

New Strength for a New Day

Cities, even very large cities, can at times suffer destruction of such magnitude as to call their continued existence into question. Such destruction can occur quite suddenly, as in the event of a natural disaster or in the midst of a war, or it can occur very slowly over a period of time as the result of long term demographic or economic trends. In either case, though, once the devastation or decay has reached a certain point, then reconstruction, making the city whole again, becomes a very large undertaking that requires enormous resources and a great deal of commitment.

But it does happen. For example, it happened in San Francisco after the devastating earthquake in 1906. Or in Chicago, after the great fire of 1871. More recently, it happened in New Orleans after the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, so much destruction that at the time it really looked like it might be the end of New Orleans as a major city, as if it might never come back. I remember quite vividly our first mission trip down there after the hurricane to help with the re-building, and when our plane landed, it was the only plane on the ground at the airport, most of which was closed off and no longer being used. It felt like a “ghost town,” which is certainly not the case today. Other cities, of course, have famously been rebuilt after the terrible devastation of modern warfare, cities like Dresden, Berlin and Warsaw, places all but destroyed during the Second World War, but perhaps most dramatically of all, Hiroshima, a city that was utterly and completely destroyed in literally the blink of an eye in 1945. Yet today, over a million people live and work in the city of Hiroshima. An amazing recovery.

But it doesn't always happen like that. Other cities, even some very well-known ones, have been destroyed and never re-built, including major cities of the ancient world like Babylon and Ephesus, and most famously of all, Carthage. Once great cities where today there are only ruins, if even that. It happens in modern times as well, where cities that were once thriving centers of manufacturing and population have over time and for various reasons withered away to shadows of what they once were, and seem well on their way to withering away to almost nothing. A perfect example is Camden, New Jersey, right across the river. Until fairly recently, other major cities like Buffalo and Detroit seemed to be headed toward much the same fate. Closer to my home, having grown up along the Mississippi River, there are a number of old river towns which were once busy ports but which never recovered from the devastating floods of 1927 and 1937, places like Cairo, Illinois, and Greenville, Mississippi.

So why do some cities recover and rebuild, and others don't? I doubt there's any easy answer to that question, and there are probably all sorts of factors involved but clearly it's more than just a matter of having adequate supplies and financial resources to rebuild, though, of course, there has to be that. But beyond that, there also seems to be a need for some sort of reckoning, some communal “coming to grips” with what happened and why, and steps taken to prevent its re-

occurrence, all so as to have some degree of confidence that such a fate can be avoided in the future, if not of a certainty, then at least of a high degree of probability. After all, if a city has been devastated not just once, but numerous times, then it becomes pretty obvious that maybe building a city there was not such a good idea in the first place.

Much the same dynamic involved in the rebuilding of cities after a disaster is also present when it comes to rebuilding nations that have suffered a similar fate, where reconstruction doesn't simply mean putting everything back the way it was, but correcting whatever the flaws that had contributed to the disaster to begin with, corrections that require gathering a consensus around those things that clearly needed to be changed. It is quite clear that in the reconstruction of both Germany and Japan after the Second World War, both of them nations that had suffered widespread destruction in the course particularly of the last year of the war, the rebuilding of political institutions was actually more critical to the nation's recovery to the nation's reconstruction, than simply the physical rebuilding of their cities and factories. Changes in the political structure intended to insure that they never go down that road again, changes that were the foundation of their reconstruction.

The same was true in United States history following the Civil War, where re-constructing the nation didn't simply mean repairing the physical damage to its cities, which for the most part had suffered relatively little damage. No, it meant repairing the flaws in our body politic that had led to the catastrophe in the first place. First and foremost, this meant settling once and for all the question of slavery in the 13th amendment. Then, going forward, the 14th and 15th amendments laid the foundation for a new conception of citizenship, a transformation in the body politic every bit as significant as the events of 1776, or the adoption of the original constitution.

This year we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the 14th amendment, which shall be the subject of our annual Constitutional Seminar this year. In a very real sense, it will be my swan song, since this year also marks the 50th anniversary of the event that more than anything else pushed me toward the ministry, the tragic death of the man who more than any other tried to make those amendments a reality in the face of continuing resistance on the part of those who never accepted them, a resistance that was literally enshrined in those monuments that have been so much in the news lately. Monuments that had very little to do with the Civil War, and everything to do with the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments.

But of all the reconstructions that have taken place over the course of human history, the most famous, I think it's fair to say, was the rebuilding of Jerusalem following its destruction by the Babylonians in the sixth century BC. I say the most famous, because a critical step in that reconstruction was the act of putting together what we call the Old Testament, itself the conceptual re-ordering of Israel's history for the purpose of providing a secure foundation upon which the people of Judea could re-constitute themselves as God's people. It was their reckoning, their act of coming to grips with what had led to the catastrophe of the nation's destruction, and therefore their re-thinking of what it meant to live in the future as the people of God. Doing that,

getting that straight, was actually more important to the future of the Jewish people than the physical task of re-building the city which had been left in ruins for years, for decades, until the tentative efforts at restoration undertaken by the first wave of people returning from their years of exile in Babylon, and the later more substantial efforts under the leadership of people like Ezra and Nehemiah, with no small amount of assistance from the Persians.

What emerged then, first in the Hebrew Bible (ie, the Old Testament), and then in the life of the people, whether in Babylon or Jerusalem or anywhere else in the world, was a new understanding of God, a new way of thinking about God, about who God was and how then to structure one's life as God's people. Critical to this emerging new theology was the work of two prophets, two prophets who are not nearly as famous as some of those who had gone before them, and therefore who get nowhere near the credit they deserve for having played such a critical role. But while prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea and Amos are all famous (and rightly so) for having stood up so courageously for justice and righteousness, it was Ezekiel and the prophet we know only as 2nd Isaiah (because we don't even know his name!) who actually changed the course of the nation's future. They changed the nation by changing the way people thought about God, and therefore what it meant to be God's people. Not that God had changed, of course, but the world had changed, and had changed dramatically, and it was critical that their thinking about God changed as well.

Which is why passages like our Old Testament lesson today (Isaiah 40:21-31) are so instructive even today. Our world has changed dramatically too. We live today in a very different world than the world of our parents. As a result, the church today is in a very different place than the one I grew up in, even than the church in which I was ordained now almost forty years ago. While, thankfully, we in the church—and I don't mean just this church, but most churches in our society—we in the church haven't suffered through anything like the devastation of Jerusalem in ancient times, or even like that of New Orleans in more recent times, we are in many ways a little like a Camden or a Detroit. We're still here, but not nearly the institution we once were, and not all that long ago. We don't occupy nearly so prominent a place in American society, and frankly we count for very little in our world today, and I don't think we've adjusted to the fact that nobody much cares what we think, or wants to hear what pronouncements we have to make. Which is why we don't need an Amos or even a Jeremiah these days, nearly so much as we need an Ezekiel or a 2nd Isaiah, someone to re-think who God is in our own day, to come up with a new vocabulary by which to speak not only about God, but also about us, a new understanding of who we are, and what it means then to be the people of God today. A new understanding from which to derive new confidence and strength for a new day. If the church is to move forward, that is our task.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and for endless ages...*