

Los Angeles, St. John's ProCathedral  
Advent 2: December 7, 2008

Lessons and Carols: Isaiah 40:1-11; Genesis 3:1-24; Baruch 4:36-5:9; Isaiah 35:1-6; Romans  
13:11-14; Mark 1:1-8 [Haggai 2:6-9 substituted for Baruch]

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Sixty-seven years ago today this nation entered the Second World War. A series of exiles began that day, and some of them continue into the present.

At its most basic level, war represents the separation of God's children. We who were created to live in peace with each other are wounded and sundered by war's reality. Soldiers can only engage the enemy by treating them as less than human, less worthy of respect and dignity. That is a fundamental challenge to what we profess at baptism, to treat each other as a human reflection of the image of God.

That second global war divided Americans from the German people, and from the Japanese people. My husband's aunt married a German in the 1920s, and she spent the war years, and many thereafter, in Germany, exiled from her family here. There are some here this morning who remember, or whose parents experienced, the exile that came to Japanese-Americans living on this coast. Sent to internment camps supposedly for matters of military security, they were prisoners in their own country. This nation apologized in 1988, and some of those wounds have been healed, but far from all of them.

The irony is that this nation has both been the cause of exile and a new home for exiled persons from elsewhere.

The Diocese of Los Angeles has been involved in ministry to exiles and refugees for a very long time. I have read about the work that started at St. Anselm's, resettling exiles from Viet Nam in the early 1980s, again people who left their homeland because of war. The great exodus from Mexico and other nations south of us is often an experience of exile for those who live in fear of discovery and with an aching desire to go home or establish a new home in this place.

There are other experiences of continuing exile, particularly in the Middle East. The peace settlements that ended the Second World War eventually resulted in the establishment of the state of Israel, but also the displacement of many Palestinian families who had lived there for generations. The exile of Jews from Europe and the exile of Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, from their ancestral lands, continues to fuel enmity and instability and wars both declared and undeclared that have spread through much of the Middle East. Samir Habiby, who started the work with Vietnamese refugees at St. Anselm's, now works on behalf of Palestinians, also often exiles in their own land, much like Japanese-Americans here in the 1940s.

[Baruch and] Isaiah tell of the yearning for homecoming of earlier exiles. The leaders of the kingdom of Judah were hauled off to a foreign land in 586 BCE in order to make it easier for Babylon to rule. Political leaders are still sent into exile to prevent them from forming an opposition. [Baruch reminds those who are grieving that God will bring them back.] Almost every word we heard this morning is about the deep yearning for exiles to return home.

The challenge for us is to recognize that we're all exiles in foreign territory, and strangers in a strange land. We were created for joy, to be citizens of the peaceable kingdom, a world of life-giving plenty. The Genesis story we heard this morning is about our exile from that original dream of God's. Our journey in this life is meant to be homeward toward a renewed earth and a new creation. Augustine said a long time ago that we are all basically exiles until we find our way home again to God, to that reality for which we were created.

So how do we go home again? How do we leave exile?

Home-going begins with recognizing that we are in exile, that this world isn't yet the home God intends for us all. Going home may involve a physical removal to another place, or it may mean changing the place where we are so that it looks more like home. Our solidarity with others is another important part of finding home, for none of us goes home until we all do.

Bishop Pierre Whalon, who looks after the Episcopal congregations in Europe, has been telling me about his work to get Iraqi refugees resettled in France. A family he had met several years earlier in Iraq asked for his help in August of 2007. He succeeded in getting them admitted to France. Then he prodded the French president, who agreed to take 500 refugees. After Nicolas Sarkozy met one of them, the brother of the murdered Archbishop of Mosul, he increased the number to 1000. Now Pierre tells me that France has agreed to admit 10,000. These are the leaders a peaceful Iraq will eventually need to reestablish itself. They are a direct parallel to the leaders of Judah taken into exile in Babylon 2500 years ago. The great irony is that it is now the residents of the country around Babylon who are being forced to move away. Many of these modern exiles are Christians, themselves a tiny minority in Iraq. Like their Hebrew ancestors, in years to come they will be called on to come home and help rebuild their nation. And like many of the Japanese-Americans here, they will return and help to rebuild a more peaceful society.

That peaceful society can only build on foundations laid long before, on a memory or a dream of what peace is like. I saw some physical evidence for that yesterday morning in Riverside. I went for a run up Mt. Rubidoux and found the Peace Bridge, with a brass plaque on it. The plaque is dedicated to a Japanese equestrian in the 1932 Olympics, who is remembered for stopping his horse before the final jump. The rider would have won his event if he'd continued, but the horse would have been mortally injured. The inscription says this: *Lt. Col. Shunzo Kido turned aside from the prize to save his horse. He heard the low voice of mercy, not the loud acclaim of glory.*<sup>i</sup> A local commentary says that the memorial was never defaced during the war. Like that low voice of mercy, peace resonates deep in our bones. Peace is embedded in our collective memory, but it takes the vigilance and labor of many to rebuild it.

What does building a new home look like here? How do we return from exile? Where do we listen for that low voice of mercy? That's what Paul means when he challenges the Romans to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. It's what John Baptist is asking for when he asks people to repent – literally, to turn around – and go toward home.

We begin to leave exile when we hear that voice calling and turn our faces homeward, when we join the pilgrim throng, and start to build a road that lifts up the lowly and puts the high ones down in a lower place – both people and mountains. That's our work, that's our vocation, and that is our journey.

If you want to help the Iraqi exiles, ERD will gladly accept your donations. IRIS will help other refugees and exiled people in this part of California. But money won't do all the work. Your congregations are filled with lonely and fearful migrants who need to know there is someone to welcome them home right here – and there are even more outside your doors. Take a walk and see the exiles right here. Look in the mirror and see another. Peace begins with us, listening for that low voice of mercy.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.mt-rubidoux.org/NewsletterPDF/Drysdale\\_letter.pdf](http://www.mt-rubidoux.org/NewsletterPDF/Drysdale_letter.pdf)