

Sermon – June 25th, 2023

Seeking Peace Together – Peacemakers Celebrate the Beauty of the Earth

Sermon Title: Babylon & Isaiah: Two Visions of Beauty & Peace Competing for our Loyalty

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-2, 6-13

My sermon title for today is “Babylon and Isaiah: Two Visions of Beauty and Peace Competing for our loyalty.” Based on our children’s time this morning, however, I think I should have gone with a different title: “Babylon and Isaiah: Invitations to Rival Celebrations.” Indeed, this latter title might be more appropriate, for what we are going to consider today are what I believe to be rival parties to which we are invited – two competing celebrations of the earth, its beauty, and the well-being and hope that we find in it as creatures of the earth. By the end of the sermon, I hope we will see how the celebrations offered by these two invitations differ significantly in the way they ask us to think of the earth’s beauty and how it all relates to seeking peace with creation together.

On the one hand we have the celebrations hosted by Babylon. A bit about the name Babylon in the Bible. At once Babylon names the historic empire located in present day Iraq that drove Israel into exile in the sixth century BCE – this is the Babylon mentioned in prophetic books like Isaiah, Jeremia, Ezekiel, and Daniel. When historians describe this empire, especially in its form under King Nebuchadnezzar II, they speak of imperial expansion, of a political and religious world-capital city, and of opulent palaces and temples built on the backs of slaves and conquered peoples.¹ This historic city had an ideal location along the Euphrates River and so also had fertile agricultural land, a booming economy and trade network, and with its many

¹ See Paul-Alain Beaulieu’s comprehensive book on Babylon called, *A History of Babylon, 2200 BC - AD 75 (Blackwell History of the Ancient World)*.

construction projects and landmarks, it also attracted tourists. [SLIDE] The “Ishtar Gate,” for example, was a famous landmark built under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II – a construction project that would have occurred while Israel was in exile there. Walking through the gate, you would venture upon what was called [SLIDE] the Processional Way, “a brick-paved corridor more than half a mile long, [which led] to the temple of Marduk, Babylon’s patron deity.”² The path was paved with “red and yellow stones” and on either side had tall walls of “enameled tiles decorated with lions and flowers.”³ Then there are the legendary “hanging gardens,” one of the wonders of the ancient world that are supposed also to have been in Babylon.⁴ Despite getting a bad rap in the Bible, to this day, Babylon’s grandeur intrigues and even inspires people’s imaginations. I was surprised, for example, to see that as recently as 2019, the business magazine *Forbes* published a column praising ancient Babylonian infrastructure and tourist attractions as examples of good marketing that modern business owners can learn from today.⁵ That’s a bit about historic Babylon.

But not surprisingly, given the fact that the great architect of Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar, destroyed Jerusalem and forcibly took Israel into exile, the name Babylon would enter Israel’s imagination as much more than a reference to the historical city. Rather, it would become a code word for the evils of empire in general – along with the evils that often accompany empire: human pride, opulence, violence, and idolatry. The story all the way back in the beginning of Genesis about the Tower of Babel, for example, is thought to have been written

² <https://www.artstor.org/2014/03/27/the-rebirth-of-the-ishtar-gate/>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The existence of these gardens is contested as no archaeological evidence has ever confirmed their presence in Babylon.

⁵ “What Marketers Can Learn From The Ancient Babylonians.” Found at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2019/03/22/what-marketers-can-learn-from-the-ancient-babylonians/?sh=65ca91c12c94>

during Israel's exile in Babylon – with the story's tower reaching to the heavens as a not-so-subtle condemnation of one of the many high temples built by Nebuchadnezzar, reaching as they did toward the heavens to make a name for Babylon and its ruler. And later, in the book of Revelation, Babylon again appears, this time as the name assigned to the Roman empire to signify its violence and idolatry. This second use of the term "Babylon" as a critique of empire in general has persisted in Jewish and Christian imagination through history to name what is seen as religious or political rivals to God's reign or to call out idolatry within society or the church.⁶

So, with all of this in mind, we can ask, "what kind of party does Babylon (or the "Empire" of a given age) throw?" If Babylon offers us a kind of celebration of the earth and its bounty by the way that it builds its grand cities – by who it includes and prioritizes, and by how it uses its resources – then what kind of celebration is it? As uncomfortable as it might make us, answering that question might not be very difficult at all. Perhaps we need only consider the kinds of celebrations that take place in the empires we live in today. Given what we know of Babylon as a city, there are a number of similarities to life here in the "Golden Horseshoe," this land of plenty that we live and celebrate in: great cities with tall towers, access to opulent and rich agriculture and land and so food, beautiful landscapes, tourist attractions, and a cultural landscape that could be described as cosmopolitan or diverse in the composition of its many peoples.

