God’s hope for neighborliness.” The moral imagination, he goes on “is rooted in promise; at the same time though, it is grounded in the realities of dollars, laws, natural resources and social conditions.” It’s time my friends, at one and the same time, to imagine a new reality and to get real.

It is a strange time to be beginning here as your new bishop when public health regulations have prohibited public worship indefinitely.

I long for the time that we can be together in person, that this building and the buildings throughout the diocese will ring with the sounds of the voices not just of the few but the many. To rising up with wings like eagles, to running and not be weary, we shall walk and not faint. To not having to always wear masks and keep distance.

But, as we wait, it is not the time for weeping, it is the time for moral imagination. As our Dean, Ansley says, and as the prophet basically said to the people in exile, “suck it up, buttercup.” The prophet spoke to the exiles and said, *Well, you’re going to be here a while. Might as well plant some gardens; might as well do some good.*

We also should get busy with prophetic vision and action. For doing all the good work I heard about in the first of the regional meetings: of the Loaves and Fishes program at St John Gaulbert, Port McNeill; of housing the homeless at St Ann and St Edmund in Parksville; of reaching to those suffering with addiction at Trinity Anglican + Lutheran Church in Port Alberni; of the work this cathedral and other churches throughout the diocese are doing with sponsoring refugees. For putting our situation and struggles in the great trajectory of history and trusting that God is always and everywhere working to make all things new and God is always and everywhere calling us to be co-creators with God of a new creation.

And so, my friends, it is a strange time to be beginning as your bishop. But do not despair. We shall rise up with wings like eagles, run and not be wary, walk and not faint. Our God is a mighty God and our story as God’s people is not finished yet.

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<https://bc.anglican.ca/news/bishops-sermon-breaks-the-internet>