

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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Balance
Isaiah 40:1-11, 7:14, Matthew 1:18b-22

Isaiah the prophet brought hope to his people. He tells them that God will give them a sign, a child will be born of a young woman and he will be called Emmanuel. Then they will be set free to go home to Jerusalem. But, first there is the little matter of 80 years of exile in Babylon. Their behavior, their disobedience to God, wrought catastrophe, and the result is 80 years of exile from their home. This is plenty of time to put things in perspective, to bring things back in balance.

Remember that these were God's chosen people. God has a long relationship with them. God first called to Abraham to follow God- to be a wandering Aramean, a stranger far away from his land, his home and family, without anything to secure his future, except God. Then God used Moses to lead the descendants of Abraham to a promised land. In the Promised Land, God gives them a way of life to allow everyone to have land, food, family, and live in peace.

In response? they ask God for a King. They want to be like all the other people they see. Well they get Saul and then David and Solomon and it goes downhill from there. You see they tried to be like the other people. They had a King and an army and they went to war and captured land and people and wealth. Instead of a promised land where everyone had land, food, family and peace, they

had the wealthy and the poor, the elite and the stranger, the privileged and the unwanted and marginalized.

Then along came the Babylonians who wiped out their King and army, took everything they had, and made them captives. There in Babylon they relearned what it was like to be a stranger in a strange land. They remembered what it is like to be a homeless people, without family; orphaned, widowed, poor, and without a place to worship God. They remembered that God has set things up to be in balance, and that they are responsible to keep them in balance. There are some parallels we might draw here for our own country and time, but that is a sermon for another day. Now Isaiah tells the Israelites that they have remembered the balance and they are finally going home.

Centuries later, Joseph is one of their descendants. We don't really know much about Joseph, except that he was a good and righteous man. We can imagine that he did what was expected of him. He worked hard, paid his bills, went to worship regularly, and was a good neighbor. We know that he met and became engaged to a young woman named Mary. This probably required several things: perhaps negotiating with her family, paying a dowry, signing a marriage contract, and having the intended marriage announced in the town square. Then he finds out, we don't know how, that Mary is pregnant.

What must Joseph have felt? Perhaps angry, embarrassed, at least confused? Like his life has gone completely out of control? Like he is whirling around and has lost his balance? We can imagine he goes through all of these feelings, and yet, the scripture says he “decided to put her away quietly”. He will not make a big scene- embarrass her and their families, demand satisfaction for his hurt pride. Joseph is a good man. But then an angel comes to him in a dream and reassures him, he can and should take Mary as his wife, it will be okay.

When I first read this story this week, I did not understand how Joseph could just pick up his life and go on from there. I was not convinced. I had to think about it some more. Then, I thought of a man named Bill who had a good job with good pay and benefits, a loving family, and a new home. He had everything he could want, except he had to work long, hard hours. It was another one of those difficult economic times. The company was downsizing, reducing payroll. Bill was 45 years old when he lost his job. He had worked for that company for 20 years, so dedicated to his work that he rose from an entry-level job to be the engineering manager running the whole plant. People thought he had a graduate degree in engineering. It should be easy for him to find a job with his experience and education. The truth was he had never taken time to go to college. He was busy providing for his family and keeping the company growing.

He had also just moved his large family from a little house where he had paid the mortgage off early, to house that fit, with a big mortgage. He had one kid in graduate school, two kids in college, two at home, and the oldest daughter came home to bring the ‘good news’ of plans for a wedding. Then, to add to it all, a step mother he barely knew died, naming him executor of her will- no inheritance, just a drive across the country and back to settle her messy affairs. He was discouraged, and although he loved his family, could not see a future, everything was out of balance.

What these stories have in common is a sense of or a lack of balance. On the one hand we could see God’s in it all. Reaching in a plucking the Israelites out of the promised land and thrusting them into captivity to punish them, taking Joseph’s nice little life and twirling it around until he is dizzy, and playing the hand of fate to mess up the life of the man who worked so hard. But it is not that God does these things to teach or use us. We do things, and, things happen. It is not that they are good or bad. It is what we do with them that makes them good or bad for us. And it is about balance. Balance in our relationship with others, ourselves and with God.

The Israelites played their cards the wrong way. They had a beautiful land where they could have lived in balance with their environment, God, and each other and had peace and plenty. But they decided they wanted more. They upset

the balance by building a kingdom of wealth, attacking their enemies, enticing, and demanding, response from the kingdoms around them. They lost perspective on what was important, and they allowed divisions to occur, rich and poor, elite and stranger, ruler, orphan and widow, us and them, possessions and people. The little 80 year-learning-experience was about getting back in balance with each other.

The man named Bill, had it all too. He didn't want more, but he needed balance. He worked hard for his company, but was expendable. He felt unappreciated, but they did pay him well for his labors-they did not guarantee him a future. He provided well for his family, but they did not know how little he got out of what he put in to his efforts. There was no balance: he never complained, even when he was tired, but he had no fun. When he drove across country he took the time to look at his life. He realized he hated snow. He applied, got a new job in California and moved there. The job not only allowed him to provide for his family, but for the first time in his whole work history he loved going to work. Instead of just working hard for pay, he was learning and growing. His family didn't want to move, but he let that be their choice. And then he went out and bought himself a bat, ball, glove and shoes with spikes, and for the first time since he was a child, he started playing his beloved game baseball again. He got balance with himself and he got fun!

As for Joseph, well, I got this vision of Joseph when I was in Tai Chi the other day. Judy was leading us and she reminded us about balance. Before we can take a step we need to be in balance. Then when we take a step, we need to regain our balance. And before we take the next step, we need to check our balance.

Joseph was in balance at first, he was in right relationship with God, himself and others. Then he took a step, he got engaged to Mary. So far so good. But then before they could get married, he found out that Mary was pregnant. Life just whizzed at him, and he could have gone off balance. He could have been angry and lashed out. But he didn't, he went back and checked his balance with God, and Mary. He decided to end their engagement quietly. And in the midst of this balance, Joseph was open to hear God speak to him. In the quiet of the night, an angel came, with reassurance and hope for the future. Do not be afraid, Emmanuel has come, God is with you. And from there, Joseph could take the next step and the next step, in balance with God.

And that is the message for us too. Whenever we have steps to take, do not be afraid, God is with us, Emmanuel. Just be sure we stop and check our balance with others, with ourselves and with God, first. Amen.