



DISCIPLINES OF READINESS

by Walter Brueggemann

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PREFACE

The General Assembly's Ministry Unit on Theology and Worship has two over-arching goals. First, to assist the church to understand and practice the worship of God which is theologically based, historically informed, and sensitive to the needs of the community of faith. Second, to encourage the church to shape its life and mission in the world with theological integrity. In doing so, the Unit is seeking to develop a strong partnership not only with the church's theological institutions and with the church's governing bodies, but also with persons across the church who are greatly concerned about our theological and liturgical life.

We are also at work on a new initiative in discipleship and spirituality. In consultation with many persons church-wide, we are seeking to develop resources which will encourage the renewal of Reformed piety and spirituality. Through the recovery of Christian disciplines we trust that church members, officers, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament, may be led to live more faithful lives.

Walter Brueggemann, Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, is a friend and colleague of many of us. He has enriched us through his books and essays, his addresses at theological institutions and local congregations, and his leadership in conferences. His personal presence and passion have prodded us toward deeper commitment.

Dr. Brueggemann's address, "Disciplines of Readiness," was given at the dedication of the Presbyterian Center in Louisville in October 1988.

The Theology and Worship Unit's staff and elected members believe his address is extremely important for our consideration of many realities in the church and for our conversations with you. We believe that you will find it stimulating and will be eager to discuss its implications for the life of the church.

Therefore, this first in what we plan as a series of Occasional Papers is also an inquiry and an invitation to you. Should we initiate opportunities for further consideration of "Disciplines of Readiness"? We are unsure. On the one hand, it is our fervent desire to stimulate as much theological discussion as we can. On the other hand, we have a great desire to avoid giving a party which no one wishes to attend!

You are the key. After you read the paper, we hope to hear from you and learn whether you think further initiatives on our part might be in order. You can use the attached form, write us a letter, or phone us.

The Theology and Worship Unit offers this address to the entire church for its study and reflection. We gratefully acknowledge Walter Brueggemann's

willingness to make his address available to us. We also recognize the Symposium Planning Committee of the General Assembly Council - Barbara Wheeler, Chair; Kenneth Hall; Fern Holden; and Robb Gwaltney - for their wisdom in planning a theological colloquium to open the new Presbyterian Center and for inviting Walter Brueggemann.

We trust that this address will serve as the occasion for constructive discussion about the situation before us and will be a resource for the renewal of our church. We are at your service and earnestly invite your response to our inquiry.

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DISCIPLINES OF READINESS

Walter Brueggemann

The journey of Presbyterians to this time and place has been a long, odd journey, and now comes a moment's resting place, and a new beginning. In my comments, I will consider first that long journey, and then the new beginning that we mark today.

Israel's Journey

God's people, so the Bible claims, is a people on the way. There are strange connections and parallels between that biblical narrative travel and our Presbyterian narrative of coming to this time and place. It would be possible to read our journey in other ways. I propose for now, however, that we read our travels together in light of that older biblical story we take as normative.

The biblical account of a faith journey is set in three large stages, the three stages that may be a clue to our own life.

1. The beginnings of that story, voiced already in Genesis and Exodus, are of a people deeply at risk, without home, without land, without security, moving in trust to a new place. No doubt they travel for many reasons, to escape oppression, to acquire new land, to enter a fresh prosperity, to have a zone of freedom and power in their life. Mostly, however, as the story is told, this traveling people is summoned and sent by *the sovereign promise of God*. It is the voice of God which initiates the journey. This is a God who notices trouble, who promises to accompany, who anticipates

blessing and well-being, who drools and dreams with Israel over milk and honey. In the presence of that sovereign promise, Israel is deeply certain that bondage, barrenness, oppression, and marginality are not God's will for them -- or for any one.

2. As the biblical story goes, the promise of God is kept. The land is reached and acquired. The second stage of this sweeping narrative concerns Israel in the land. God is faithful. Israel did come to the wondrous land of milk and honey, cities and cisterns, vineyards and olive trees and bronze and iron (Deuteronomy 6:10-11). Israel no longer needed manna; now the Israelites ate the produce of the good and generous land (Joshua 5:11-12).

The land, however, decisively transformed Israel. The land seduced Israel, until the Israelites wanted more and more of land and security and goods. They organized great cities, great armies, and great tax systems; they ate well, exceedingly well at the expense of the others (I Kings 4:22-28). In the end, Israel forgot (see Deut. 8:11-19). They forgot that this good life and this good land were gifts, the outcome of God's promise. Greed overcame gratitude, selfishness displaced compassion. Covenant was reduced to control and exploitation. They forgot, and they imagined that their might and the power of their hand had gotten them this wealth (Deuteronomy 8:17).

In their self-sufficiency Israel encountered *the sovereign demand of God*. It was a demand on the lips of the prophets; it was also a demand that became visible and inescapable in the concrete processes of economics and politics. The demand was that power must be administered in new ways. Power must be held within the fabric of human, social transactions. Israel learned, repeatedly, reluctantly, painfully, that God had not abdicated. In the end, mismanaged power would hurt and destroy, mismanaged land would be lost, mismanaged security would evaporate, and mismanaged promises would fail. The Israelites learned that they could not presume upon God, because among the prosperous and secure, the bite of God's demand is more forceful than the surge of God's promise.

3. Israel had entered the land with buoyancy. Now Israel left the land disconsolate, like mother Rachel, refusing to be comforted (Jeremiah 31:15). The third stage of this awesome tale is one of land loss, displacement, and exile. The Israelites thought exile could not happen to them; now, as the tale winds down, they are as bereft as the old slaves in Egypt and the old, barren mothers in Genesis.

It is difficult to determine how the exile happened. A case can be made that the defeat was simply a result of failed leadership in the presence of the expansionist imperial policies of Babylon. The whole sorry outcome can be explained on the basis of such surface facts. That would be enough of an explanation, except that Israel is endlessly haunted by the hard, shrill, uncompromising words of the prophets, who see beforehand and who

speaking outside the rhetoric and rationality of the dominant culture. They speak "woe" and "therefore" and assert that Israel's life is shaped by a purpose other than its own, that life has a moral coherence that cannot be mocked. Israel never doubted that its exile is a theological happening.

