

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Have You Been Paying Attention?”
Ordinary 5—February 4, 2018
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Lessons: Isaiah 40: 21-31; Mark 1:29-39

When I served as a seminary intern in a church in Westport, CT, I followed by a couple of years a man who was incredibly well loved. All throughout that intern year people would tell me about how wonderful Martin was. They said it in a nice way and I never took offence and I began to feel as if I knew him even though we’ve never actually met in person. It seems that I keep running into him. He has been a leader in church circles and he has written a good many books as well. A number of years ago, Martin and two friends wrote a book called: *Good News in Exile: Three Pastors Offer a Hopeful Vision for the Church*.¹

Martin describes his own childhood: “I was born in 1954, at the epicenter of the baby boom. It was an era in which every respectable, upwardly mobile, and concerned citizen was expected to be in church on Sunday morning and the children were expected to be in Sunday school. The formal photograph of my confirmation class, taken on the front steps of the church, included roughly half my classmates at the school across the street. Many of the rest of my classmates attended the Catholic and Episcopal churches in town....”² Do you remember those days?

Of course, the church of today is different, and the authors of this book suggest that the new era the church is experiencing today can be described as a time of exile. “For North American Protestants it is a time of loss, of relinquishment, of disestablishment. In short, we no longer live under the illusion that we are in charge.”³ This is a reality we can understand. Those of you who have been a part of this church for a lot of years will remember the days when we had twice as many members as we do now—more than twice in fact and we had a youth group. We had more going on and so did all the other churches. In those days, parents did not have to struggle with the demands of soccer or little league on Sunday morning, and most employees did not have to miss church because their workplace was open. We were the only game in town and that is no longer our reality.

For some people this is bad news. They look back with longing at the good old days that are past and they get depressed. Some wonder if there is any real future for the church and for people of faith; will we still be here in another fifty years? In our current circumstance, we can look back and ask how we can become what we used to be. We can try to make the church great again, or we could ask instead, what are we called to be today?

I have some friends here who have told me that in a class they are taking the teacher says that people who spend all their time looking back at the past tend to be depressed. People who spend their time focusing only on the future often get anxious. This teacher suggests that the present is where we are meant to live.

The world is not what it was fifty years ago; we don’t know exactly what the church will be going forward. We don’t know all the ways the church is called to change. This is a kind of exile,

¹ Martin B. Copenhaver, Anthony B. Robinson, William H. Willimon, *Good News in Exile: Three Pastors Offer a Hopeful Vision for the Church*, © 1999 William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

² *Ibid.*, p. 7

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2

which means this is actually a time of great opportunity. We don't need to be what we used to be; we can be who we are right now. And in the world right now remember this: God actually has "considerable experience in working powerfully among those who are in exile."⁴ Those who know the story of exile also know that at the far end of exile is always the Promised Land.

Our passage from Isaiah was written for such a time and such a people. Isaiah was called to proclaim a word of hope in the midst of a time full of questions. Life was so difficult for some people that they had forgotten God. They didn't even look back anymore because the present was so awful. So Isaiah talks about how great God is and how little we are. All the powers that seem to threaten us—they are as nothing compared to God. Here's how Gene Peterson translates our passage today: Have you not been paying attention? Have you not been listening? Haven't you heard these stories all your life? Don't you understand the foundation of all things? God sits high above the round ball of earth. The people look like mere ants. God stretches out the skies like a canvas--yes like a tent canvas to live under. God ignores what all the princes say and do. The rulers of the earth count for nothing. Princes and rulers, those people in power--those oppressors, those who took you from home, those who did you wrong, those who did not respond to your need, they don't amount to much. Like seeds barely rooted, just sprouted, they shrivel when God blows on them. So, who is like me? Who holds a candle to me? Says the Holy. Look at the night skies: Who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name--so magnificent! So powerful! --and never overlooks a single one? Why would you ever complain or whine saying '[God] has lost track of me. [God] doesn't care what happens to me?' Don't you know anything? Haven't you been listening? God doesn't come and go. God *lasts*. [God's] creator of all you can see or imagine. [God] doesn't get tired out, doesn't pause to catch his breath. And [God] knows everything, inside and out. God energizes those who get tired, gives fresh strength to dropouts. For even young people tire and drop out, young folk in their prime stumble and fall. But those who wait upon God get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles. They run and don't get tired, they walk and don't lag behind."⁵

In the midst of exile, too many people forget that God has "considerable experience in working powerfully among those who are in exile." In times like ours we are called to pay attention. We are called to remember what we've said here many times before that we will trust an unknown future to a known God. Take a good look around. There is a new joy in this church, a new energy, where do you think that comes from? We have some new members; we have our three Bible study groups meeting. Back at Christmas time we raised more than the entire Deacon's budget to support our cooking for Emmanuel Dining Room. We've continued our support for Urban Promise and Sunday Breakfast Mission and we raised a good bit of money to support our sisters and brothers who were suffering after the hurricane season last year and that's not the whole of it. People here are caring for each other and of course we suddenly have three new bell choirs. God is at work even right now.

Have you been paying attention? William Carl writes about a woman in Tennessee who has. "Her name is Margaret Stevenson. She is in her nineties. She used to hike ten or fifteen miles every day. She is a legend in the Smokies. It was always a joy to hike with Margaret, because she knew every turn and every trail and every plant and tree by its Latin and colloquial name. My first trip up Mt. LeConte was her seventy-fifth, and my second was her hundred twenty-fifth. My third was her

⁴ Ibid., p. 2

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, © 2002 Navpress, p. 1284

five-hundredth trip. When she finally stopped hiking, she had climbed Mt. LeConte more than 700 times. Her husband rarely went, even before he got cancer. Once when we were hiking together, we came upon what Margaret described as the most unrelenting two-mile ridge in the whole area—two miles up with no break, and this after a hard six miles on a very hot day. I like to hike in spurts, so I said, “See you later, Margaret,” and took off in my usual fashion and got way ahead of her. At some point, I found myself lying flat on my back in half delirium. A blurred Margaret passed at her steady pace. I can still hear the click-click of her cane and with no pity at all in her voice, “One more mile to go, Bill. I’ll see you at the top!” And so she did, arriving well ahead of me without stopping once.

“Not long after that, her husband finally died of cancer, but because of her daily walk with God their last few hours were spent not in sadness or remorse, but in joy and celebration. For when Margaret says, “I’ll see you at the top!” she means it, for her face is fixed on Christ, her step is steady and sure, and she knows the meaning of Isaiah’s words: “Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”⁶

The world is not what it used to be. It is what it is. And God is still in charge and if we open our eyes and our ears and listen and pay attention, we will discover, even in times of difficulty, that God has “considerable experience in working powerfully among those who are in exile.” Pay attention.

Let us pray: God of life, there are days when the burdens we carry are heavy on our shoulders and weigh us down, when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies gray and threatening, when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, turn our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music; give us the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to your honor and glory. Amen⁷

⁶ William J. Carl III in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1, Advent through Transfiguration: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume)*. Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown, editors. Westminster John Knox Press. © 2008

⁷ Prayer attributed to Augustine of Hippo (354-430), in *The Book of Common Worship*, © 1993. Westminster/John Knox Press.