But, if we are honest, the beauty and bounty celebrated in the Babylon of old and in all the 'Babylons' of today, is all too much a tamed beauty and a limited bounty – it is a bounty gathered almost exclusively for human ends, and even then, it is a bounty accessible to some and not to others. The bounty of Babylon is bought and traded with accumulated and hoarded wealth,

⁶ In the Reformation the name "Babylon" was variously used by Reformers and Radical Reformers to name what they saw as the Church's apostasy and idolatry.

and its beauty is enjoyed by those who can afford to buy access to its parks and pay to see its monuments. Historic Babylon may, indeed, have been beautiful, but it was not a beauty that most in Israel, exiled there, could enjoy.⁷ There can be no question that we have a similar dynamic of inequality at work in the celebrations of our society too.⁸

I was struck when considering the theme of celebration, how in Psalm 137, the exiles are enjoined by their Babylonian captors to “sing songs” and be “happy” along the Rivers of Babylon, but all they could do was weep. The trees around them—willows (possibly an image too, of sadness and tears)—become hangers or hooks for their harps. I was struck by this image because of how much it contrasts with the celebration Isaiah invites Israel to, and here we come to Babylon’s rival, the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah invites Israel to a celebration outside of the grand city of Babylon. To be sure, the celebration that Isaiah describes also involves a city – Jerusalem—although to get there involves a journey through *wild space*. Right off the bat, the invitee list is notably different than those invited to Babylon’s party. In Isaiah’s vision, the procession does not lead to the center of Babylon but *out* of Babylon, towards a different place where the thirsty are invited to find water, and the hungry are invited to enjoy rich, good food – bread and wine and milk. Notably, this rich food is not reserved only for those who can afford it, rather, it is purchased without money:

Isaiah 55:1 everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Here this celebration is for the person that has just come back from exile and has no economic privilege to draw on. They are invited to a celebration, to a party, hosted by their God whose

⁷ This is, to be sure, somewhat of an over-generalization – there were examples, I’m sure, of those exiled in Israel who found beauty and even prosperity there. Jeremiah 29 suggests as much, perhaps. Nonetheless, the critique of empire remains legitimate.

⁸ Another interesting aspect to our monuments and museums that animates active discussions today is whether to return objects to nations and cultures from which they were taken as spoils in colonial conquest.

ways and thoughts are wild and untamed. At this party, all can rejoice alongside the waters, all can sing songs and play their harps happily. Instead of willows functioning as hooks for neglected instruments, Israel now can sing and clap for joy on the wild path – on the path where trees clap their hands, and the hills and mountains sing.

Have you begun to see the contrast? I like to think of the contrast between Babylon's celebration and Israel's celebration as a contrast between the celebration of tamed beauty and wild beauty. The beauty and bounty celebrated in Babylon is that of the tamed, the circumscribed, the limited beauty that is kept for the enjoyment only of some, while the beauty and the bounty that Israel's exiles are invited to celebrate is a wild beauty – a beauty untamed, uncircumscribed, and accessible even to those in the lowest economic bracket of society. No towers reaching the heavens on this wild path, no attempt to make of themselves a name beyond the name God has given them. Instead, they are a people who celebrate and rejoice because they have called upon the Lord of heaven and earth, because they have inclined their ears to the Lord, whose way is made in the wild spaces where life is blessed to grow by God's word. (Isaiah 55:9)

As we wrap up the first section of our "Seeking Peace Together" series which has focused on "Peace with Creation," it occurs to me that all three Sundays that we've focused on creation, there has been an emphasis on "the wild" and the untamed: we began in the garden with a focus on the human cultivation of the earth as a form of care. But we also acknowledged that human care and cultivation had its limits set by God. There were trees to eat from but there were also trees to be left alone, perhaps an image of nature left untouched. Dorothy's reflections on caring for the earth by caring for our water supply also moved us to reflect on how too much human cultivation and use can be damaging to the earth – our water needs to be preserved by extracting less of this precious resource – by reserving the wildness of this resource for the health

of all life on the planet. Then we literally moved to the fields where we lived in booths or “tents” as we shared together in the earth’s bounty, reminding ourselves of God’s provision. In their own way the booths represented the wildness of God’s promise for us – that even in temporary shelters we could share a bounteous feast. And now this morning we’ve considered two competing celebrations of the earth and its beauty: an invitation into a tamed celebration space and an invitation into the wild space of God’s promise and hope. Which invitation will we take up? Are we already celebrating at Babylon’s party where the earth and its beauty is celebrated by way of taming it and *using* it up? If so, perhaps we must take our leave of this party; perhaps being peacemakers will involve us going instead to the wild party spoken of by the prophet. As the body of Christ that seeks peace in a climate crisis, I wonder, how might God be calling us to celebrate the beauty of the earth in such a way that the earth itself, as well as the most vulnerable creatures and humans around us, as well as future generations, will be able to celebrate this beauty too? Perhaps Isaiah’s invitation calls us today to join a procession into the wild spaces of the earth – a way that leads us beyond what is comfortable and circumscribed, into a space where the well-being and hope that we find as creatures of the earth comes from God, a space where all life – trees, hills, and humans - can celebrate together. May it be so. AMEN.