

The writer of Second Isaiah, positioned amid Babylonian exile, remembers the Exodus. God made space for God's people to carve out new life and new possibilities. Far from home, physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, the prophet imagines God's newness resulting in a return of God's people to God's land. Exile in Babylonia will give way to welcome and restoration in Israel. Something new is happening – there's gonna be way-making in the wilderness, rivers in the deserts, jackals and ostriches dancing and singing.

Genesis tells us that God fashioned and formed humanity. God is invested in creation. God has a record of tending to God's creation. And the prophet senses God stirring, even in exile. The character, investment, and movement of God recorded and repeated in the past, brings expectant hope for God's movement in the present, and paves the way for God's possibilities to be realized in the future.

We often describe God's intentions and possibilities as the *not yet that will someday be*. Isaiah is sitting right in the middle of the not yet. But the prophet refuses to believe that the space-making God is a thing of the past. "There's newness brewing," Isaiah says, "Can't you sense it?!?"

Exodus, exile, and newness are the themes that intrigue me this morning.

All of us have experienced an exodus in some form or another. It could be a physical movement from danger to safety. In this new space you don't have to keep looking over your shoulder. It could be a liberation of thought. Perhaps some thinker finally expressed something you'd never felt comfortable saying out loud, but always had rattling around inside your head. And it was this very expression that gave you the

freedom to be confident in your own voice. Maybe you've been freed from the burden of a demanding job, or an all-consuming guilt, or a suffocating grief, or a debilitating pain, or a toxic relationship, or a secret that had to be kept, or the outdated expectations of societal norms. And finally freed from that burden, you realized how much life it was depriving you of. What a glow, what a glory, what a relief, what an easy yolk is freedom space!!!

But sooner or later we run out of space again. We become exiled from ourselves, from our systems of support, and from feeling the closeness of God's presence. Danger comes closer than an arm's length. Dissenting views shake our internal confidence. The crushing weight of expectations (Thanks Encanto!) paralyzes our movements. Stressors influence us to prioritize shine over substance. It's easier to say we're okay than to let people know that we're not okay. We feel isolated from all the things that ground us. And it's hard to imagine a return to restoration.

And somewhere in the middle of exodus and exile is newness. Moses took time to pay attention to a burning bush in an arid region – I can't imagine it was the first brush fire he'd ever seen. But he noticed something new, and the newness led to wholeness. The bush wasn't consumed by the flames. And in exploring such newness, he met the Holy One. Isaiah senses the beginning of Spring. There are seeds implanted that will one day build a bridge connecting Israel to the experiences and feelings of days gone by. It's Isaiah's dogged expression of hope, rooted in faithfulness, that eventually inspires a return home, and a return to Temple-centered life.

During this Lenten season, we have been writing on rocks, those roles, feelings and responsibilities that make us feel burdened. I think *exiled*

*from ourselves* is another apt description. We're also writing those roles, feelings, and responsibilities we describe as *being called to*, the ones that give us energy, life, and vitality. You might say they are our exodus rocks. Our burdens are old. Our callings are new.

My dad recently shared with me an old anecdote from a famous Baptist minister named LD Johnson. Johnson, was remembering his friend, Carlyle Marney, who once served as the senior minister at Myers Park Baptist Church here in Charlotte. He remembered that Marney often spoke of Inscription Rock, a great wall in a formation called El Morro in New Mexico, and guarding a pass opening to Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and the Northwest. Over the centuries, soldiers, trappers, and other travelers would inscribe their names in the rock wall. It was their way of marking their presence on that place. All those names, all those coming and goings. I wonder how many were heading in the direction of exodus and how many in the direction of exile?

Johnson asked a different question. He wondered what the names might be on his own personal inscription rock. Marney was one of them. He goes on to share a few poignant pages about the saints (most friendly, some hostile) whose names occupy his rock, and the positions they take. I think the names also represent God's newness in a tangible way.

Wherever we are in life's journey, we all have our own set of names permanently inscribed upon our story. And most likely, our own names are also inscribed on the rocks of others.

Isaiah occupies the passage between exile and exodus. And thousands of years later, his name is somehow etched on my own rock. I hear the first verses of Chapter 40, words of comfort, a holy highway, and God's

people dwelling together, and I cannot ever believe, not for one moment, that my personal exiles will ever be permanent.

It also seems to me that, Jesus, the One we claim to follow, spent a lifetime creating inscription-worthy moments. He knew how to be present in such a way as to reveal God's newness in familiar, ordinary living.

I wonder what might happen if we, the people of Sardis Baptist Church, imagined the collective marks or inscriptions we have the capacity to impress upon the lives of our neighbors, and they us? What are the opportunities for us to introduce God's newness into moments of exile?

One act of love can change the trajectory of an entire day. One good day can breed hope for an even better season. One inspired life can influence an entire community. And an inspired community can transform an entire world.

I don't know what place you personally occupy on the spectrum of exile and exodus in this Lenten season. But your position doesn't define your value or your future. I think we have an opportunity to recognize and share God's newness, and in so doing, create a bridge between the two points. And I don't know about you, but I for one would welcome a well in the wilderness, a river in the desert, and a few noisy, praise-singing ostriches in the parking lot. I'd even settle for a garden hose, a kiddie pool, and some lawn flamingos. Because God's simple newness leads to redemptive seasons.

May it be so. And may it be soon! Amen.