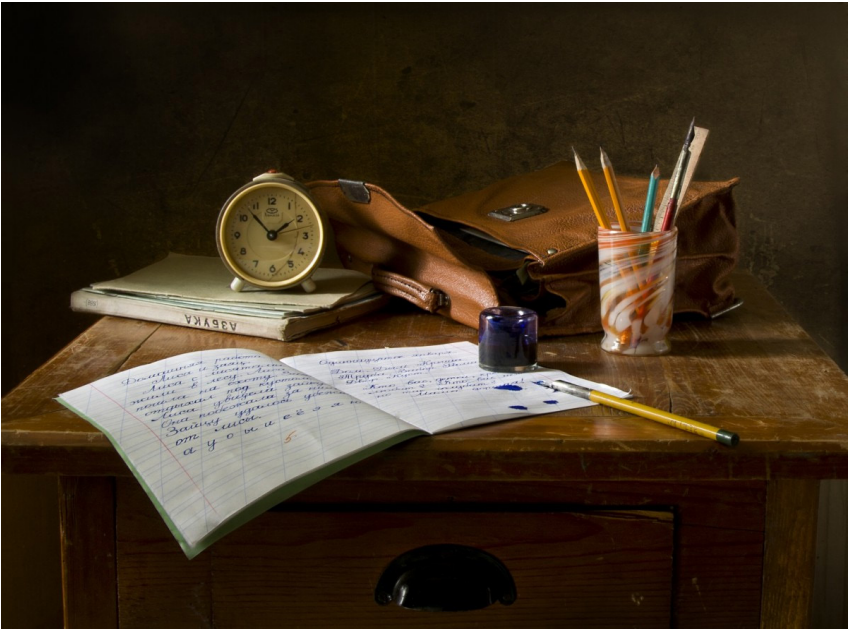


October 2, 2022

# The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Lamentations





*The Book of Goose*, a recent novel by Yiyun Lee, tells the story of two childhood friends Agnes and Fabienne living in provincial France just a few years after the second World War. Agnes, who tells the story, is the subdued, more measured of the two, while Fabienne is less restrained, raw, and almost feral. Somewhat aimless and disenchanting with country life, Fabienne devises a plot that will help them transcend their drab existence. She will dictate stories of farm life, and Agnes, the one of the two who can write, will take everything down. Fabienne notes the rationale: “The world has no use for who we are and what we know as country people. A story has to be written out. How else do we get our revenge?” The book they write does get them attention; the Paris media hail Agnes as a teenaged peasant possessed of literary genius, though she was only the scribe.

Soon enough, Agnes is catapulted into a life of fame and stardom – her book is a national bestseller, she’s heralded as a child prodigy. Her fames attract all sorts of attention to her rural town. One of her admiring visitors is the wealthy headmistress of a British school, Mrs. Townshend, who pays the family money to take their daughter, who has had to strongarm to enroll. Mrs. Townshend has her own purposes: she can exploit the young prodigy to garner fame and attention to her school; and, soon you realize she is using Agnes to write a book about herself and her school.

There comes a moment in her schooling when Agnes has a realization that she hasn’t written an authentic word in her life, she’s been a pen in another’s hand – Fabienne’s, and now Mrs. Townshend. The words that got her famous were another’s, and now she is being pressed further and further into a false existence. Of course, so Agnes and Fabienne tell themselves, they were just playing a game. But the problem was that the game got real, and what it left them wondering is if they themselves were real or just players in a bigger game.

*The Book of Goose* is about Agnes achieving acclaim and recognition and yet not able to recognize herself. It’s a story of her exile and her potential. Not merely a geographical exile. Agnes wakes up at boarding school in absolute anxiety that her life has been a lie, the hapless attempt of two provincial schoolgirls to gain recognition, to gain existence. The crucial point the book makes is that there are multiple kinds of exiles we can suffer, everyday

exiles. There are exiles of identity, of country, of friendship, of family, of maybe the most haunting and hard to resolve exile – Agnes’s exile from her own voice, her exile from herself.

We homeowners don’t often think of ourselves through the lens of an exile. To be in exile is to be denied or cast out of a certain place which we certainly weren’t. Right. But so much of the wisdom from our tradition comes from the experience of exile, and in some ways having that experience is essential, especially if you want a taste for the Spirituality of the Old Testament. One of those places where we get a feel for an exilic spirituality is Lamentations. This is a short five-chapter book tucked in the middle of our Bibles, and the central theme is Jeremiah writing the book in tears as he laments Israel’s disobedience to God, and the ensuing decimation and exile from Israel in the 6th century. Jeremiah wonders, “How did we, the people of God, end up here: lost, severed from Yahweh, the source of Meaning and Reality, the One who rescued Israel from Egypt and bestowed upon us an identity and future? How did we become exiled from our destiny to be the people of God? How did this happen?” This little book raises a set of difficult questions, and yet I want to see Chapter 3, the midpoint of the book, as Jeremiah’s attempt at an answer.

So, *The Book of Goose* tells a story of one girl’s exile from herself. Lamentations is one man’s exile from hope and home. I want this morning to think about exile in a very practical way by looking further into three exiles that each of us experience constantly, unflinching. Exiles we may have already experienced today. Exiles related to time – our exile from our pasts, our exile from the future, and our exile from the present. It’s our exile from Time.