There is a departure and a displacement; there is a city left behind and now life in a hostile, alien environment. The economic-political realities were hard enough to bear. Through these circumstances, Israel came to meet *the sovereign absence of God*. The glory had indeed departed (see I Samuel 5:21-22; Ezekiel 9:3; 10:4-5). The poet pounds the point: "None to comfort, none to comfort, none to comfort" (Lamentations 1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21). No God, no presence, and life failed because God has been mocked. Israel is left hopeless and helpless, without energy or buoyancy, barely going through the motions, ready to abandon its failed identity.

Chronologically Israel's story is a long history, filled with odd gifts. Theologically, however, that long story is encapsulated in a few lean formulae, *sovereign promise, sovereign demand, sovereign absence*, so much given, so quickly lost. This community arrives at a point in its journey where it is as it began. It began bereft, barren, powerless, without hope in the world. Now in exile it has become once again what it was in the beginning: bereft, barren, powerless, without hope in the world. This community in exile is as barren as Sarah, as oppressed as Moses. There may be more to come. There may be a fresh summons to faith issued by God. There may be a new, daring adventure in theological creativity. There may be a new season of life and faith. At this moment, however, there is only waiting and grieving and wondering. This may be an end, but Israel hopes otherwise. Israel hopes, but does not know.

That narrative account, of course, is too sweeping. There are many historical-critical problems with it. Nonetheless, it catches the canonical claim about our people. For our purposes the main point is that this journey is a journey with reference to the power, purpose, and presence of a very particular God. There is for Israel no journey without this God, but this God insists that the journey be one of a very specific kind, a journey of risk, trust, and obedience. That insistence does not mesh easily with our predilection to have the journey on our own terms. And the journey on our own terms ends in disaster.

The American-Presbyterian Journey

Consider what happens if we re-read our own journey to this time and place in light of that biblical narrative. Ours is not the same journey, and the parallels should not be forced. Ours is a different journey, different mainly because it is ours, different because it is modern, more knowing, more an exercise in self-direction, more secular, more on our own terms. Yet we hear in our journey some of the same wondrous, costly accents.

Consider our tale in three stages, albeit too schematically. I tell the story from the perspective of white-Europeans, because that has been the dominant and dominating story-line among us. I am aware that others have other story-lines; the truth is, however, that those others have all had to accommodate themselves and their stories to this white-European narrative. American Indians have had to accommodate by surrendering their land and their power. Black Africans have had to surrender much of their story in subservience, in order to service the white-European story-line. Asians have stayed marginal and have only of late been admitted into the story at all. Therefore in this telling I do not exclude them but simply observe how many people have paid deeply in order to make the main story "work" at all.

1. That story, the white-European story, became as it evolved a hyphenated story, an American-Presbyterian story, a story of moving to a new land for all kinds of mixed reasons, for escape from bad situations, for religious freedom, because of entrepreneurial ambition. The rhetoric which dominated the arrival in the new land was the rhetoric of sovereign promise, of God leading, willing, and guiding. There is a fairly straight line from "a city set on a hill" to "manifest destiny" to being "leader of the free world." It was not doubted then and it is not doubted now that God's providential care has guided this new establishment which is passionately theological and intensely political. In making that new establishment, we were no more troubled about preempting the land than were the Israelites, because the sociopolitical realities were militantly re-read according to a self-serving theological passion.

2. The second stage of this American-Presbyterian story is the incredible account of American prosperity and expansionism and the development of tax systems, defense systems, and welfare systems. An American Empire emerged which exploited markets, established larger spheres of influence, and regarded the "under-developed" world as our rightful domain, a proper sphere for the missionary work of Americanism.

In ancient Israel, Solomon built a legitimating temple to give divine blessing to the new concentration of wealth and power. The American enterprise never arrived at a national temple, but we did arrive at a national rhetoric which is in large measure a Presbyterian rhetoric. It is our theological tradition -- certainly not the tradition of Roman Catholicism or Lutheranism or frontier sectarianism -- which established the rhetoric of legitimacy and let us believe that our expanding economy and our self-serving ideology were a delight to God. As the temple served the king in ancient Israel, so our religion was largely at peace with the exploitative mercantilism which used up people for the sake of economic growth and national security.

That season of convinced intensity had its price, to be sure. That perception of American destiny was an odd mixture of compassion and

impatience, of inclusiveness and insensitivity. In the long run, impatience outran compassion, and insensitivity overrode inclusiveness. Our public institutions are mainly shaped to serve the center and neglect the margin. There has been a growing insensitivity about the excluded who do not share in the economic miracle which God has wrought among us, the miracle "of houses which we did not build and vineyards which we did not plant and cisterns which we did not hew."

This long period of uncriticized theological legitimacy is not without its shrill poets of dissonance. There are voices of marginality which speak of common access and dignity and political rights. There are occasional fits and starts of societal reform, of labor rights and voters' rights and civil rights and human rights. Our society, however, is not excessively hospitable to such voices. The engines of prosperity and security have found ways of discounting such marginal realities and leaving such poets of dissonance unnoticed. And when they are unnoticed, our capacity for not noticing only grows larger. We are caught in the staggering act of giving theological legitimacy to that which contradicts our faith. The demands of God for justice and inclusion and caring are muted. Only now are we learning that those demands are not so easily eliminated as we had imagined.

3. Perhaps we now meet in stage three of this second narrative. There has been no great deportation or displacement of persons to match the experience of ancient Israel. Scholars, however, think that there was not such a great deportation in ancient Israel either. The exile is a dramatic, liturgical event of marginality, alienation, and displacement. The exile may indeed be happening in our white Presbyterian-American world without our even noticing. The work of exile among us need not be a big, dramatic event caused by the communists, but may come unnoticed and unacknowledged. Exile may take the form of brutality, indifference, cynicism, and despair, showing up in drug abuse and child abuse and wife abuse -- endless abuse. All the while, the fabric of human care, human dignity, and human possibility is destroyed in the powerful name of greed, as though the American dream has run its course and nobody knows what to do, or even when to notice.

We religionists are caught in an odd endorsing and legitimating, when in our knowing, we may want to talk about the sovereign absence of God, an absence evident in the secularization of a society which seems to manage very well by itself. And in an unconvincing religious recovery that lacks credibility and substance, we sense ourselves ever more distant from old forms and old practices. The rhetoric sounds less convincing, and we know that the real decisions are increasingly made on other grounds. We scarcely have any poets left whose lips tremble enough to speak our truth for us. We sense the absence, an absence evident in the vacuous rhetoric of our national leaders who still try to spend off that old narrative when it no longer works. We stand, I imagine, at the bitter, lonesome, tail end of a narrative nearly powerless, largely used up.

