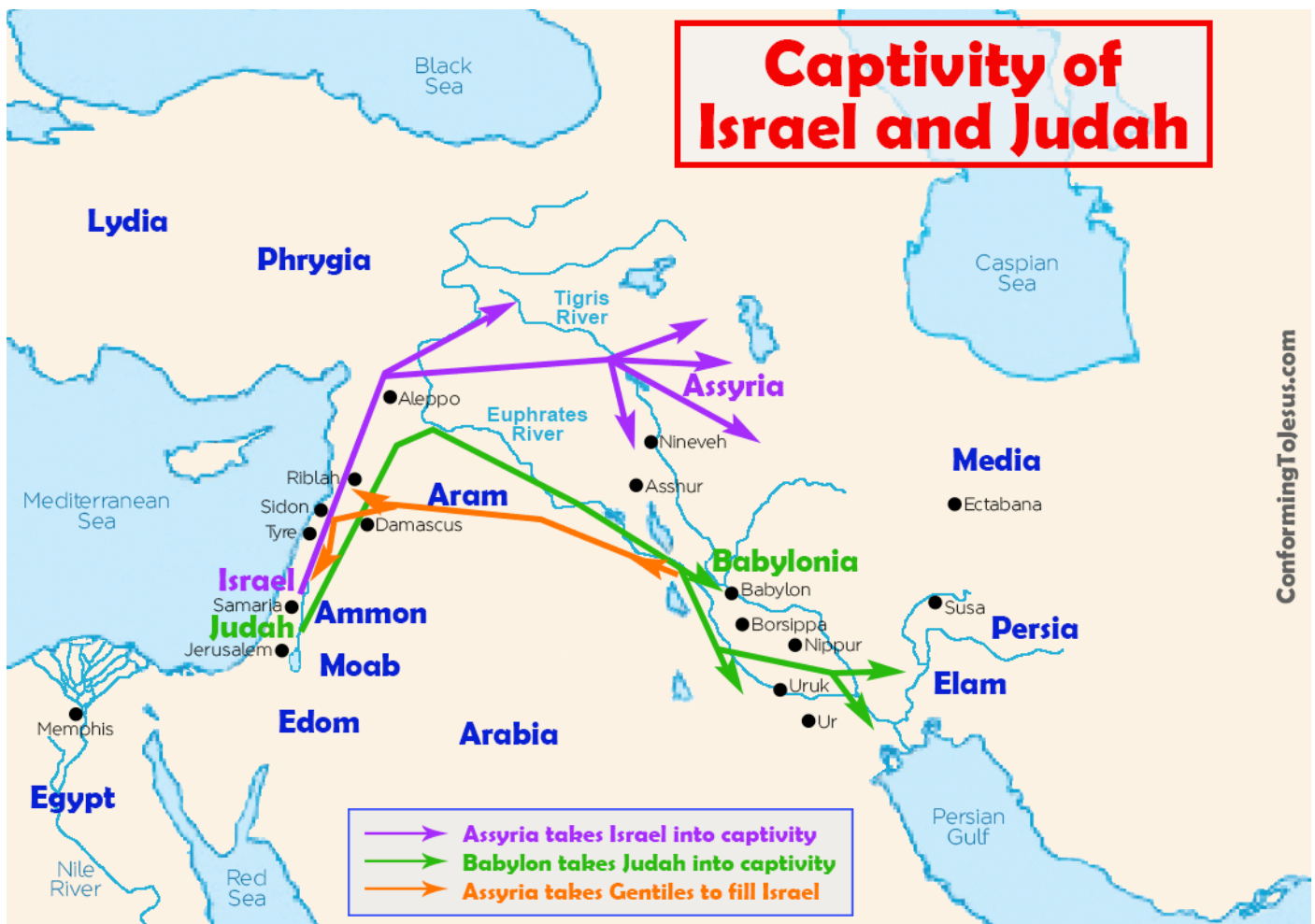


SERMON FOR SUNDAY 7TH JUNE 2020

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a; Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

When the people of Judah (southern Israel) were taken into captivity in Babylon in 587 BC they were utterly desolate. They were far from their homes and land. Furthermore, the Temple in Jerusalem, where they believed that God dwelled, had been destroyed. When they wrote about this time, they described themselves as being so grief stricken that they were laying down and weeping by the waters of Babylon.

