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70 Years  
1 Samuel 14

This time last year we were just returning to worship indoors after 73 weeks of meeting online and out on the portico. Do you remember what those first weeks of worship were like? It's ok if you don't remember - not many people were here for it! Let me tell you - it was weird and it was unsatisfying. When we first came back for worship, we met without any singing. Nobody took off their masks at all. The only music was instrumental music. Do you remember how we took communion in those days? We blessed the elements in the service, but everyone received the elements by picking them up for themselves off a table set up outside the sanctuary. We've come a long way since then. It took us a couple of months to add vocal singing to the service again, then hymn singing. By the middle of the fall we were walking forward to receive communion at the table. Piece by piece we have been adding elements back to the worship service as it has been safe for us to proceed.

There was so much about worship last year that just didn't feel right. It felt risky to be in community with each other. It felt so odd that we could not sing basic hymns. It felt so dislocating to have fellowship time outdoors. Even now we desire the piece of connection with each other that is missing because we continue to wear masks. How could worship feel so soulless? So maybe it's understandable that we found small things to be very irritating. The schedule of readings appointed for last summer did nothing to alleviate our frustration. Do you remember what we had to read last summer? The Revised Common Lectionary appointed readings from the books of Samuel. So just as we returned to worship we were afflicted with week on week of sermons about King David.

David's call as a shepherd boy. David's slaying of Goliath. David's looting and pillaging of Philistine villages. David's multiple marriages. David's countless infidelities. David's failures as a father. Every week last August we were so let down by the experience of worship and found a character in scripture that did so little to inspire us and lift us up. Why are we reading about this man who does not live out the values of our church? Why does he have to be at the center of the story? We were so frustrated by multiple encounters with David that we adopted a new schedule of readings entirely. It was the David cycle in the Revised Common Lectionary that prompted us to adopt the Women's Lectionary. Surely with readings selected by a Black woman and translated by a feminist and antiracist priest with the credentials of Dr. Wilda Gafney we will find in the Bible new characters to inspire us. So it's maddening, or maybe it's hilarious, that again this year the Women's Lectionary has stuck us with King David for more than two months. We find ourselves still one year hence celebrating how much has changed. We can sing! We have communion! We are together again in worship. But we are still reading about King David.

O Lord, how long? How long must we suffer with this character? Of course there are many other things about our condition we wish might change. Maybe you have thought, like I have, that we could use a break from these readings. Maybe you have wondered, as I have, when will we stop wearing masks to worship? I'm sure you have wondered - when will the fellowship hour after church feel as warm and rich and full as it used to. I have certainly wondered that. How long are we going to have to live this way?

A couple of weeks ago we convened a congregational retreat to wonder together about what God is doing amongst us right now and where we might be headed. Our facilitator, K. Ray Hill, offered an answer to this how long question. He could hear how tired we were of the present circumstances. How long are we reading the stories of David? How long are we living with the pandemic recovery? Well - he asked - how long did the Israelites live in exile? How long was their captivity in Babylon? "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you," God said through Jeremiah. "For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." How long, O Lord? How long? Jeremiah's answer: 70 years.

70 sounds young to us. But for Israelites of the Bible, seventy is more like a double-life sentence. Seventy would be multiple generations. Seventy means that no one living now has any hope of seeing circumstances change in their own lifetimes. But as harsh as the judgment sounds, Jeremiah emphasizes the points of grace. Accepting that their circumstances will not change, Israelites no longer live with false hope. The long time horizon may not be what they had hoped to hear about their exile. Of course they want to return to Jerusalem. But in their pleading and their bargaining and their dealmaking with God, just imagine how many things they have put on hold. Why would they build a house for themselves to live in Babylon if they might be leaving any day now? Sitting on the banks of the river, they have planted no olive trees. They've planted no vineyards. They've celebrated no weddings. They've erected no schoolhouses for their children to learn. They've been living in Babylon like a weekend hotel. They haven't unpacked their bags. But now, knowing it will be 70 years, they hang their clothes and fill up the chest of drawers. They sow their gardens and water their vines. They send their kids to school. They start to *live* in exile.

Let me make one more note about the tradition of the prophets. It is true that God eventually makes it possible for the Israelites to return. When Cyrus becomes King of Persia, the Babylonians are defeated and all the exiles return home. But home is not to them as it was before. Generations have gone by. Jerusalem and the temple have long since been destroyed. When they are restored, they are delivered to the New Jerusalem. It is a new creation.

So little in our experience of the past year has been comfortable. So little of it has been familiar. The last program year was for us as the first years of exile must have been for the Israelites. We have been waiting to return home to all that we knew and all that we loved. But the pandemic has an unpredictable course. These face masks have been sticking around. Our

worship and our program has not just returned to the old Jerusalem. The word of the prophet to us is - What are you waiting for? Settle down and make a life in this place. There are gardens here that need your watering and your nurturing. There are people here who need your love and your attention. There are children here who need to go to Sunday school. I don't know how long the pandemic will be with us. There's no way to know when attendance will surge back to 250 or 300. If it's seventy years, that would be a shorter exile for us than it was for Israel.

We are in the middle of August and we are nearly ready to commence our new program year. Next Sunday, at the Celebration of Ministries, Kramer and Logan and others will be grilling chicken out on the lawn. The women and men of the congregation are bringing a summer salad potluck to celebrate. More than 20 ministries are planning to set up tables in the Fellowship Hall to advertise our ministries in the year ahead. Habitat for Humanity. Volunteering with the IFC. Crop Walk. The Alternative Gift Market. This coming Thursday, for the first time in three years, we are holding an orientation session for our Sunday school teachers. 26 adults have signed up to teach Sunday School beginning on September 11. It will likely be rather slow getting the word out and welcoming children into the church school again, but we have a community of leaders and teachers who are ready to share their love and care. I'm looking forward to the Fall Retreat at Blowing Rock, to Community Groups and other small groups that are being organized this fall. I'm looking forward to celebrating the Story Project that so many folks contributed to during the first year of the pandemic.

So, Come to the Table. This community will be what we make of it. And we will all get out of it more than we put into it. Let's plant our trees. Let's water our vines. Let's teach our children. Let's love one another. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. It is a future filled with hope and promise. Whether whether stuck in Babylon or dancing in the New Jerusalem.

Amen.