God's Gift of Newness

I have reviewed these histories because I want to reflect with you on the theme of exile as the locus of this new beginning. In ancient Israel the exile is an overwhelming reference point for faith. Exile is the decisive event in the Old Testament for faith as for history. The notion of exile is initially geographical. It suggests physical dislocation. Exile, however, is not primarily geographical. It is a cultural, liturgical, spiritual condition; it is an awareness that one is in a hostile, alien environment where the predominant temptation is assimilation, that is, to accept and conform to the dominant values which are incongruent with one's faith and destiny. The alternative to assimilation is despair, to yearn for non-being, because one's situation is indeed hopeless and helpless.

Two things about exile in ancient Israel make it useful as an organizing metaphor for our own experience. First, exile is largely paradigm and model, not an extensive historical fact. That is, though not everyone was deported, all Jews, then and subsequently, participated in the sense of being exiles, lived between assimilation and despair, were summoned to fresh faith. Exile became a definitional mark of this community of faith for all the generations to come.

Second, the situation of exile created an enormous theological crisis in Israel and evoked astonishing theological creativity. The crisis emerged because God's absence suggested God's defeat, failure, and infidelity. In response, in exile Judaism was birthed and the canonical literature of the Bible was decisively shaped. Our Old Testament is a theological attempt to stay faithful in exile when the old narrative of faith has exhausted itself in disobedience. Judaism and the tradition which produced our faith emerged in exile because Jewish exiles resisted both assimilation and despair. Using this model I shall argue that it is now our theological vocation, when our story has run out, to resist our own assimilation and despair.

With the use of the metaphor of exile I affirm that we find ourselves in a cultural context in which our central faith claims are increasingly unwelcome and are received, if not with hostility, at least with indifference. We find ourselves alienated from the dominant value system. That is why I have insisted that exile is not primarily a geographical phenomenon, but is a liturgical, cultural, spiritual condition; one may indeed be an exile while being geographically at home.

It may seem to you that this metaphor is inappropriate, because in many places Presbyterians and others who share this faith are in places of power and influence and are not marginal. That is surely correct. Those persons, however, find out even in their power and influence how difficult it is to act through the rhetoric and out of the claims of this theological tradition. Like Daniel and the exiles of ancient Israel, the powerful among us must travel mostly incognito in the culture at large. The rhetoric of our public community has largely shifted, and our speech, long the dominant public rhetoric of our society, is now odd and alien. We are told that

“main-line” churches have lost their central place in public discernment. We may be permitted our rhetoric, but no one expects the public conversation any longer to be cast in our terms.

The more difficult part is the recognition that the faith claims (as distinct from rhetoric) in our theological tradition are increasingly at odds with dominant American values. This is a new situation for us. It has come about not because the faith has grown more radical but because the anti-human side of American self-discernment has grown more powerful and bold. Thus as we make this new beginning it is important to recognize our true situation. We hold to an identity and a vocation, an overriding loyalty, which is largely unwelcome in our society.

The question this leaves for us is how to embrace our exile when we sense God’s absence, how to respond in faithful ways to such an odd circumstance. I have already suggested that three lines of response are possible.

1. It is possible to respond in *assimilation*. There were a number of Jews in Babylon who found Jewishness too demanding, and who capitulated and simply joined dominant Babylonian values and identity. It is possible for baptized Christians to assimilate into imperial America in the same way, to embrace the dominant American hopes and fears that are all around us, to live so that the world does not notice our odd baptism or our odd identity.

2. It is possible to respond in *despair*. We can recognize the power of Babylon and the absence of Yahweh, concluding that this situation of homelessness and displacement is permanent, knowing that though Babylon may be very wrong, God has failed and we are helpless. This is the temptation for those of us who know better than to assimilate, but for whom resistance is a defensive posture without buoyancy or expectation. This response to displacement has most in common with the grim resolve of Stoicism.

3. The third possible response to exile, for persons who refuse assimilation and eschew despair, is to respond with *fresh, imaginative theological work*, recovering the old theological traditions and recasting them in terms appropriate to the new situation of faith in an alien culture. It is thus my urging that this new time of beginning for the Presbyterian Church be a time and place for imaginative theological recasting which takes full account of the church’s new cultural situation. For Presbyterians this taking into account signifies that we are no longer chaplains for national legitimacy. For Americans generally and for white males in particular, it means that the story of Western domination and hegemony has come to an end.

Two things seem peculiarly important in understanding the analogy to exile. First, the new, imaginative activity now required does not scuttle the tradition but stays very close to it; the activity does not seek a new rhetoric composed of new thought forms, but pays attention to what is given in the

normative literature. Second, the new imaginative enterprise stays very, very close to the present reality of suffering and displacement, and it insists that it is precisely among those sufferings that fresh ways of faith will be given.

The response of exile upon which I shall focus by way of suggesting a model is the poetry of Isaiah 40-55. There are other biblical materials which could also be pursued, perhaps especially Job; for now, however, we will consider Isaiah.

I make two preliminary observations about this poetry. First, it is deeply grounded in tradition, enormously imaginative in articulation, and a hard, disciplined, intellectual act of faith. Exilic reconstruction will require hard intellectual work which makes linkages between past and present never before seen, and which risks utterances never before heard. Clearly this daring intellectual activity not only shatters the old certitudes, but also renders obsolete most of the old ideologies and all of our old, precious quarrels.

Secondly, for all the impressiveness of traditioning and imagination, the core reality of this poetry as response to exile is its focal evangelical conviction. There is indeed a gospel of the nearness of God's governance. Everything else flows from the conviction that God is working a newness, has turned loose energy and power and promises amidst the realities of contemporary public life. This daring liturgical, rhetorical claim, voiced in passion and poetry, repositions Israel in exile, reshapes world history, rereads Israel's destiny, and makes a promise which comes as demand. After the sequence of God's *sovereign promise*, God's *sovereign demand*, and God's *sovereign absence* which we have already considered, here is voiced God's *sovereign newness*.

Notice how the Gospel is a precise antidote to the twin temptations of exile. The sovereign newness of Yahweh refuses to despair that reality will never change. The sovereign newness of Yahweh rejects the seduction of Babylonian hegemony and the dominance of Babylonian gods. It is world-shattering and faith-summoning to say as does the poet:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!" (Isaiah 40:9).