Notice what the prophet is doing in our passage: he is brooding over the present moment – my soul is bowed down within. The prophet is bent over only able to take note of his and his country’s sin. He is stuck in the past tense. This what sin does: it diminishes our capacity to live fully in the present; it imprisons our potential; it freezes our love for life, doing so by giving more weight and more power to the past. And as you know, what lies unabsolved in our pasts, we unflinching inflict on the other, to expel our guilt and assuage our anxious conscience. For most of us sensitive and empathic individuals, our guilt pushes us in a more polite direction. We become chronic and incessant people

pleasers. This is totally my sin; I just want everyone to be happy, and sometimes I'll sacrifice my own sanity to keep the peace. We do this in part because we are looking for someone to be a kinder judge to ourselves than we are. If you want to know where in yourself you need a tender word of forgiveness, look at where you are most critical, most harsh, and ask what that judgment is judging in you. *My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.*

And yet, this morning, we encounter the God of the Bible who comes to us in a surprising way. She comes not as the judge, but as the gentle and merciful Savior. "I know what you've done; I know who you are; I know the prison of your past; but my mercies are new every morning. And I am here to help you trust my mercy more than your own judgement." It is like God says: "Notice the dew on the morning grass; listen to the trill of the birds; feel the crisp air and notice the fog lifting off the field – encounter it all each morning as if the first time. I have healed your yesterday, God says, and delivered you from exile into the new morning of my presence."

God does more than liberate our exile to the past. The only thing more powerful than the guilt of the past is the fear of the future. I don't know how COVID has affected your sense of the future, but we often relate to what is to come with a sense of foreboding and fear – life feels more unsteady. If you are like me, you've grown reticent of making plans too far down the road. When I was in school and interviewing for various positions, I'd get asked what my 5-year plan was. It was a sign of maturity and responsibility to indicate that your future was trending up, and would, with a little muscle from you, go the way you wanted it to. We no longer talk about 5-year plans. We barely have 5-day plans. We read cancellation policies much more closely now; as we are worried about the next variant; our kids not being able to go to school; getting sick; or losing more of our lives to the unforgiving void of another lockdown. Our souls are bowed down – what's been broken is a sense of trust in the future.

But Jeremiah reminds himself, "The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him." That word *portion* is another word for inheritance. What an amazing promise to those in exile – people have lost their land, their homes, their livelihoods. Social stability was shorn up by the eldest son receiving the inheritance

from the father. But now there is no inheritance, no land to pass down. No future to speak of. And yet, the weeping prophet holds forth the promise: O Soul, do you know see what is coming to you? Do you glimpse what is your birthright? You can't possibly fathom the riches that are yours. Look up and see, and don't let your fear cloud your vision: your future is full of God. Open yourself to receive more of life, to say Yes to more of Life. Your future is full of God; the God who comes to us to liberate our exiles from the future.

We are freed from the exile of our pasts, which we call forgiveness, and we are liberated towards a future, in which we can hope. And we do our best to live in the present. What is interesting about our passage is how Jeremiah tells us to inhabit the present. *The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.* How do we as the people of God live faithfully – we wait on God. Want to be a faithful Christian in 2022: learn how to wait. Learn how to be more patient with your life. Now we don't like this at all. Jeremiah, don't you know, we are industrious Americans; we are planners and pioneers: can't you give us a word that isn't so passive? We find waiting for anything difficult. In some ways, isn't the endeavor of the tech industry to streamline life, instantize experience to the degree that we can conquer demon of waiting? We spent our childhoods waiting – for our parents to finish talking about their jobs, for the school bus to come pick us up or for the dismissal bell to ring, for the dial up modem to finally connect to the internet, for the our mothers would stop calling us sweetie pie in front of our friends. We waited. But we've grown past that. We are adults: we are post waiting.

When I lived in Pittsburgh I remember walking through Squirrel Hill, a largely Jewish neighborhood, with a Rabbi friend – we walked into a restaurant together, when no more than 3 steps in, without much more than a mumbled excuse me, he walked back out the front door, bowed his head for a brief second and then rejoined me inside. I asked him if everything was okay. He said, "Oh yes, its just my practice that every new place I walk into I ask God to go in before me. I was so enjoying our conversation I forgot. I never enter a room before God."

*Wait for the Lord.* Pause. Recognize there to be an agency more active than yours when you step into a room. Give space

for God to show up. What if say before you hopped on a zoom call, or went to your board meeting, or entered a new space you asked God to enter ahead of you? To heal, transform, illumine. Waiting on the Lord is about a humble reliance on God's power and God's presence in the big and small parts of our lives. It delivers us from the exile of self-reliance, and frees us for God-reliance, right here, right now – to experience the Salvation that comes from God.

Exile is real; and the exiles we feel in our own souls are real. There are everyday exiles of meaning, of time, of life, of identity. And yet no matter how dark our exile, exile only has meaning in relation to a home. For our text reminds us that God is our Home. And it reminds us that our lives unfold before this God, who loves us, and invites us to make each moment a homecoming.