By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? Psalm 137:1-4



For not only had the people of Judah been beaten, and enslaved, they were also humiliated and beset by doubts about their faith and their God. For the Babylonians taunted them by telling them that in the Babylonian victory their pagan god Marduk had triumphed over their God, Yahweh. Think about that. Imagine how that would feel!

And think about what would have happened as their time in captivity went on and on. How could they, a little depleted remnant, keep faith in a foreign land? How could they ensure that their children would follow in their traditional culture and beliefs when they were constantly being exposed to the pagan faith and customs of their masters and mistresses? More and more of their children were growing up speaking only Aramaic, the language of their captors, and more and more of them were adopting the ideas and beliefs of their captors, including the notion that the moon and stars were celestial deities that should be worshipped.

There were the prophets, like Ezekiel, prophesying and seeking to bring the people back onto the right track. But something more was needed to remind the faithful few that their homeland had not been lost forever, that the Temple would one day be rebuilt, and most importantly, that Yahweh, that God, who had called Abraham out of Haran to Canaan and made wonderful promises to him and his wife Sarah of a land, and of numerous descendants could be trusted. And that this same God, Yahweh, who brought the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, was still with them and still in control.

Furthermore, they needed to remember that this God, Yahweh, was the great Creator who had made this wonderful earth and all that was within it, and furthermore, had created humankind in God's image to be in relationship with God.

So it was that the Priestly writers began to compose the book of Genesis, putting down into written form the beliefs and understandings of the Jewish people. Much of this had been previously passed down in oral form, but now in captivity there was the fear that much of this could be lost, especially as the older generation died.

So it was that the creation account was composed as words of faith and hope to be sung by the God's people in captivity. As they sung that creation account, they were proclaiming that it was Yahweh, our God, who created the earth and all that is in it, and it is God who is to be praised not Marduk. In fact, God alone is to be praised. They were a poetic bulwark against all the cultural and religious impositions of the Babylonians.

Instead of worshipping the stars, like their captors along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers did, they are to worship the One who created them. They are to worship God who is Creator.

Ever since that time, the understanding of God who is Creator (and who has created humankind in God's image for relationship with God) has been a core understanding of faith for the Hebrew (Jewish) people and then for Christians.

But the early Christians struggled to find a way of talking about God that gave full weight to their belief that Jesus was not only God's Son, but also truly God. This was a belief that they came to only after much contention as there were those who believed that Jesus was fully human, but not divine. This group struggled with believing the miracles and healings and the resurrection, but thought Jesus was a great teacher. Clearly, as the death and resurrection of Jesus is the central belief of the Christian faith, this was not satisfactory.

And there were others who believed that Jesus was divine, but not fully human. These people thought that Jesus was some sort of a spirit, clothed in a man's body but incapable of being hurt or failing or any other human frailty. This group, generally, had no issues with the miracles and healings, but they didn't believe that Jesus was born a human baby into a fully human frail body. They consequently also did not believe that he was tempted, like we are, that he experienced human emotion, and that he suffered and died. This also was not satisfactory, as Jesus' oneness with humanity and full experience of human life, including suffering and death, was also an important aspect of the Christian faith.

The early Christians needed to find a way to hold together their understanding that Jesus was truly human, but also God's Son who had overcome sin and death.

And furthermore, they had to find a way to understand where the Holy Spirit fitted in. They had long discussions (meeting in a number of councils of the early church fathers) as to whether Jesus was inferior or equal to God the Creator (who we often called the Father), and whether the Holy Spirit was inferior or equal to God the Creator (Father) and how the Holy Spirit was related to Jesus.