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good tidings,
who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isaiah 52:7).

There is offered in these announcements no explanation of how or why such a fresh, subversive, liberating word could be uttered. That word is uttered in the face of exile, the purpose of which is to silence all such speech and to stop all such utterance. What Israel knows in this moment of inversion, however, is that even imperial exile cannot stop sovereign newness from God. Israel's speech, no doubt enacted liturgically, no doubt on the lips of very human priests, no doubt deeply regretted by the imperial bureaucracy, was nonetheless uttered as God's own word and God's gift of newness.

Disciplines of Readiness

I imagine that like Israel, our Presbyterian-American history has run its course in three moves from land-yearning to land-abusing to land-losing, or conversely from sovereign promise to sovereign demand to sovereign absence. Now, in our wonderment, bafflement, and sometimes despair, we wonder if the plot has run out, or if like in our ancient paradigm, a new word can be uttered about God's stunning newness.

Of course we do not know if such a word can be spoken. We cannot coerce such a word from God, for the word is sovereign in freedom as in newness. Nor could we silence such a word if it were uttered. We can, however, at the sorry end of our present narrative, consider our readiness and prepare ourselves for the utterance of such a word. For that reason I speak to you about *disciplines of readiness*, acts to be undertaken with intentionality and discipline, to leave us ready if God should make new moves among us. This new beginning in Louisville and this new building should not be just business as usual, not just a merging of budgets and staff, but should permit a rethinking, a rethinking of what exiles must do that usually is not done by pre-exilic people. This new beginning is a new circumstance, not easily acknowledged by old-line and main-line faith, a circumstance that permits and requires fresh disciplines. From the assertion of the gospel in Isaiah 40-55, I suggest six such disciplines of readiness that are crucial for the receiving of God's newness and for converting exile into homecoming.

1. In the exile, Israel is driven back to its most *dangerous memories*. I suggest that in our exile, having played out our history of domination, we also are now driven back to our most elemental memories.

In Israel prior to exile there were two powerful temptations. On the one hand, Israel gave up remembering completely, scuttled the past and pretended that only the present had any pertinent claim upon the community. Such a deep and systemic forgetting caused the present to be taken too seriously, to be valued too much, to be absolutized. On the other hand, Israel was tempted to substitute closer, more reasonable and respect-

able memories that were not so radical or so embarrassing. Israel could remember the founding of the holy temple and the royal monarchy and the possession of the land, but could not so well recall older memories of pre-rational needs, pre-rational gifts concerning the amazement of liberation, the miracle of manna, and the wonder of transformation.

The poet of the exile calls Israel back behind more convenient establishment memories to the definitional ones that lurk in Israel's past. The most elemental memory embraced by Second Isaiah is the memory of Abraham and Sarah. The poet Second Isaiah explicitly enjoins Israel to return to that memory:

Hearken to me, you who pursue deliverance,
you who seek the Lord;
look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were digged.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for when he was but one I called him,
and I blessed him and made him many. (Isaiah 51:1-2)

If you want to seek Yahweh, says the poet, seek Yahweh in the oldest, most embarrassing circumstance we ever had. Remember Abraham, who is on the one hand the strange, impressive father of faith who leaves at God's command, who goes into a new place, who carries blessing for others. But this same father in faith is on the other hand a pitiful figure of helplessness and fear, lying to save his skin, seeking a surrogate wife to get an heir, so unsure, so bewildered, so barely faithful.

When we have reflected long enough on Abraham, remember Sarah your mother. Sarah is the princess, the one after whom the great empire lusts, the mother of Isaac, the promise carrier. But remember more than that about her. Remember her oldness, her barrenness, her helplessness, her mocking laughter, her inability to receive the promised future. Remember her, because this pitiful old lady now laughs a new laugh, an Easter laugh, for God uses her very barrenness to create a newness. She is the model and anticipation of all barren mothers in our faith, of all barren people who have within them no gift of life and no capacity for faith. And yet God works a newness. God works a newness against all the evidence, in the face of deathly circumstance.

Remember Abraham and Sarah and then name all the names who worked "by faith."

By faith Abraham obeyed . . . by faith he
sojourned in the land of promise . . . by
faith Sarah herself received power to
conceive . . . Therefore from one man,
and him as good as dead, were born

descendants as many as the stars of heaven
. . . These all died in faith, not having
received what was promised but having
seen it and greeted it from afar.

The whole tale is a tale "by faith" (Heb. 11:8-13).

Remember this cluster of dangerous memories, because this story models faith and invites to faith. Such remembering, embracing, recalling, celebrating, standing in solidarity with, is clearly a discipline of readiness. Isaiah 51 invites exiles to remember because they are short on faith, having nearly succumbed to the present imperial reality. In their doubt and despair they could not imagine a change in the present arrangements, and so they submitted and obeyed and resigned themselves. That would have been the end for them, except that the memory did its own powerful work in the community. The memory aroused faith in the power of God to work a newness.

The poet becomes lyrical about the impossible possibility:

Fear not, for you will not be ashamed;
be not confounded, for you will not be put to shame;
for you will forget the shame of your youth,
and the reproach of your widowhood you will
remember no more.
For your Maker is your husband,
the Lord of hosts is his name . . .
For the Lord has called you
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
like a wife of youth when she is cast off,
says your God. (Isaiah 54:4-6)

The shame of barrenness will be overcome. There will be compassion,
overflowing love, and homecoming:

For a brief moment I forsook you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you
says the Lord, your Redeemer. (Isaiah 54:7-8)

Think what would happen to the energy and vitality of the church if we practiced the discipline of remembering. We are little inclined to perceive that our past has been lived "by faith." On the one hand we would rather proceed by "orthodoxy" or by "morality" than by the haunting

requirement "by faith." On the other hand we would rather proceed on the basis of competence or by strategy. "By faith," however, cuts underneath our fearful morality and our ambitious strategies. "By faith" invites us to re-perceive the world as a place where the power of God works when we can neither explain nor initiate.

The miracles remembered fit no ideology, but they create communities of possibility which the empire has been trying to prevent. People without memories settle for the way things now are. People in active touch with their memories become restless and filled with energy, prepared in a variety of ways to live beyond imperial definitions and boundaries. Exiles are the ones so needful that they risk newness outside royal rationality. Needy as they are, they are empowered from on high to act in freedom. The exiles are needful and empowered. This power, however, never visits us in our amnesia.

