

I grew up in a small town in northeast Alabama in a home with my Mom and Dad, my little brother, and my grandmother who ended up living to be 111 years old. And whenever there was a momentous time in my life – you know the start of a new school year or when I got my driver’s license or went off to college, my grandmother would pull me aside and always give me two pieces of advice.

“Make sure you take time to have fun.”

“Don’t forget who you are.”

“Don’t forget who you are.”

I’m not sure she realized it but that last piece of advice would have made my grandmother a pretty good biblical writer because the act of remembering is one of the most important and central acts in our Scripture. Time and again, God’s people are commanded to not forget. Over and over again, God says to the people, “Remember that I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” In times of hardship, exile, and despair, prophets and priests call upon the people to remember the God who has delivered them in the past and to trust that this same God will deliver them again. In times of ease and comfort, prophets called upon the people to not forget the poor and the marginalized. Over and over again, the message is clear. You have left Egypt behind. Don’t go back. Don’t think that you can oppress others either. God has set you free. God has set ALL of you free. Remember who you are.

At its core, the message, “Don’t Forget,” is really about identity. It’s about who we are. When the scribes compiled our Scripture, they decided that one of the stories of creation should come first and in this story, we hear the very first word about ourselves. We are the Image of God. That’s the first word about you and me and every other person who has ever lived. That’s our deepest identity. That’s who we are.

And that truth about ourselves and about each other has profound implications. If we are the Image of God, then that means we are special, sacred, good...as we are. We never ever have to try to be anybody or anything other than who we are. It means that we have the capacity within us to do great good for this world...to be a blessing for the whole world. And if we are the Image of God, it means we have within us the ability to see the world as God sees it – to see goodness in one another, to see goodness and to take joy in the creation that surrounds us.

But sometimes, we need a reminder of that truth. This Scripture...like all Scriptures...did not arise in a vacuum, but rather was written in a particular time and place. Genesis, like most books of the Bible, was not written by a single author. Rather, it is a collection of stories written over several hundreds of years that were later compiled by editors called scribes. And Genesis 1 was written during the time when the Hebrew people were living in exile in Babylon.

The people of Judah and Jerusalem always lived a precarious existence as they were sandwiched between three superpowers – Egypt to the South, Assyria to the North, and Babylon to the East. At any given time, any one of those powers could decide to try to assert its dominance in the region by invading. In the year 586 BC, the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem, broke through its walls, burned the city and the temple to the ground, and forced most of the people to leave their home and go and live as exiles in Babylon.

If you want to see how horrific the situation was, you can read Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon—

there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

² On the willows^[a] there
we hung up our harps.

³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

⁴ How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!^[b]
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!

⁹ Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

That’s horrifying, isn’t it? In this Scripture, the writer calls for the murder of children. But this is not meant to be the word of the Lord in the sense that this indicates God’s will for us. Rather, this is a cry of deep pain. “Happy will they be who do to you what you have done to us.”

The Babylonians have slaughtered our children.

The Babylonians have destroyed our homes

The Babylonians have taken everything from us.

Think about how hurt you would have to be to utter such terrible words. That’s what the people were living through.

The people needed to know how could they hold on to hope when it seems all hope is lost? How can they sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? Where is God in the midst of all this pain?

In many ways, Genesis 1 is the writer's attempt to answer those questions. He's trying to convince people who have no logical reason to hope to hope anyway. It's almost like the writer after hearing the people's cries, after hearing their pain over and over again says:

I know it has been so hard. And I know it seems like God has abandoned us or that God was defeated when the temple was destroyed. But you know what, God is here in Babylon just like God was there in Jerusalem. In fact, God is in the whole universe. Look at the sun and the stars – God made that. And the animals and plants and birds. God made that too. And I know it's so hard to feel that there is any good at all, but take a moment to look around – everything that God made is good.

And so are you.

I know what the Babylonians call you. They have a slur where they call you "mud," not good for anything except to be walked on. But that's not who you are. You are not mud. You may be living in exile but that's not who you are – that's not your deepest identity. You are the Image of God...that's who you are, no matter what the Babylonians say. And don't ever forget it.

Friends, this story that is filled with so much hope did not emerge out of a time of ease and comfort. It emerged out of one of the most difficult times in the people's history – during their exile. And in the midst of that difficulty, the writer reminds the people who they are.

You are the Image of God.

I know we don't live in exile. But we are living in a time that has not been easy. We are living through at least four generational crises at the same time: the worst pandemic in our nation's history, the erosion of our democracy, the emergence of white supremacists and would-be authoritarians, and the existential threat of climate change. And we hear the constant voices of unrealistic expectations all around us that tell us we are not successful enough, not a good enough parent, not smart enough, not thin enough, not lovable enough...not enough. And on top of all of that, you are going through a time of transition and uncertainty as a congregation.

Friends, I believe that during hard times, during times when we may feel that we are not enough, during times of uncertainty maybe the single most important thing any of us can do is to remember who we are.

You are the Image of God. And don't ever forget it.

Announcements

- I want to meet with you

- Volunteers for our Sunday School program
- Offering