

Gathering on the horizon of this holy community are clouds of sadness and fear.

As one wiggly, wonder-eyed generation rises among us, one beloved, bedrock generation of our congregation is visibly approaching its sunset.

Gladys Johnson returned to the hospital this week with pains that reminded her of the heart attack she suffered earlier this summer; test results are encouraging, but her recovery time and her knees are frustratingly slow.

Mel Clawson is still in rehab after the cellulitis in his legs landed him in the hospital last week.

Alma Metzler worshiped with us last weekend when family was in town to bring her, for the first time in months, and for the first time in a wheelchair.

All three of them have celebrated their ninetieth birthdays ... a while ago.

All three of them are indescribably dear to those of us who have been a part of this place for more than a Sunday or two, the Resurrection regulars with some history here.

They are part of our Friendship Club, a circle of seniors that gathers monthly for lunch and laughter and collects money for gifts to our newly baptized and to our neighbors at Hawthorne School, the latest ministry of a group that has collectively and individually been and done countless good on this corner for so many years.

Friendship Club has dwindled in the last couple of decades from a robust assembly filling our parish hall to a pair of tables with plenty of room.

Lunch was cancelled this month and more than once this year when too much weather or too much weakness made it unwise to gather.

The days are coming, sooner than we are ready for, that we will be forced to say goodbye to our beloved friends and commend them fully and finally into God's hands.

They have been a rock for Resurrection Lutheran Church for many years, a steady and sturdy blessing, strong and reliable, present and accounted for, hard working servants, generous stewards, and loving spirits, a living foundation for our community now showing the signs of time's inevitable erosion.

In the midst of our deep gratitude to God and to them, we now feel the lurking sadness, the mounting fear of losing them, at first to our company and after that perhaps even to our shared memory.

Those heavy wooden doors at the front our sanctuary continue to revolve, with people who know and love our local saints and their stories moving out, with people who don't moving in.

Will one generation be able to tell its tale to another, or will the story be forgotten, lost in the shuffle of life that only gets faster and more chaotic with every passing year, shipwrecked on ears that are too busy and distracted to listen?

The prophet that biblical scholars call Second Isaiah, an anonymous and powerful poet who kept alive the story and the spirit of the original, speaks to a congregation in a rather similar situation.

They have been in exile in Babylon for more than a generation, nearing half a century now, and the seniors who remember the way things were in the promised land have dwindled to a precious and precarious few.

The prophet feels in his bones the sadness and the fear that they and their sacred story will be lost, forgotten in the shiny but shallow new reality of life in Babylon.

The power struggles of heaven play out on earth, so it appears that Israel's God has lost, and the gods of the Babylonians have won.

The worship of God is threatened not only by God's apparent powerlessness but also by logistical problems, like the fact that the temple is a rock pile of rubble hundreds of miles away.

Babylon's gods, victorious and convenient and sensible, and their daily culture have gradually eroded the beautiful but bizarre faith of Israel like a river wearing down a rock.

The people have grown accustomed to exile there as much as we Christians have here, surrounded and shaped by other gods like money and family and career and reputation and sports and sex appeal and name brands and instant access and all the other personalities in today's pantheon of idols.

Sunday morning is no longer sacrosanct or supported in the culture around us; it is a time for soccer tournaments and marathons, bike rides and brunches.

The Babylon around us that has defeated and replaced God doesn't care about our weird ways or our quaint, old fashioned, outdated worship habits.

Youth coaches and adult bosses aren't going to honor a Sunday sabbath or a church committee meeting.

Europe is full of empty cathedrals (those that aren't already rock piles of rubble decimated by war and modernity), standing evidence that God has lost and the world has moved on, while here in America, our own denomination and other mainline Protestant traditions watch as so many congregations age and shrink in the shadow of clouds of sadness and fear gathering on the national horizon, too.

So much stands to be lost, forgotten, swept away in the onslaught of time and progress.

And the people living in exile, in Babylon and in Chicago, are too busy or distracted or content or consumed or overwhelmed to afford the luxury of noticing.

Yet there is a remnant, a hopeful handful of people who gather to hear the prophet, there in Babylon, and here this morning.

To them and to us the prophet sings words of prodding and of promise:

*Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the LORD.*

*Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
the quarry from which you were dug.*

Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you.

Look to Mel and Elaine, to Alma and Gladys, to Donna and Gerry and Opal.

I blessed [them] and made [them] many.

The LORD will comfort Zion;

*he will comfort her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden
her desert like the garden of the LORD;*

*joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.*

Someone had the foresight and the faithfulness to write down the prophet's words.

Someone listened, and looked to the rock from which they were hewn, and kept the story alive, not only by telling the way it happened first, but also by living it in a new way.

Many stayed in Babylon, but a remnant returned and rebuilt Zion.

It looked a lot different, but it praised the same God and it advanced the same story. From the generation that returned sprang forth another generation, faithful and forgotten, lost to the pages of history but, like all the generations of our congregation who have gone before us, safe and cherished forever in the heart and the heaven of God.

And so it was for centuries, one generation learning from and loving and losing the one before, until one day, a circle of faithful Jewish friends, heirs to the threatened but resilient faith of Israel and Isaiah, gathered at a fancy resort.

Lush and beautiful with flowing springs and a scenic panorama, it was a worship center for a wide variety of gods.

In one grotto, animals and possibly humans were sacrificed to the god Pan, and their bodies were tossed down into the darkness of a cavern guarded by fencing named *The Gates of Hades*.

It was there that one of the men asked the others, *Who do you say that I am?*

It was there, in the swank center of suffocating idolatry, that Simon gave Jesus his impossible, nonsensical answer, and then Jesus told him who he was, and who we are. *You are Peter*, Jesus said, *and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*

Sitting right there, it was a promise as hard to believe and also as solidly true as the one centuries before it on the prophet's lips.

Within a few verses, Jesus would reveal that he is on the way to the cross while Peter the rock tries to stop him like a stumbling stone.

The church on the rock begins to erode and crumble immediately.

The clouds of sadness and fear gather quickly as Jesus makes his way, sooner than anyone is ready for, to his own death and inglorious descent into Hades.

It appears for all the world that God has lost again.

And here we are, named Resurrection, to tell the tale.

Here we are, many generations later, to celebrate the truth and the endurance of the promise that *my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.*

Here we are to carry forward the sacred story of the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Israel and Isaiah, the God of Jesus and Peter, the God of Alma and Gladys, the God who continues to lose and lose and lose again, the Rock of Ages from which we are hewn, the resurrected redeemer who rescues us all, the reason we still and will always have for *joy and gladness, thanksgiving and the voice of song.*