The old memories are not all contained in the ancient book. The history of the church is strewn with acts taken "by faith." What a service this new building would render if it were a place of sustained remembering, bearing daily and concrete testimony to the way in which God works life in the face of death, to the way in which God creates newness out of nothing, to the way in which hopeless faith discovers the power for life. The memory would not only permit but would insist on a very different present and on a future not domesticated. That is what happened for the listeners of the poem who went back into the memory they had neglected.

2. To be an exile and to resist assimilation and refuse despair, one must not grow too cozy with the host empire. It was a powerful temptation for exiled Jews, whose story had run out, to live themselves into the story of Babylon and to re-identify themselves as citizens of Babylon. Exiles in readiness, however, must practice critical distance from their context, indeed, must practice *dangerous criticism* to keep visible the destructive seduction of the empire that is too often covered over by euphemism. That criticism must assert both that the empire is incongruous with Yahweh's governance and that the empire cannot keep its promise of life.

The dangerous criticism voiced in the poetry of Second Isaiah concerns two dimensions of the empire which are related but distinct. First, there is a *religious critique* of the empire. Every concentration of power needs its gods to bless it, to give credibility and legitimacy, to evoke loyalty and confidence. Every empire has such legitimating gods, however hidden they may be. But, says the poet, these gods are in fact a joke, because they have no power and they cannot save. The poet mocks them and invites his comrades to dismiss them:

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops,
their idols are on beasts and cattle;
these things you carry are loaded

as burdens on weary beasts.
They stoop, they bow down together,
they cannot save the burden,
but themselves go into captivity. (Isaiah 46:1-2)

The poet describes the ludicrous process by which gods have been "manufactured." They are created, not creators; they are objects, not subjects. They are not self-starters, cannot take initiative, cannot work newness, cannot give life.

Those who lavish gold from the purse,
and weigh out silver in the scales,
hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god;
then they fall down and worship!
They lift it upon their shoulders, they carry it,
they set it in its place, and it stands there;
it cannot move from its place.
If one cries to it, it does not answer
or save him from his trouble. (Isaiah 46:6-7)

These gods do not warrant allegiance and loyalty because they are mute and passive; and if the gods of the empire are so helpless, so in the end is the empire helpless. Though couched in clever poetry, this is a devastating critique which declares the empire illegitimate. Its claims to legitimacy are a hollow joke which the exiles boldly dismiss.

That critique of lack of legitimacy is made even more stark and daring by the offer of an ultimate legitimacy for an alternative life. It is Yahweh, not the imperial gods, who has power for life and who keeps promises. The polemic against the other gods is resolved into doxology:

Hearken to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from your birth,
carried from the womb;
even to your old age I am He,
and to gray hairs I will carry you,
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save. (Isaiah 46:3, 4)

This God can act, has acted, and is now active. This one who acts can be trusted; the ones who cannot act deserve no loyalty or attention.

The religious critique is reenforced by a second critique of a very different kind. Chapter 47 continues to use theological rhetoric, but it in fact voices a *political critique* against entrenched power. The poem begins by anticipating the collapse and shame of the empire soon to be dismantled and humiliated. The empire had received all its greatness from Yahweh but

had promptly violated Yahweh's mandate by showing no mercy (47:6). The poet makes the remarkable assertion that the condition for the durability of the empire is mercy to the exiles. The empire would not endure because of might and power or even because of wisdom, but only because of policies of mercy. The problem with the empire is that it did not know that it had to answer to the merciful purpose of Yahweh. It imagined that it was autonomous and could do what it wanted to do. The empire repeatedly asserts its cynical notion of autonomy:

You said, "I shall be mistress forever . . .
I am, and there is no one besides me;
I shall not sit as a widow
or know the loss of children . . .
No one sees me . . .
I am, and there is no one besides me." (Isaiah 47:7, 8, 10)

The exiles, however, know that cynical, autonomous power, no matter how massive and impressive it is, finally cannot have its way in the world. Inevitably, says the poet, a harsh end must come to such pretension:

Behold, they are like stubble,
the fire consumes them;
they cannot deliver themselves
from the power of the flame. (Isaiah 47:14)

The two critiques of religious legitimacy (in chapter 46) and of political autonomy (in chapter 47) together assert that the empire is precarious and tenuous and cannot sustain itself. I do not imagine that this heavy critique is in fact addressed directly to the Babylonians. Certainly the Babylonians would never have noticed or heeded such words. Rather the poetry is for the benefit of Israel's "overhearing." The overhearing is for the sake of the exiles themselves. They are being warned of complicity with the empire and invited to an alternative. The exiles, even at the failed end of their old narrative, know and trust enough to avoid such phony legitimacy and such seductive autonomy. The exiles are to have no part in such legitimacy and autonomy, and are to embrace an alternative that is neither phony nor seductive.

To be sure, the exiles had to work and shop daily in the empire. This literature, however, aims underneath such necessary involvements. It addresses Israel's imagination. It wants Israel's sensitivity weaned from imperial realities. It asserts that Israel is shaped and summoned for a more excellent way. But that more excellent way is not persuasive unless there is criticism which cuts through the imperial ideology and exposes the true character of the empire. In that time when Babylon seemed so awesome and in our time when dominant cultural values seem so irresistible, criticism of a daring kind is an act of readiness for homecoming. The prospect of

being "born again" in exile is to be born to a new identity outside the empire. The exilic community must work at a critique that is not sectarian, not excessively partisan or elitist, but which names things by their right names. The truth is that the host empire is bent on earth and its gods cannot give life.

3. Assimilated exiles who accept the claims of the empire come to regard the empire as a final home where they shall always be. The power, threats, and gifts of the empire seem massive and absolute, ordained to perpetuity. When the claims and power of the empire are taken so seriously and are respected so deeply, the exilic community is incapable of thinking beyond the empire or of imagining a coming time when things will be greatly different. The empire has the strident capacity to domesticate exilic imagination and to co-opt Israel's capacity for hope. When hope is preempted by the empire, exiles cease to think about going home, abandon their precious notion of home, and settle for the empire as home. Such people cease to be exiles and redefine themselves as "at home" in the empire. The loss of home is then forfeiture of an intentional exilic status and of a hope beyond empire.

