

SAUDADE

Isaiah 55:1-9

Sunday, March 7, 2010 – Lent 3

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Have you ever been haunted by a longing? It's not really nostalgia. It's not really sadness. It is more than that; deeper than that; hard to explain – at least in English. The Brazilians, however, have a word for this feeling. It's saudade. And a Brazilian person will be very quick to point out that we English speakers have no single word that can adequately describe saudade. To prove that point, here is Wikipedia's stab at a definition, and trust me, I edited this down: "saudade is a word for a feeling of nostalgic longing for something or someone that one was fond of and which is lost. It often carries a fatalist tone and a repressed knowledge that the object of longing might really never return. It is a "vague and constant desire for something that does not and perhaps cannot exist ... It can refer to people and things whose whereabouts are unknown, such as a lost lover, or a family member who has gone missing. Saudade is sometimes described as "the love that remains" or "the love that stays" after someone is gone." Brazilians take their saudade quite seriously; so seriously in fact that every January 30 is set aside to consider saudade.

Not too long ago, after a rather grueling day at work, I returned home rather late at night and wanted nothing more than a few moments of quiet. And so I went into the living room, left all the lights off, and lit a candle that my grandmother had once given to me. I loved her very much and still feel her loss keenly six years later. I sat in the darkness and watched the flame, and as strange as this might sound to some, I had a talk with her. And I was filled with the most bitter-sweet longing, yearning, saudade.

A few weeks later, some of us from this congregation went to Merkin Hall to hear Russell Saint John sing spirituals, accompanied by our own Douglas Drake. African American spirituals, by nature, are expressions of yearning and longing. That was no clearer to me than when Mr. Saint John sang "Heaven is One Beautiful Place." A reviewer wrote that part of the power of this song is the sense of longing that it evokes – a longing for a better place, for wholeness, for homecoming, for heaven. And then the reviewer said that if you really want to know the genesis of the slaves' longing, then all you have to do is substitute the word "Africa" for "heaven" - "Africa is One Beautiful Place." That one word substitution is a window into the "anguish of a captive held prisoner in an alien land."

The Hebrew captives were held prisoner in an alien land. They had once been slaves in Egypt until Moses came to lead them to freedom. But their freedom did not last. About 600 years before Jesus, the best and the brightest of the Jewish people were taken into captivity in Babylon, modern day Iraq. They were separated from their homeland, from their culture, and from their beloved Temple. And as is true for all captives, they spent their days longing for home – a home they feared they may never see again.

It is to these lonely and despondent people that the beautiful poetry of Isaiah 55 was written. UCC theologian Kate Huey says that this passage is a near perfect summary of the biblical promise. And she summarizes these verses like this: *“God promises (us) the things that we most yearn for, deep down in our hearts, the very basics of life: homecoming when we’re lost or far away, a rich feast when we’re hungry, flowing fresh water to satisfy our thirst, and a community of hope when we long for meaning in our lives – something greater than ourselves, in which and through which we might be a blessing to the whole world. Oh, and another thing: there will be no cost affixed to this wonderful feast, no price of admission, and everyone (even people you would never expect) will be invited to the party.”*

What a wonderful, wonderful promise. And all these thousands of years later, Isaiah's prophecy is still powerfully relevant. We still long for that kind of world. And we are painfully aware that we do not yet live there. We are just as captive as the ancient Hebrews or the American slaves. And this is never clearer than when we stop distracting ourselves long enough and dare to be quiet enough, to look at the world as it really is.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has written that "we are in an exile – right where we live – because "we are bombarded by definitions of reality that are fundamentally alien to the gospel." "The voice of this American empire wants to reshape our values, fears, and dreams in ways that..." turn us away from the promised Reign of God.

Now this does not mean that there is no beauty in this earth or that life cannot be very good – because we know it can. But friends, how can we ever be truly comfortable and content in a world in which children still starve to death and women are executed because they were raped and wars rage because despots never have enough power and the poor are abused by those who have more than they could ever need. That is the world in which we live. And we feel that disconnect whenever we gather in this room and sing and pray and listen

to the promises of God. We gather in this room and allow ourselves once again to dream the dream of the prophets and sages of every age who longed for a world made right; who yearned for a world made right.

Recently, I have had opportunity to listen to some folks who struggle with their faith precisely because of the pain of this world. They struggle, as I have struggled, as you have struggled, with what theologians call the problem of evil. How is it that a merciful and good God could allow so much suffering? I've never found a good answer to that question.

Sometimes these people assume that even to ask such questions is somehow an indication of a lack of faith. But I think it is quite the opposite. I have long suspected that it is the depth of our questions and the pain of our longings that are the proof of a vital and connected faith. Allowing yourself to sink into the longing for a better world is one of the holiest exercises any of us can embark upon.

In a few moments, we will come to this table, where gifts of bread and wine have been laid. This is a table of remembrance, in which we recall the unjust death of Jesus, and with him the unjust death of innocents everywhere. But

that is not all this table is. It is also a table of prophecy, for it is here, perhaps more than any place else, that we remember with our bodies, with our sense of taste, the promises of God for this world. Walter Brueggemann writes that at this table we remember, with our bodies, that “we are children of another bread.” And we leave this table called not just to “tell what is” but “to trust what will be.” Brueggemann concludes by saying that in this meal, in this community, in our work together, we “redescribe the world”, we “live out the promise.” We come to this table with a deep sense of longing for that day when all people shall sit down together at a table of plenty and of peace.

So friends, don't run from your longings. Don't turn your back on this dream of a better world. Don't be afraid to let those longings challenge your faith – because I am convinced that it is the longing itself, the yearning, the saudade that is our faith.

And so for the longings, and for all things, thanks be to God. Amen.