Diaspora and the breach of COVID-19

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In 587 BCE many of the wealthy of the land of Judah were taken captive by the Babylonians. So began the time of exile–the time of the diaspora. In many ways the exile was a breach that has never completely healed. There remained Jews who did not return to Israel when the temple was rebuilt. There remained Jews who did not return to Israel when Jesus walked the earth. When the second temple was destroyed, those who had come back to the land returned to exile. When the state of Israel was 'reborn' in 1948, there were many Jews who did not return to the land. For Jews, the experience of diaspora was born in 587 BCE, and has evolved and continued in one way or another since that time.

Diaspora is a time of loss. In 587 BCE, the familiar ways of being community and of worshipping God were no longer viable. No longer could one offer lambs or doves at the altar in Jerusalem. The ways of worshipping and being community handed down through generations experienced a breach–a radical break. This could have been the end of the community altogether. For many other ancient peoples, being taken into captivity meant exactly this–the decisive end of their communities.

Diaspora is not only a time of loss, it is also a time of sorrow and grief. It is a time of deep lamentation. For those ancient peoples that ceased being, the loss was more than devastating. What a horrible thing it is for the memory of a people and their culture to be lost to all posterity. For those who found a way to continue, the sorrow would have been different but no less real. For them, the past could become an unbearable burden that threatens the future. When what is lost carries with it the meaning of one's existence, continuing forward can become simply too much to imagine.

Yet during the time of the Babylonians, and later the Persians, Assyrians, and Greeks, the diaspora not only moved forward–they thrived.

The Hebrew Scriptures as we know them comes from this time. The writings that inspire and encourage us today came out of those dark times. Later, after the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, again the Jews were forced to reckon with a lost past. They did so by reconfiguring their key religious references points, and from this was born Rabbinic Judaism. Again, a time of loss became a time not only for grief, but also for creativity and new life.

I offer this brief overview of diaspora and exile as a narrative icon upon which to process our own times. We too are removed from familiar ways of being community and of worshipping God. Our loss is not as categorical or final as the diasporic Jews of which I have spoken–or at least we have good reason to believe it is not. Yet it is a loss–a breach.

Sometimes when communities experience a loss that threatens their collective identity, the impulse can be to quickly react and artificially mimic what was done in the past, and this can sometimes occur in ways that come close to betraying the core of what made the past special. I suggest that for Anglicans, being too quick to rush back into virtual forms of Eucharist might be an example of this. While it is possible to reformulate Eucharist using ancient traditions and modern reflection so that it is something that can be accomplished within a virtual context, I suggest that a better line of action might be to stop and reflect on the loss, without quickly trying to deny its reality.

My reflection upon the diaspora suggests that a newness and creativity can and do come out of loss, not as a Pollyanna denial of loss, but rather through its deep embrace. I do not have a clear picture of what exactly this might mean for us. I only suggest that by fully embracing the loss of the moment, and by letting it be loss, that as we continue to reflect upon the past that was, perhaps some new vision or rite, or action, or.... We might discover some new resource that while fully true to our collective identity, is also as of yet unrealized. Something that might be able to forge for us a fresh way through the wilderness into a new "promised land." After all, the Anglican church faces critical challenges relating to our future–and has faced these challenges well before the advent of COVID-19.

I do not speak so much against the practise of virtual Eucharist, but against a reflexive attempt to pretend that nothing meaningful has really changed for us. The living potential for something exciting, vital, and new is sacrificed if we do not embrace the actuality of change that has come upon us. Rather than simply assuming we should proceed with as close to business as usual as we can get virtually, perhaps we should be still and accept the loss and the change. That is, we should embrace a new identity that might be akin to diaspora.

We of a new exile cannot simply do what we did before. One outgrowth of this might be something new drawn from our ancient well? Again, I have nothing specific in mind, just as those Jews in captivity in Babylon had nothing truly specific in mind. Rather, what they did was to take what they had–the assorted writings and narrative fragments. They did not have access to the land directly, but they could access it virtually through writing. Though far away from it, they could inhabit the land through the magic of narrative. They did what they could. They collected the tales and writings they had and forged them over hundreds of years into a recognizable shape. They took what they had and boldly stepped forward, creating something new.

I am certainly not suggesting that it is our task to write a new Bible. But what do we have at hand? What can we do that both honors the past and moves boldly into the future? I believe the only way we will discover answers to this is by recognizing–even embracing–the breach that has come upon us.