In order to resist such debilitating hopelessness, the exiles are invited to practice *dangerous promises*. The promises are centered around the sovereign faithfulness and the faithful sovereignty of Yahweh who will do what Yahweh says. This Yahwistic conviction is rooted in the memories of past promises which were kept. Reference to Yahweh and reference to the past, however, are made in the service of a different future, a future fresh and new and joyous, not derived from what is, not extrapolated from the present, not the next "stage" in some development, but gift, intrusive surprise. The poet would have the exiles practice and maintain defiant speech which the empire will judge to be either silly or irrational. It is speech which asserts, posits, and envisions something not yet in hand, a gift to be given outside the empire, a gift the empire could never give and which the empire could never deny.

The question posed for the exiles by the poet is this: what gifts are yet to be given which lie outside the control and competence of the empire? The empire characteristically insists that it is the single, all-sufficient source of gifts. The poet counters the empire by sounding another voice of promise:

Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;
break forth into singing and cry aloud,
you who have not been in travail!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than the children of her that is married,
says the Lord.
Enlarge the place of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations
be stretched out;

hold not back, lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.
For you will spread abroad to the right
and to the left,
and your descendants will possess the nations
and will people the desolate cities. (Isaiah 54:1-3)

The roles in this poem are easily assigned by the listening exiles. The "married one" who has children is Hagar, and the barren one is mother Sarah. The poem builds on an oxymoron, "barren mother." The poem is an assertion that eventually Sarah will bear more children than Hagar, though we know not how. Such a poem is remote from the exiles, of course, for in the sixth century they hardly cared about ancient Hagar and Sarah. Because of this remoteness, the poem must be reheard, listened to more carefully. A more intense listening yields a second scenario. The married one is Babylon. She is the one who is socially superior, seemingly approved in heaven and on earth, successful, secure, and self-satisfied. The barren one, mother Sarah, turns out to be the community of exiles, barren of heirs, bereft of historical possibility, abandoned, denied a future, without present joy or future prospects. The poet presents a terrible contrast between a shamed failure and a buoyant success, one humiliated, the other haughty. There seems to be no doubt about the locus of well being for now and for all time to come.

The poem, however, assaults such a sure, obvious reading of reality. The poet counters the conventional assessments and speaks of an awesome inversion of historical reality. The barren one, Sarah, the old lady, the hopeless exiles, is invited to sing, sing for joy, dance in amazement. The reason is that the children of this hopeless community will be more than the offspring of smug, hated Babylon. The future, says the poem, is more buoyant for the exiles than for the empire. The hopeless ones will swarm with children, be overwhelmed with newness, staggered by possibilities. The new life which is promised to this community of exiles will spread everywhere, beyond all limits and boundaries, rich with blessing.

The poem is candid. It acknowledges hopelessness, abandonment, and despair. It concedes that the present moment is a moment of God's angry abuse and painful silence. That, however, is only for a moment; then the *hesed* of God will be activated and life restored. God's fidelity endures and outflanks even the empire (Isaiah 54:7-8). Life can begin again. The ones who were last will now be the first.

The important point is that the poem is outrageous and unreasonable. It invites exiles to sing against reality, to dance toward a future not even discernible, to praise the faithful God who will not be held captive by imperial reality. The singing and dancing and praising is an act of hope, a betting on God's capacity for an inexplicable future. It is the sort of hoping serious, baptized people must always do, always against the data, with trust in God's promise.

What is supposed to happen in this act of hope? Surely such a poem will not cause Babylon to retreat. Surely we know of no magic which will stagger the empire. The hoping of the poet has, however, another intent. Its purpose is to destabilize the present. Its intent is to break open the present system of domination for the sake of a new human possibility. Its purpose is to counter despair and to remind the exiles that they are children of a different trust, a trust in God's sovereign future not governed by the empire.

Think on our situation, where the hoping is only the domesticated promises which the free market system offers to insiders. But that is not really promise, rather simply an advantage. The relentlessness of imperial rationality wears down the buoyancy of seduced insiders and intimidated outsiders. So who is left to hope? Only the baptized, only those who regularly enter a zone of alternative possibility that is not rooted in present technology, but in gifts yet to be given, in promises yet to become visible, in gifts and promises guaranteed by God. The promises refuse to succumb to the rulers of this age. The promises stake out a way to live apart from the rulers of this age.

4. The people with dangerous memories and dangerous hopes may enter the present moment, not as resigned people, but with a strange, odd stance toward the way things are organized. Such bearers of danger must regularly work and eat and sleep. But they also gather regularly and restlessly in the liturgy, in a safe space where the "mother tongue" of trust is spoken. The liturgy is always the same. The kids always wonder why we do it one more time. Nonetheless one senses in this gathering a readiness and an expectation. There is a roll of drums, a blast of trumpets, waiting for the choir. And then they sing. They sing and people stand, stretching their necks to see. It is all choreographed, and yet there is an excitement about the music. There is a smattering of applause. Then the bold ones dance. The meeting is moved into awe and amazement and gratitude.

What has happened is that a *dangerous new song is being sung*. Exiles take music seriously and they sing dangerously. They sing what cannot be printed or announced officially:

Sing to the Lord a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,
the coastlands and their inhabitants.
Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the top of the mountains.
Let them give glory to the Lord,
and declare his praise in the coastlands.
(Isaiah 42:10-12)

Everyone sings. It is a new song, commissioned just for this meeting, never heard until now, and it grabs Israel in exile. It grabs all of creation. Everybody joins the song: the sea, the coastland, the desert, the cities, the villages. They all sing a new reality.

This is what they sing about: Yahweh is on the move! Yahweh has long been silent and is now active. Yahweh has been absent and is now powerfully present:

The Lord goes forth like a mighty man,
like a man of war he stirs up his fury;
he cries out, he shouts aloud,
he shows himself mighty against his foes. (Isaiah 42:13)

Yahweh comes like a dangerous warrior and everyone yields before him. Yahweh comes as well like a mother in labor:

For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in travail,
I will gasp and pant. (Isaiah 42:14)

Yahweh comes and everything is changed:

I will lay waste mountains and hills,
and dry up all their herbage;
I will turn the rivers into islands,
and dry up the pools.
And I will lead the blind
in a way that they know not,
in paths that they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do,
and I will not forsake them. (Isaiah 42:15-16)

The song is a song which names the name of Yahweh. Precious name! The naming of the name in the new song is a polemic. For every time the name is sung, some other pretender is dismissed. The affirmation of Yahweh always contains a polemic against someone else. Thus in its song, Israel might say:

Yahweh, and not Baal,
Yahweh and not Dagon,
Yahweh and not Marduk,

Yahweh and not Zeus,
Yahweh and not Hobbes, not Adam Smith,
not George Gilder;
Yahweh and not any pseudo-power.

