

“Your Citizenship Papers”
EpiphanyC-01 – January 10, 2010

Preaching Text: *“By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept...” (Psalm 137:1)*

“By the rivers of Babylon,” laments the Psalmist, “there we sat down and there we wept – when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps.”

Here one feels the haunting, sickening power of loss, broken hope, despair.

The words are in response to the cruel taunts of Israel’s Babylonian captors, who earlier had destroyed their homes, their city, their whole way of life, carting them by force to Babylon, and who now, making sport of their grief, demand they sing the happy, spirit-filled songs of their lost homeland. Such a thing, they know, is impossible.

For, as the Psalmist rightly asks, “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

Yet in a letter sent by Jeremiah to these same refugees in Babylon, God says this: “Build houses and live in them...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you in exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

So what are we to make of these two accounts of this same experience of dislocation and loss? For in one, the Psalmist bitterly laments Israel’s lost homeland. “If I forget you, O Jerusalem,” he says, “let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.”

Then again, God, in Jeremiah’s letter, tells these same Israelites to go ahead and build homes, make families, settle and seek the good of this alien place to which they are exiled, though it is far from their true home, Jerusalem.

How, then, to reconcile these two?

Among the great classics of Christian literature stands *The City of God*, written in the early 5th century by one of Western Christianity’s most influential figures, Augustine. So influential was he, in fact, that both the Roman Catholic Church *and* the Protestant Reformers fought each other

over whose teachings best reflected his. At the time, only the Apostle Paul carried as much weight.

In *The City of God*, Augustine addresses a perennial Christian problem. His premise is that there exists two distinct “cities,” or spheres. There is “The City of God,” or heaven, and there is “The City of Man,” the earthly realm. Though Christians, like everyone else, must make their home here on earth, their true home, Augustine says, is not here at all, but in heaven.

Just as the estranged Israelites are encouraged to build homes, have families and work for the good of Babylon, the Psalmist’s caution holds, that they/we must never forget we are but resident aliens in Babylon, on earth, even as we seek to live as best we can within the provisional “kingdoms” of this world, within the social and political configurations of our day.

In Augustine’s time, after centuries of persecution, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. As a result, the sacred and secular became inextricably intertwined, so much so that it was not always easy to tell where the political began and the church of Jesus Christ left off.

This might be compared to the historic, symbiotic relationship between church and state in America. It’s no secret, after all, that the Pilgrims, who settled these shores, sought to make Christianity central to their “errand in the wilderness.” Quite self-consciously they sought to create a wholly “new world,” replete with a “New Jerusalem,” far from the debased corruptions of the old European order. It is clear also that the Framers of the United States Constitution shared similar views toward Christianity, though, to be sure, in far more secular ways.

With variations along the way, this curious mix of church and state remained intact until 1965 or so. From that point on, we have seen a marked shift in society away from the church. Just two short decades after F.D.R.’s “fireside chats,” which included appeals and even prayers to the God of Jesus Christ, we today live in a public square all but stripped of overt Christian symbols and sensibilities.

This has created a crisis of sorts for us Christians. We see the culture around us becoming more secular, less religious, and lament the

church's lost influence. We may lament as well what seems, as a result, a coarsening of our culture.

Such was the case in Augustine's day, for in 410 A.D. the Visigoths stormed in from the north to sack the great city of Rome. Many were left questioning whether the God of Jesus Christ had abandoned them. *The City of God* was written to address this very concern.

It wasn't that the Christian God had failed, Augustine argued, because the proper sphere of God always has had to do with the "city of God," not the "city of man." So even if Rome had fallen, the trajectory of faith leads unflinchingly to heaven.

The temptation in every age, it seems, is to assume that what happens in the social and political sphere is synonymous with the "city of God," the heavenly sphere. But as the Psalmist's words remind us, we ought never to confuse our loyalty to Zion with that of Babylon.

During the approach to World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, noted Lutheran pastor and theologian, left Germany to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Before returning to Germany, where he eventually died in a concentration camp just one month shy of liberation, due to his opposition both to Hitler and the official Nazi German church, he made a rather astute observation about the American church.

In short, he said the American church was too captive to the political, that it mixed up and conflated the kingdom of God (heaven) with the kingdom of man (America).

We in America have, to be sure, a long history of optimism, optimism born of our origins, origins that professed the idea that we are a special people destined to build nothing less than heaven on earth.

Throughout our history, this has led both Mainline Protestant "liberals" and Evangelical "conservatives" to treat secular political matters as if they were of ultimate concern, rather than secondary realities conditioned by sin and creaturely limitation.

Not to put too fine a point on it, it's almost as if we have treated America as if it were the church, promising perfection, eternity. And when, as invariably happens, this utopian "church" of America proves

decidedly fallible, as something far less than heaven, disappointment, anger and despair naturally ensue.

The simple truth is that the Christian witness informs us of a new way of life and a different path to freedom. It says that when we are baptized, we become citizens of heaven, in the same way the Israelites living in Babylon understood themselves to be citizens of Zion. Heaven is our true home.

For a time, though, while we are here on earth, we, too, live in Babylon. We lament our alienation from Zion's/heaven's perfection, and long to claim its ineffable peace, its radiant joy. For the time being, we are to build our homes, establish families, settle in and work for the welfare of our world, for our welfare, we understand, is tied inextricably to its welfare.

Yet the Psalmist cautions us not get too comfortable with the Babylons of our own making, for were we to do so, we might forget the Jerusalem that stands above our "highest joy."

The Christian belief is that through baptism, and the community of those baptized, the church, we anticipate and experience our future beyond this life, beyond Babylon, even heaven above. It's not that we build up a world that becomes heaven; it's that we seek a heaven that one day shall come down yet again, transforming everything that is.

Sometimes Babylon treats us well, other times it doesn't. But either way, Christians recognize that Babylon alone is not our true home, that we are citizens of heaven first and foremost, and citizens of the world only secondarily.

The climax of the spectacular *Boar's Head Festival* yesterday at Paul and Dorothy Mueller's son's church in Springfield was the arrival of the Three Kings, preceded, I might add, by three live camels.

Epiphany celebrates two events. One is Jesus' baptism. The other is the arrival of the Three Kings. The symbolism of the Three Kings is that they represent all the kingdoms of the world who come to worship the true King, in fulfillment of prophecy.

Here the Babylons of the world come, finally, to worship the one true God. And in this, the world is restored to its proper ordering. Heaven is heaven and earth is earth. Amen.