

Kyle Duff '15/'16
Friday Morning Prayer Reflection
Valparaiso University 09/25/20
Homecoming Weekend.

Good Morning to all! It certainly makes me sad that I cannot be physically with you today- I would never miss a chance to visit Valpo if I could, but am still thankful for the opportunity to share my reflection.

I walked out of the room full of theology majors, faculty and guests after presenting my senior thesis, out of the Arts and Sciences Building down the walkway past the library, past the Campanile bell tower, and made my way up the [this?] long, long aisle of the Chapel. I stared up at the Christus Victor, with swelling gratitude, and churning joy, sat down in the first chair...**and wept**. I wept, and I sang, and I prayed, and I laughed. I gave thanks and praise to God for God's grace, for the journey I was now completing, and the vocation yet unfolding, for the friends and family I had gained, and for the home that I had made.

When I was here, there were all these videos that were put together for promotional campaigns and special events, and as I remember them, what I can vividly hear is President Mark Heckler's voice saying, "**Valpo: where passion meets purpose.**" A HUGE shout-out to the marketing team that strung that one together. I can guarantee that the applicable alliteration worked for at least one student! Because Valpo was the space that helped me discern my calling, when I arrived a little, well...we'll call it *adventurous*.

See I began my time at Valpo as, what they called the undecided majors at that time the "Exploratory." Exploring I had done. I took my parents on, I believe, Nineteen in-person college visits, all over the place, trying to find a school that would be a good fit, though I didn't really know what a good fit would be, or what I was looking for- it certainly wasn't a specific degree program. And somehow I ended up at this place, as an Exploratory major, as, well, somewhat of an **exile**- beginning what felt like an utterly new phase of life, living in a new space that was not my childhood house, with little sense of purpose or direction in what I was trying to accomplish there, not so sure of who I yet was, certainly not who I was to become.

When the author of Isaiah 43 proclaims the words of God in our text for today, they are intended to meet the people of Israel who have been living in exile within the Babylonian empire for almost 70 years. These were people who had been brutally conquered and captured, saw their cities and shelters burned, communities slaughtered in warfare, and had left their known connection with God in the temple at Jerusalem behind them. Much of Isaiah 1-39, which many scholars call first Isaiah includes mostly indictments against the people for neglecting the ways of God and living lives of injustice. Second Isaiah however, from which our text is taken from, begins a turn towards consolation. I believe our text today brings words of identity affirmation, comfort, vision, hope, and inspiration for a people who deeply longed for connection to the God from whom they felt estranged. God comes to them and says: See, "I am about to do a new thing!" -And That's what God did and has continued to do for me over and over and over through Valpo.

And God did some new things for me *quick!* Only a few months in to my first semester, after some very intentional conversations with folks at the career center, space away from my previous context, developing new friendship and communal support, and prayerful discernment, I came to discover that I felt that my gifts, passions and longings landed me nowhere else than on a call to public ministry on behalf of the church. And so I set on my path. I grew up in the Christian, and even Lutheran, tradition my whole life until that point, and would even say I had already made my faith my own. However, I will quote my Entrance Essay to the Candidacy process for the ELCA, that my next few years at Valpo served as “the radical catalyst of a more passionate, diverse, authentic, Spirit-fueled and led, deeper and wider faith of service, leadership, and far-reaching love.” Through my spiritual and personal development I came to reflect critically on my faith in this wide world, learn more about God’s activity in our society and creation and how I could join effectively in this work, and maybe most importantly, I found a rootedness in a community of siblings in Christ that I would come to, and continue to, call my home.

See, for me, coming back here (well, now being virtually In Spirit there), truly is a homecoming. I view home as a space, place, time, or people in which one can truly be oneself, that one can return to in order to be reminded of who they are, and also where they may be going. For me, this place and people has been one of those unique contexts where the vale of paradise is moved aside and I hear God’s voice proclaim to me most clearly: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” God spoke these words to the Israelites rapturously declaring that they would be returning to their homeland and united to God once again, and that nothing would get in their way. Oftentimes, when I struggle to remember to know who I am, or am discouraged about the perils of the way ahead, I return to this this sacred space where I hear my identity assured, and I am reinvigorated by knowing that God will face these new fires with me, that the waters will not overwhelm me. God walks with me. God did during my college years, and God makes a way in the wilderness for this lost and chaotic world even now...

I must say however, that though the words “homecoming” ring true for me, I know this is not the case for all people. I mourn that this space, and places like it all across our nation can be inhospitable at times or entirely to folks who don’t look or sound or walk like me, who may be ostracized by the color of their skin, the people they call kin, or past countries they’ve lived in. During this moment in our country, here at the Chapel again I weep, but in a new way, for black and brown bodies that must continue to scream “I can’t breathe!,” “Stop Killing Us,” who cannot even sleep in their own beds at night without facing violence and for whom “Justice” can’t seem to serve. For that I mourn, for that I, and we, must confess, seek repentance, and follow as disciples where God is making a new way... My invitation to you today is to open your ears, your eyes, and your hearts to where God is doing a new thing in your life and your communities, and follow after this with all your might. -Pursuing my vocation has recently taken me somewhere new. Some of the people that helped make this place home for me are also now encouraging me to be the witness God chose me to be. At their inspiration I’m now part of a group we lovingly term “Valpolitical Education” as we seek to gain knowledge, and change our hearts and lifestyles to take part in dismantling white supremacy and other forms of oppression in our society. So also, may your discernment not stop with

your degree, and may your passions be always meet their purpose as God has so far done for me!

And Thanks be to our God who has named and claimed ALL folks, who is gathering EVERYONE from the ends of the earth so that all may be one, and who is doing a new thing even in this place, even right now, so that all may celebrate a glorious homecoming. Peace be with you all.