Israel can sing like this because it knows that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come can have their way with God's people in their singing and in their homecoming. The song dares to say in the most vexed situations, "only Yahweh -- none of the above."

The community of exiles sings new songs. If we listen to the singing, however, we discover that the new song is constituted by the same old words. The old words are recovered and reclaimed. Every song of exiles is a new singing of homecoming and possibility. The barren ones sing about the promised future. It may be that they will sing such innocuous sounding phrases as "Glory to God in the highest," or "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." Even those familiar phrases are polemical, however, and stake out new territory for the God now about to be aroused to new caring. The songs of the church in exiled America have grown timid and feeble. In the face of such timidity and feebleness, we have these models of songs of transformation and healing, forgiveness and emancipation and resurrection; we have songs of Easter that assert the newness of Jesus in the face of death, songs of Christmas that assert the new messiah in the midst of a cosmic chaos, songs which devastate and energize, songs which dispatch to nullity and which evoke to possibility.

So what song did they sing in that old exile?

--Yahweh has triumphed gloriously,
the horse and the rider he has thrown into the sea;
--Yahweh has just become king;
--Christ is risen, risen indeed;
--Christ is born in a village, among the peasants.

You will notice that I am simply quoting the old formulations. Yet we call that "new, new song." How odd, that the new, new song is made up of the old, old story. The new doxology consists in the old songs we trusted before we succumbed, the lines we knew before we were embarrassed, the ones we prized before we capitulated to patriotic slogans and television jingles, the ones we trusted before we gave in to the dominant culture and its killing ideology.

The exiles are called to sing songs in a strange land; they discover in their singing that the land is not so strange. Even this alien land is claimed for the rule of Yahweh. We imagine in our modernity that singing is only cathartic or escapist, but that only shows our domestication. We need to remember how new songs have issued in new reality, remembering, for

instance,

- that the civil rights movement was born on the singing lips of the suffering;
- that in South Africa, two Christmases ago, carols were banned because they evoked revolutionary energy and danger.

There is a lot to be said for the threat of such daring music; there is even more to be said for unruly, unruled imagination that dares to sing what is prohibited and outrageous and subversive, for such singing enthrones and dethrones, and the restless exiles sing until homecoming. In our exile, we will do well to study our failed singing and notice our fatigue and then notice how in our old songs, the invitations and possibilities are all there for those with freed lips and unadministered tongues. We may indeed yearn for a thousand tongues unfettered, tongues as the first member of our body to depart for home, all in singing.

5. As the poet moves toward the completion of Isaiah 40-55, a radical dimension is voiced that at first seems incidental. Exiles eat *dangerous bread*:

Ho, every one who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for
that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Hearken diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in fatness.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live . . . (Isaiah 55:1-3)

This image and invitation are very different from all the others I have mentioned, less obviously a historical-theological category, more concrete and related to daily experience. It is in this image that the poet articulates the deep materiality of our faith, a materiality that begins in the valuing of creation and culminates in the incarnation, a materiality which knows all along that our bodies count decisively. What happens to our bodies? On the one hand they take in food. We must eat. On the other hand, the food that is eaten is transformed into loyalty, energy, work, and care. The one who provides the food we eat governs the loyalties we embrace. The one who supplies our sustenance has claim upon the loyalty of the community.

So we must pay attention to what we eat and to who feeds us.

This poem looks back to the startling wonder of alternative bread in the manna story of Exodus 16. The Israelites had lived long at the flesh pots of Egypt, and in their eating from the imperial hand had become slaves. Then they departed. As soon as they departed, hunger hit. Some wished to resubmit to the empire, embracing the bread of affliction and humiliation as the best way to avoid starvation. At the last moment, however, another bread is given. It is oddly given from heaven, from a source well beyond the plan of imperial bakers and brokers. The testimony of the narrative is that there is alternative bread and that we do not need to resubmit to Pharaoh in order to have food. This memory is on the horizon of the exilic poet of Isaiah 55.

The same poem also looks forward, all the way to the stunning narrative of Daniel 1. Again the plot concerns the empire which always seems to control the bread. This time it is Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, the same ones who manage the exile in the time of Second Isaiah. The imperial government, so the Daniel narrative states, seeks to recruit young men for government service. When the recruits arrive at the training table, Daniel and his profoundly vigilant colleagues refuse the rich imperial food. They opt for a diet of vegetables which is a diet of faithfulness. When basic training is completed, Daniel and his friends are found to be "ten times better" than the ones who ate the rich seductive food of Babylon. That the narrative has such an outcome should not surprise us. The poet in Isaiah 55 already knows that much about food. He knows that freedom, well-being, and power to act depend on an alternative bread that is provided neither by Egypt nor by Babylon. The old narrative and the later narrative sandwich our poem. All three texts assert that in order to have freedom to act, one must practice discrimination with one's food.

The poem issues a profound invitation: come, buy, eat without money, without price. This is free food, food not given in order to coerce or seduce or ingratiate. There is a free lunch. The food is free. The poem of invitation is at the same time a strong polemic. Why do you labor for that which does not satisfy? Why do you endlessly and passionately pursue such food which cannot keep its promise, so that after the meal is over you remain unfed, un nourished, uncared for? That bread is empty and lacks nourishing power. It is junk food. The poem is invitation, polemic, and in the end, it is promise. There will be delight in God's loyalty which has been offered since the time of David, for now the same steadfast, sure loyalty is offered the exiles.

The poet with manna memories and Daniel hopes invites exilic Israel to cease taking life and food and nourishment and hope from the empire. The invitation is to desist from its hope, to disengage from its feast, to quit measuring reality by its claims. Of course the exiles will not disengage from this bread of the empire unless there is another bread available. What is offered is dangerous alternative bread; it is the very bread of the gospel, given outside the food supply of the empire.

What if Presbyterians began to notice that certain kinds of bread enslave and are the bread of affliction? The most elemental faith decision we make concerns who feeds the body, and if the truth be told we are in various ways into "eating disorders" of a theological kind. Louisville becomes a place from which to reflect on bread and alternative bread. We may begin our reflections with Eucharist, the relentless enactment of our conviction that only broken bread feeds, only poured out wine contains the power of new life. But we daily resist the brokenness and refuse the poured-out-ness. We have become victims of junk food, the junk of social ideology, the attractiveness of consumerism, the killing seductions of security and despair; we are domesticated, silenced in our satiation. We scarcely notice that all these ersatz bakers have made promises which they cannot keep.

