

I think at this point, you all are well acquainted with my feelings about flying, and if you aren't, let me sum it up for you: I hate it. Now that we're all up to speed, a story for you while holding in your mind the fact that my fear of flying and a complete lack of understanding of how a huge metal box stays up in the air are a messy combination in my brain.

Last summer when we were on vacation, I found myself sitting at a counter in O'Hare Airport, staring out onto the tarmac while working on a sermon. We were waiting for our flight to LA, but for some reason we were in a terminal that also had several small commuter flights boarding. I'm sitting there, minding my own business, trying to think godly thoughts while keeping my anxiety at bay, when a voice comes over the loudspeaker asking all of the people who are on the flight to Madison to please come to the desk because their seats were changing. First of all, who in the world is flying from Chicago to Madison, Wisconsin, I will never understand because it's a two and a half hour car ride, but whatever. Second of all, it would have been fine if they had just made the announcement for people to come get their new seat assignments, *but then...* they explained *why* people needed to have new seat assignments.

When one is on a flight that lasts exactly one hour, the plane taking you that distance is...small. Minute if you will. Well, as it happens, the

number of people that day flying from Chicago to Madison was also minute, and so the flight crew had discovered that with the established seating arrangement the flight was *off balance!* Thus, they needed to move people around in order to properly distribute the weight in the plane so it didn't have any complications. In my mind, sitting there listening to this, my thought was so that it didn't *fall out of the sky due to improper weight distribution*, but that's just me. The truth of the matter was, for this plane to fly properly and safely, it was all dependent on weight distribution, where people sat, and most likely...how much baggage they were carrying... Because that's the thing with this flight, it couldn't have been just an issue of people and placement, it also had to be a consideration of the weight of the baggage loaded onto this plane. Too much baggage, or too much unevenly distributed baggage could have led to complications.

Now, there is a whole other conversation to be had here about my flying issues and my trust of the ability to do the proper *math* when it comes to weight distribution, passengers, and all of their baggage, but this isn't a sermon about flying. It is in fact a sermon about baggage...it's weight, how we carry it, how much we carry, where we place it, and ultimately, what we do with it. Our biblical writers don't exactly put it in those words, but the concept, the idea is there. Granted they aren't talking about weight

distribution on your donkey or camel for safety's sake, but the type of baggage that we can't always see, but most definitely feel. Emotional and spiritual baggage that sometimes prevents us from flying as smoothly as we need to when it comes to our life with God.

Between our first and second lessons, we're dealing with two different kinds of baggage: communal and deeply personal, and yet the message underlying both is the same, but we'll get to that. First, let's open up said baggage. In our first lesson, Isaiah is speaking to the Israelites as they are mired under the weight of the Babylonian Exile. They have been there for generations and are longing for a way home. After years of prophets doling out misery, explaining just why they are in the situation they are in, Isaiah finally turns over a new leaf. He begins talking to the Israelites of home, of restoration, of protection. He shines the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, and as always, that light is God's never ending covenant with God's people to love and protect them in all things.

However, here's the issue. Isaiah and God recognize that the Israelites bear in their hearts, their minds, their very identities extremely specific expectations of God when it comes to the concept of deliverance and salvation. They hear these promises and they are expecting the Exodus 2.0. Another Red Sea, another display of God's might drowning their

enemies, and potentially another 40 years slogging away in the wilderness before they reach home. The baggage they carry is the expectation that God is going to act in the exact same way God has acted before, and they can't quite fathom that God is capable of doing something different.

Isaiah basically takes that baggage and throws it off the plane. It's not that it's *bad* baggage. This is an innate part of who they are, Exodus people, delivered people, *but* they have the potential to hold on to that so hard that they can't see that God is doing a new thing in their lives and in their relationship. They can't see that salvation doesn't lie behind them in the past, but before them in the present. They need to let go of the past in order to see that God is about to do something remarkably unexpected, deliver salvation from a Messianic figure out of Persia. A foreign king named Cyrus who will simply send them home and let them be, let them worship and live how they want. But they won't be able to recognize that for the gift it is, if they're constantly hauling around the expectation of God to do what God has always done and kick start another exodus.

If Isaiah was all about tackling communal baggage, Paul then decides that he needs to address individual baggage. In writing to the people of Philippi, Paul finds himself being reflective. This is not my favorite Paul passage, as he sounds a little too boastful for my liking, but he's boasting to

make a point. If salvation, righteousness, belovedness are based on things that people have done in the past, well then he is *set*. He has all the right credentials. Yet, he tells them, all of that, everything in his past he counts as loss, because the only way forward is ahead. His salvation, righteousness, and belovedness are not because of things he has done in the past, but because of what Christ *has done* and *is doing* in his present and future. Paul encourages the Philippians to let go of what lies behind, the good, the bad, the indifferent, and look ahead to where they are going. Their lives are not defined by the baggage they carry. Christ took all of that baggage and gave them a new thing to carry...love, and that is the only thing that defines them from here on out. It's not that they can't learn from their past, to take those things that they've experienced and grow from them, but they don't have to constantly relive them, they don't have to fear that where they have been is where they must stay. Christ gives them a new way forward, free from the baggage, free from the weight, free from everything except Christ's abounding love, grace, and forgiveness.

Because here's the thing about baggage, about constantly looking to the past for what we need, those things put limitations not only on our own hearts, but on what we think God is capable of. If we're constantly expecting God to act in the same way, to bring light into our lives in the

same way, to deliver us in the same way, if we're constantly expecting to get what we've always gotten, we leave zero room for something new, or least we don't give ourselves permission to *see* the new ways God is acting in our lives. It doesn't mean that those things in the past, the baggage we carry is all negative or bad. Isaiah tells the people, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." The Exodus and wilderness journey weren't *bad experiences*, they were salvific and loving and incredible, but they are moving on to a new thing and in order to see that new thing that can't constantly be looking behind them to what was or what they think is going to happen.

We are a lot like both audiences in our lessons, we carry a ton of communal baggage and a lot of individual baggage. As a community, we look back over the last two years and it can feel like enough weight to take more than a puddle jumper out of the air. It's heavy and it's hard and it's been exhausting, and it has left us longing for what was before all of this started. But...if we're constantly looking back to life in February of 2020, longing to go back there, we're never going to see the new thing God is doing today, right now, in 2022. We can honor the past, learn from it, grow from it, but we cannot be defined by it. The church has to be willing to see and be a new thing, to trust that God is helping us do a new thing.

I don't know if our individual baggage is harder or easier than the communal, it's just different. We all know the things we have been through not just over the last two years, but in our lives. Some good, some bad, some joyful, some breathtakingly painful. We haul that baggage around and keep adding to it so much we're going to have fees put on it at the airport for it being too heavy. But the more we haul it around, the more we are going to let it define us, and it will make us think we are incapable of change, of experiencing anything different than what has been, or that it will taint everything that is to come.

The promise, the hope that we have is that the cross, the love of God is the greatest airplane rearranger of all time. God takes all that baggage, all those burdens, and says please let me hold this for you, so that you're no longer off balance, on the brink of sinking, so you can fly free. It doesn't mean it disappears, but it gives us the freedom, the ability to see our world, our lives as capable of change, capable of something new and wondrous. We do not have to be beholden to a seating pattern, a weight limit that is going to make us fly recklessly and live in a way that isn't safe or healthy. The challenge is being willing to come up to the desk when God calls us to move things around, to be willing to hand our baggage over and say it's not ours to carry anymore, and see where this flight with God takes us. **AMEN!!**