

Sermon: 10th Sunday after Pentecost (A) 8/2/26**Peace, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preacher****Texts: Isaiah 55:1-6, Matthew 16:13-20**

“Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and the quarry from which you were dug.” Today’s reading from Isaiah is a study in stone, a holy riff on “the rock from which you were hewn.” It makes me think of what some have called the **eighth** wonder of the world, 11 churches carved and excavated from solid rock in Lalibela, Ethiopia. Tradition has it that these 12th-century churches were the miraculous overnight work of **King** Lalibela of Ethiopia, a team of royal carvers, **and** a crew of heavenly **angels**. The cover photo on today’s bulletin is of one of those churches. But perhaps the words of African American scholar Henry Louis Gates can **also** help paint the picture. Gates wrote of his visit to Lalibela: “I peered over the edge of a cavernous hole in the ground and saw, in the shape of a cross, a church carved entirely out of rock embedded in the ground.”

These stone churches effectively hid the treasures of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from invaders and thieves. But they **also** provided a rock-hewn pilgrimage and a kind of painted catechism for the faithful, because each church was devoted to and had decorations that depicted some aspect of the story of salvation, from creation to the cross to the Last Judgment. Christians could experience the whole panorama of biblical history by walking in and walking through this cluster of churches, all connected by underground tunnels and passages. And their common cruciform shape reminded believers of the shape of their life together as a people marked by the cross of Christ forever and called to bear witness to its power and promise...**even** in the midst of suffering.

“Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you...”. Isaiah’s words evoke images of permanence, strength, and

an immovable foundation; those names – Sarah and Abraham – who are here named with a sort of equality we don't find elsewhere – reminded Isaiah's people how centuries before, barrenness had turned to fruitfulness and given birth to a people of promise. Isaiah walked his people through their history, stirring up memories and associations to sustain and encourage them, because they were a people now living – **and dying** – as exiles in Babylon, after enduring invasion and **another** kind of theft: the invasion of fear and the plundering of hope. Far from home, their temple and sacred city destroyed, Isaiah's people had grown disheartened, dispirited, and disoriented. They wondered if their God had come **with** them....or had simply abandoned them to a sorry end. Was there **anywhere** in the world, in **their** world, where God's presence could **still** be found? Was there any more hope to be mined from the quarry of God?

In the midst of such questions, Isaiah urges his fellow exiles to peer over the edge and see not the **end** of hope but its **beginning**, not just Sarah and Abraham, but also God's own faithful promises...a quarry of hope still available to be mined by exiles of a **new** generation, by every despairing, disappointed people. And they heard God speak an utterly unexpected word: Lives that had become waste places would bloom like Eden; songs that had died on Zion's lips would be heard again.

How could this **be** – and **why**? Because God and God's promises are the real and immovable **bedrock** of life and hope...because it is from the rock of hope, not the pit of despair that God's people were born...and because **all** God's promises **will** be kept. To make that point unmistakable, Isaiah uses **past** tense verbs, not **future** tense verbs to talk about Zion's waste places comforted and the wilderness blooming like Eden, to declare God's promises as good as done. It's as though Elijah wants the people to see things through **God's** eyes and in **God's** time, to see why there is every reason to trust and hope again. Just as the faithful drew inspiration and encouragement from the painted

panels of the churches of Lalibela, God's people in Babylon drew hope from a glimpse of the great panorama of salvation. There they saw not just a memorial to **past** deliverance but also a vision of comfort and deliverance **still to come**. Wherever Isaiah's people looked, they saw themselves, their children, and their children's children painted into the picture...and hope was reborn.

The rock behind which Jesus was buried was not anywhere near as high or deep or elaborate as the churches of Lalibela. And, like the people to whom Isaiah spoke, it seemed like the end of their hope, not the way of deliverance. But then God raised Jesus on the third day and the tomb became the birthplace of resurrection and deliverance for all.

Of course, you don't have to have lived in Babylon in the 5th century BC to know what exile feels like or to experience hope evaporating right before your eyes. Perhaps you, like me, know people who have experienced the terrible suffering of being driven out of the land they called home. The Africans who were taken from their homelands and brought to the Americas to be slaves certainly did.

But there are **other** sorts of exile, too: the exile imposed by sickness or aging, that makes a person feel like a prisoner in their home or hospital bed or body; the exile that comes from having your immigration proceedings or your TPS cancelled; the exile that comes from feeling like a stranger in your own church because people you see week after week **still** don't talk to you; the exile that comes from being shunned by your own family, your workplace, or your classroom for holding an unpopular opinion or a different political perspective; the exile that comes from living in a neighborhood that always comes out on the short end of services or jobs or police protection; or the exile we sometimes impose on **ourselves**, believing we don't **deserve** God's care or help because we've failed so often or in such a devastating way.

Whatever sort of exile we find ourselves in, whether it seems momentary, temporary, or endless and inescapable, we **too** are called

to hope. Every Sunday, like the exiles in Babylon and the faithful of Lalibela, we are gathered together by the Holy Spirit to be resurrected and reinvigorated for life with God and one another, to be filled with power to make a witness to the Rock that is our Mother and our Hope. Gathered in a sanctuary shaped like a cross, following the sacred pattern of Word and Sacrament, we remember Jesus, how he came to share our exile and our suffering, even death itself, and how, by rising, he has reunited us with the Rock from which we were hewn and the quarry from which we were dug.

Sharing the bread and cup, we receive a foretaste and glimpse of the fullness of salvation that awaits us all, not just us, the saints of **this** time and place, but also saints past and saints still to be born. In the meantime, we rest in God's sure promise: no invader can take this treasure from us; no exile can separate us from the love of God; because there is no end to the depths of the quarry of hope. For Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Amen.