What freedom there would be for us exiles if we left off the dominant hopes of our society, if we refused the dominant fears all around us, if we ate bread which hopes only evangelical possibility and which fears only the truth of God's faithfulness, utterly free of every other hope and every other fear! The problem, of course, is that we mostly eat imperial bread and do not notice its costs, that we wind up belonging and being owned, denied freedom for obedience. There will not be genuine freedom until, having new bread, we refuse the offer of Pharaoh's tasty bread. The new bread is, however, happening among us. We are seeing that we have neglected gospel bread and opted for imperial bread; we are left with the deep eating disorder of isolation, despair, and anxiety. The eucharist is dangerous bread, as that dramatic act mediates to us a fresh way in the world now under the rule of God.

How odd that Jesus, after the feeding, meets the disciples at the sea. They are in a storm. Jesus speaks and the storm stops. The disciples are utterly astonished. At the end of the narrative, Mark adds tersely, perhaps enigmatically,

they did not understand about the loaves,
but their hearts were hardened. (Mark 6:52)

Hardness of heart consists, perhaps, in the notion that we already know and control all possible forms of bread. For control of bread eliminates the element of gift. The misreading of bread leads to much other misreading of the gospel and of life. We need not, however, so misread. There is another option.

6. These several dangers are enacted by the poet in the liturgy. Worship is the first place for danger. Worship is the time and place where the community gathers together its odd vocation and its dangerous destiny. Worship is the place where the community imaginatively anticipates its peculiar life in the world and enacts its displacement and homelessness, its deep yearning, and finally its joyous arrival home. Such an imaginative

enactment of not being home and having a vision of home is what happens in these dangers of precious roots, daring criticism, new songs, fresh promises, and alternative bread.

Eventually, however, this company of exiles must move outside the liturgy into the reality of public life, must face the reality of Babylon and the risk of not being Babylonian. Thus the poet must speak about *dangerous departure* from the empire:

Depart, depart, go out thence,
touch no unclean thing;
go out from the midst of her, purify yourselves,
you who bear the vessels of the Lord.
For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight,
for the Lord will go before you,
and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.
(Isaiah 52:11-12)

The Jews in exile must act out this alternative, which is to be at home in defiance of the empire. The poet recalls the old departure of the Exodus and issues a double imperative to do the same thing again: "depart, depart." In its second departure from the power of empire, Israel's homecoming must be uncontaminated by "unclean things," by any of the attractions or pay-offs of the empire. Israel is to act out its otherness and its distinctiveness, eschewing every cultural power and temptation.

This departure is for Israel like the one in the Exodus, but it is also very different. That first time, our mothers and fathers hurried, leaving in a panic. This time there need be no hurry, no haste, no fear or panic. Go out with determination, but go out like first class passengers. Why the tranquility about this departure that seems so dangerous? Because Yahweh will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard. The border patrol and the imperial police cannot lay a hand on you, because you are surrounded by this awesome bodyguard. Israel surrounded by Yahweh is utterly safe, protected, free from rush, on its way rejoicing. The last words of this extended poem are these:

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
(Isaiah 55:12)

The departure is a great world event, and all the creatures take note of it. All the creatures rejoice in the homecoming because it is a sign that God is now powerfully at work to right the entire creation.

The departure envisioned by the poet is geographical, from the Euphrates to the Jordan. Long before the departure could be geographical, however, it had to be liturgical and imaginative, the community acting out in anticipation the daring break with all things imperial, thinking and envisioning itself free from all such support, stability, and reassurance. Out of the liturgical departure came ethical, political, and economic departure, Israel's choice to live life according to its call. Thus the second exodus is only incidentally geographical. The geographical reality followed readily from the more visceral disengagement and the embrace of an alternative vocation.

If I am correct that the mainline Presbyterian tale has run out in exile, then I suggest that our sustained reflection on a dangerous departure is crucial work for us. We reflect upon a departure from the ideology of the empire, from militarism which produces fear, from consumerism which ends in satiated despair, from greed which breeds brutality, from ambition which ends in isolation, from competence which begets anxiety. We ponder a departure which enacts our baptismal freedom and identity. That departure, like its model in Second Isaiah, likely has very little to do with geography. It is first and foremost a liturgical, imaginative departure which asserts our common baptism and then asserts a social-economic-political departure which liberates and sends us on our way rejoicing.

A Fresh Beginning

My suggestion is that our dominant tale has run out in exhaustion and displacement. In such a situation there is no easy or quick response. There is only the slow, hard work of poetic alternative. This poetic alternative begins in recognizing our true situation; it moves by subversive, evangelical lips uttering hopes and possibilities; it may end in new people, new community, new creation. The departure from the empire was the great point of risk for sixth century Jews, but out of that departure came the birth of Judaism, the enactment of God's faithful capacity for newness.

My thought is that this fresh beginning in Louisville is no simple bureaucratic maneuver, though it can readily be reduced to that. This new beginning is only partly a looking back to end the war that has wrenched us so painfully apart. It is more an act of hope, a hunch that the narrative which has run out may be re-entered in a fresh way. It is an act of hope that there might be birthed a new faith, a new mission, and a new worship which can again feed and nurture the body politic back to health.

Such newness is God's gift which God may give or withhold. We can only stand in readiness for what God may do. But that standing in readiness requires the use of intentional disciplines which in every case are marked by danger:

--*dangerous memories* reaching all the way back to our
barren mother Sarah;
--*dangerous criticism* which mocks the deadly empire;
--*dangerous promises* which imagine a shift of power
in the world;
--*dangerous songs* which sing of unexpected newness
of life;
--*dangerous bread* free of all imperial ovens; all leading
to
--*dangerous departures* of heart and body and mind,
leavings undertaken in trust and obedience.

The gospel, in our moment of exhaustion, is a caring promise and a wondrous assertion that we belong and are intensely cared for:

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you,
O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters I will be with you;
and through the rivers,
they shall not overwhelm you . . .” (Isaiah 43:1, 2)

The promise is given with marvelous evangelical poetic authority. We are now positioned to accept that promise and its traveling identity. Our reception of the promise is not a mission impossible. It is, however, an embrace of dangerous disciplines, whereby we wait for the wind, which may indeed come by here.

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