



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

12th Sunday after Pentecost: August 23, 2020

Sermon Title: "We are..."

Sermon Text: Isaiah 51:1

Imagine you've been awakened from a sound sleep by armed paramilitary forces who've entered your home and abducted you. You are terrified, disoriented, and confused, unable to understand a word they say. After several days of journeying you find yourself in a foreign land, far from home. Nothing is familiar. The culture, language, food is all different from what you have known. What will you do to survive?

If you can imagine an experience like that, then you can identify with the Babylonian Captivity, which is the subject of much of the book of Isaiah. About 600 years prior to Christ's birth, the Babylonians invaded and defeated the Israelites, destroyed Jerusalem, and exiled thousands and thousands of the Israelite leaders far, far away, into the heart of Babylon, modern-day Iraq, into a culture utterly unfamiliar to them. Everything those Israelites had ever known and treasured seemed as if it would be forever lost. Their language, culture, songs, religion – their entire way of life... gone. What would they do to survive?

God's prophet offered them crucial counsel. As we heard in today's lesson from Isaiah: "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug." In other words, in the midst of exile, the only way to live in hope of a brighter future is to remember who you are, where you came from, and to whom you belong.

The same would be true if you were in exile. To preserve your customs and culture for your eventual day of liberation, you would resist the urge to assimilate to your captors' ways. You would continue to speak English and practice your faith. You would kindle memories of home by teaching your songs and history to your children. With defiance toward your captors and hope in God's promise of future deliverance, you would fight to maintain your identity, your values, and your faith, just like the Israelites did as they waited for God's deliverance from exile in Babylon.

Now, you may say yourself, "Pastor, it's sad what happened to the Israelites thousands of years ago, but what's that have to do with us? Things aren't perfect in our country these days but surely we're not at risk of being carried away in the middle of the night and exiled to a foreign nation, thousands of miles from home. So why is this relevant to us?"

Well friends, at this very moment, we *are* in fact living in a kind of exile. Nearly everything in our lives has been disrupted by the pandemic. Think of all the changes we've experienced over just the last five months. We can't worship like we used to worship. We can't meet like we used to meet. We can't shop like we used to shop. We can't visit hospitals and

nursing homes like we used to do. Weddings, funerals, family reunions, vacations – *everything* has been upended, modified, rescheduled, reinvented, and sanitized for your protection. Make no mistake: we are a people in exile. And as such, we are at risk of losing or at least diminishing all of the things that have shaped who we are. How will we survive?

The answer for us is likewise found in the prophet's words: "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug." Yes, my friends, in the midst of *our* exile, the only way to live in hope of a brighter future is to *remember who we are, where we came from, and to whom we belong.*

First, we are **Christians**. This may seem self-evident, but in this exile of ours it's easy to forget that our first, foremost, and foundational marker of identity is that of Christians. Too often nowadays we divide ourselves into camps organized by political parties, political philosophies, or our hobbies and favorite sports teams. Of course those things are important, but we cannot allow them to overshadow our *primary* identity. We are *Christians* - followers of Jesus Christ who, as we profess in the creeds, was born fully human but also fully God. He taught us that everything we think and do must be filtered through two guiding principles: we are to love God above all things, and secondly, love our neighbor as ourselves. As Christians we cling to Christ and not any of the false gods this world offers us. For in his death he defeated sin *for us*, and by his resurrection, he made eternal life possible, *for us*. Never forget, dear friends, that *we are Christians.*

But that's not all. We are also **Lutheran** Christians. Our understanding of Jesus and salvation are shaped by the teachings Martin Luther passed down to us. We Lutherans emphasize what Christ does *for us*, not on what little *we* can do *for Christ*, because we stake our eternity on the love and grace of Jesus, not mere human works. We value beautiful, traditional worship, and are a people known for our contributions to sacred music. We remember our baptism daily, rejoice at receiving Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion, and embrace God's Word in scripture. We pray humbly, sing boldly, and put all *our* trust in *Jesus*, our *Mighty Fortress*. Never forget, dear friends, that *we are Lutherans.*

But that's not all. We are **ELCA Lutherans**, meaning Lutherans within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We are still a young denomination, formed in 1988 out of a desire to unify Lutherans across our nation from a diverse range of backgrounds and traditions. The ELCA isn't perfect. We've had our share of growing pains, but we're a denomination rooted in the Lutheran way, yet committed to the hard work of forming ecumenical bonds in the hope of one day reunifying Christ's Church. We believe *all* of Christ's people are welcome at the communion table because it is *Christ's* table, not *ours*. We believe women were the first evangelists of Christ's Church, and so we gratefully rejoice in the great gifts and talents of female rostered leaders like our own Pastor Hetrick. And we believe that God loves and welcomes people of *all* orientations, including our LGBTQ siblings. Sadly, not all who call themselves Lutheran share these commitments. So never forget, dear friends, that *we are ELCA Lutherans.*

Finally, in the midst of our pandemic exile, we must remember that we are **Grace Lutherans**. For well over a century our congregation has been an outpost of God's mercy and

grace here in State College, first from our building on Atherton and, since 1965, here at the corner of Beaver and Garner. The source of our congregation's strength is less the stones on the *outside* and more the relationships on the *inside*. We are a people head-over-heels in love with Jesus, and a people who love to be together. As our mission statement provides, we faithfully *gather* to be *fed* by Jesus. When we're together we love to eat and laugh. But it's when we're *sent* that our work of being the church shines brightest. As a congregation we fund missionaries around the world, we work with ministry partners in our Synod, county, and community, and our school has blessed generations of area children. As individuals, our members serve God's people in just about every imaginable way. We're generous with our money and time, and know that the best way to love God is to love God's people. We're not perfect, but Grace's people have always set a high bar for what it means to be the Church. So never forget, dear friends, that *we are Grace Lutherans*.

So what's next? Well, the Babylonian exile didn't last forever, and neither will ours. The day will come when we will be back together, laughing, eating, worshipping and serving. And when that day comes, we'll be even stronger than before, because throughout this ordeal we never will have forgotten who we are, where we came from, and to whom we belong. We are *Christians, Lutheran Christians, ELCA Lutherans, Grace Lutherans*. May God bless us all. Amen.