Some of the Jews and people of other faiths, accused the Christians of being polytheists, that is worshippers of multiple gods, but the Christians were adamant that they worshipped only one God.

How can that be, argued their critics, if you say that Jesus is divine, for Jesus was quite clearly separate from God in heaven when he was here on earth? And where does the Holy Spirit fit in?

The answer that the fathers of the early church came up with is the Trinity. The idea that God is one, but God is also three- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a dynamic, interdependent, and equal relationship. Three equal parts that make up a divine whole that is incomplete without all of the parts. The Trinity is a human construct that tries to make sense of the divine mystery that is God. The reality is that God is more than we can understand or fully know, but the Trinity is none the less a useful way of trying to find a way of approaching and understanding God, at least in part.

But we should acknowledge our limits in being able to speak about or understand God. After all, when Augustine, one of the greatest minds of the Western World, put his head to thinking about the Trinity it took him fifteen books to write what he thought was important to understand about the Trinity. These took him over a decade to write.

Augustine's book 'On the Trinity' continues to be helpful in thinking through that which is difficult to think about, and talking about that which is difficult to describe, namely the nature of God who comes to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Early on in his massive treatise, Augustine had seven statements about God: The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. The Son is not the Father. The Father is not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the Son. And then, after these six statements, Augustine adds one more. There is only one God.

I'm sure Augustine is quite right, but I'm also quite sure that for many the Trinity as an idea, concept and belief is difficult, abstract and hard to relate to. Most people, I would believe, focus much of their faith and language on Jesus who seems much easier to relate to than an abstract concept like the Trinity.

Perhaps we need to admit to the impossibility of humans fully understanding God. I like the statement from Robert Capon who said that, in our trying to tie God down, 'We are like a bunch of oysters trying to describe a ballerina'

William Willamon¹ has a go when he says, "Our God is complex, dynamic, relational, ever-reaching, ever seeking, ever creating, ever loving, and ever speaking" That description at least captures some of the dynamism of God, but perhaps does not capture enough of the mystery and otherness of God.

Perhaps we are better off concentrating on our relationship with God, but as part of that we need to heed the fullness of God who is all in all, and not try to limit God or try to put God in a box, but rather acknowledge that God is far greater than we will ever fully know, but that God is also the one who is as near as our very breath, and who loves us and wants to be in relationship with us.

After all, when all is said and done, at the end of the day the thing that matters most is that God loves us and God saves us, and God sends God's Holy Spirit to be with us to guide us, strengthen us and encourage us.

As Robert M. Watson puts it, “The (Trinitarian) formula does not save us. Love does. The power at the heart of the universe is love. God is love. Christ is the most complete form of love who ever walked the earth, and the Holy Spirit is Christ’s love among us after Easter. But the essence of the Trinity is love- relational, community love. People should know us by our love, not our doctrine.”

God’s love has been present from the beginning. That is what lies at the heart of the creation story, that is also what lies at the heart of the gospel, and is still true today.

Love lies at the heart of the Trinity in the interdependent and selfless relationships between God the Father (Creator), God the Son Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit. That love reaches out to us and we are called to share it, and reach back to God with love.

May this be our calling this week and always, Amen.

P.S. Maybe also at this time of difficulty and isolation, it might also be good to ponder that out of the awfulness and loss of the Babylonian captivity of Judah came some very important developments that have, ever since, been very important to Jews (and Christians). The first being the putting into written form the beliefs and understandings about the Jewish history with God in the form of the Torah – the first five books of the Bible. It is thought that some sections may have previously existed in written form, but previously the history and understandings were held in oral form, passed down from generation to generation by rote learning (making it very vulnerable to loss or distortion). This writing also necessitated the codification of the written Hebrew alphabet and language.

Good can come out of difficult times through the work of God’s Holy Spirit, and the openness of God’s people to being guided into new pathways and possibilities.

¹ *William Willamon: Preaching Resources, Trinity Sunday, 2005*