The Cure for What Ails Us

In today's passage from the Hebrew Scriptures we hear the prophet Isaiah addressing the Israelites who live in exile in Babylon. In January of 589 BCE the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. After 30 months of warfare, Jerusalem fell. The Jewish king Zedekiah was forced to watch as the conquering army killed his sons. Then Zedekiah's eyes were put out. Blinded and bound by chains, Zedekiah was marched to Babylon, where he remained a prisoner until his death.

Meanwhile, the Babylonian army laid waste to the city of Jerusalem. The Temple in Jerusalem, built by King Solomon, had stood as the center of Jewish life for over 400 years. In 587 BCE the Babylonians razed Solomon's Temple, burned the city, and hauled off the Jewish elites, leaving only rubble and a few indigent farmers behind. The Jews exiled to Babylon were captives, strangers in a strange land. Their homeland had been destroyed and stripped of its people. Even if they had been freed, there was no Israel left to return to.

We can hear the lament of the Israelites in the words of Psalm 137, “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?”
It is to these people -- dispossessed of their land, their sacred worship space, their communities -- that Isaiah speaks. The captivity in Babylon for the people of Israel lasted 49 years. Generations are born and die in Babylon, longing for release. So what does Isaiah say to this downtrodden, enslaved people? “The Lord will comfort Zion; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.” To an anxious and scared people Isaiah proclaims comfort, joy, and hope.

We Americans haven’t been hauled off in chains, but we too are an anxious and scared people. The world feels like an increasingly unstable place. Vehicles are being used as weapons of terror, killing innocent people in cities like Barcelona and London. Despotic rulers with nuclear weapons threaten the safety of the entire planet. Climate change is causing progressively severe weather – droughts, floods, unprecedented turbulence on airplanes.

And, as if this isn’t bad enough, it seems that we have lost the ability to think, talk, and act rationally as a nation. We know that our nation’s problems are immense and complex. But shouting and sound bites are replacing thoughtful and reasoned public discourse. And meanwhile, our fear of those who we perceive to be unlike us has led to profiling and prejudice against Hispanics, because they might be illegal, and Muslims, because they might be extremists.

We are stressed, we are angry, we are afraid. There is a cure for what ails us. Isaiah knew it. He shared it with the people of Israel held in captivity in Babylon, saying: “Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.” Look to
God, the source of your life, the foundation of your being. Prayer, spending time with God, is the cure for what ails us.

Let me quickly acknowledge that I am not saying that prayer will solve our problems, either corporately or individually. Prayer is not magic – it won’t stop terrorism or reduce carbon emissions or make politicians focus on the common good. But prayer will change the way we feel. And by changing the way we feel, prayer will change the way we think. And by changing the way we think, prayer will change the way we behave. And it’s through changing the way we behave that we can reshape the fabric of this world into Christ’s kingdom. Prayer is transformative. I am certain of that because I have experienced it in my own life and I have seen it in the lives of others. Communion with God can and does transform the world, one heart and soul and mind at a time.

For most of us the challenge of prayer is that it requires time, patience, and practice. Life is busy for all of us. But we do manage to make time for the things that are priorities. So for the majority of us (and certainly for me), it’s essential to set aside specific times for daily prayer. Otherwise, if prayer is something that may or may not get done, it’s too likely not to happen. Just like we carve out time each day for reading the news or exercising, we can carve out time each day to spend with God.

Developing a prayer discipline can also be helped by having a place set aside for prayer. There’s a rocker in our study that is only used for prayer. So when I sit in it, I know that I am seeking Christ’s presence. Just as our church sanctuary serves to call us into
communion with Christ, a specific place in our own homes can serve as a center of prayer.

In addition to establishing a prayer schedule and location, it’s often useful to have a format for entering into our time with Christ. Many find reading Scripture and focusing on a word or phrase that resonates a good way to begin a time of prayer. Others may use their bodies in walking or singing. Prayer isn’t a one-size-fits-all proposition. Some of us, whose minds wander easily, like to speak out loud when we converse with the Lord. Others free their minds more readily, and can maintain a close connection with the divine through holy silence. It may take trial and error to find a method that works. And different forms of prayer may work in different seasons of our lives.

The important thing is to seek God, to spend time with a power immeasurably greater than ourselves. Prayer isn’t a skill to be mastered. Prayer is an activity of daily living. It’s like eating: It’s something that’s engaged in repeatedly, day after day. And like eating, sometimes the experience is routine and forgettable and sometimes it’s rich and delicious.

So now, prayer tips have been imparted. But the question still remains: Why bother? Why does prayer matter? Prayer matters because over time prayer fundamentally changes us. It transforms us. Prayer alters the way we feel, think, and act. (If you don’t believe me, just ask Tony. My husband can tell, based on the way I behave, if I skip saying the Daily Office for a day or two.)
Spending time in Christ’s presence, we experience that we are loved and cared for infinitely more than we could ask or imagine. Christ delights in each one of us. Christ longs for us to pour out whatever is on our hearts – hurt, fear, anger, sorrow, joy, thanksgiving. Just as all loving parents do, Christ offers comfort and compassion to us, his children. As we weep, Christ weeps with us. As we rejoice, Christ laughs with us. Christ’s love never wavers or falters. Christ’s love never dies. It’s through prayer that these intellectual assertions become heartfelt, rock-solid realities for each of us.

The practice of prayer yields 2 more interesting – and I would say important – results. First, the more we pray, the more often we see God working in the world. Prayer attunes us to God’s presence, enabling us to be mindful of beauty, to notice small kindnesses, to see grace abounding. Prayer produces gratitude, growing in us ever more thankful hearts. Second, the more we pray, the more prayer takes us outside ourselves. It frees us to focus on the needs of others, on the needs of the world. By calming and centering us, prayer enables us to hear what God is calling us to do – or not do -- in the lives of individuals or communities.

To a community in tatters, Isaiah delivers God’s exhortation: “Look to the rock from which you were hewn; Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; Lift up your eyes to the heavens…my salvation will be forever and my deliverance will never be ended.” In prayer we look, listen, and lift up, knowing that God will keep his promise to abide with us forever.
And so, God of comfort, we know that spending time with you is the cure for what ails us – for our anxiety, anger, and fear. Reset our priorities so that we carve out time each day to delight in your presence. As we pray give us patience with our wandering thoughts and lackluster feelings. Make us mindful and responsive to the needs of others. And bind us to you, Lord Christ, in an embrace that encompasses all of creation in a love that is fierce and pure. In your holy name we pray. Amen.