

WEEK 1: Thoughts from Exile

Much of what everyone is going through today feels like we are in exile and I don't know about you, but it makes me think of the Babylonian Exile for the children of Israel. There are several books in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) that talk about the Exile from a historical perspective (e.g., 2 Kings, parts of Daniel and passages in the book of Jeremiah) as well as an emotional one (Lamentations, Psalms and several minor prophets).

Just like today, the experience for many of the exiles in Babylon day-to-day life was a nightmare. However, for others it wasn't that bad. Sure, the loss of freedom of movement was hard but there is evidence that some prospered while in Babylon. In fact, after it was over some chose to stay in Babylon and by the 1st century CE it had become a prominent center for Jewish scholarship!

Maybe some of you have noticed differences that are positive. Maybe you have had more time with your family or that sibling that was away at college who is now home with you. Perhaps there are some where being physically present in school was very hard because it was not an emotionally safe place.

This week we are going to be exploring some passages from the period of the Babylonian Exile to see what it teaches us about surviving in these tough times. Here are the readings we will explore this week if you want to get ahead and start thinking about them.

Monday

Jeremiah 29:4-7

Tuesday

Habakkuk 1:2-4
Lamentations 2:19

Wednesday

Esther 4:9-14
Psalms 22:1-5

Thursday

Ezra 9:1-4
Ezra 10:16-17, 44
Daniel 9:24

Friday

Jeremiah 32:6-15
Leviticus 25:25-28
Isaiah 40:3-5

Monday

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

So first a little background...

We find the prophet Jeremiah still in Jerusalem speaking to the people and telling them to accept the fact that life as they know is going to change. The armies of Babylon will overthrow the Kingdom of Judah and the remaining peoples will either be killed or taken into captivity.

In this passage, however, Jeremiah is writing a letter to those who are already in exile. Can you imagine? You are ripped out of your home, taken to a foreign country where you don't speak the language, the food is weird, and most importantly you have no personal freedom. What Jeremiah is telling them is two-fold: (1) you are going to be there awhile and (2) make the best of it.

I imagine there were any number of "prophets" there in Babylon who were telling people what they wanted to hear – things are ok, this is not a problem, we will be going home soon so don't worry. Jeremiah is indirectly telling them the cold hard truth: this is not going to end any time soon.

Sound familiar? Amidst the swirl of opinions as to how long we are going to be held in captivity by COVID 19, we need to follow Jeremiah's advice. Now, I don't expect any of you to literally go build houses or get married; however, planting a garden might be nice! What we do need to take away is that we should live into this moment and look at the possibilities it might bring to us. Don't just sit and wait idly by for two weeks to pass because two weeks is likely to be two months. Take walks, spend time with your family, start a spiritual practice ...

So, how did it turn out for those in exile? Well if you know your Old Testament, they are there for seventy years! I imagine children were born, grew up, raised families and died there having never been able to see Jerusalem for themselves. As we have no physical church to go to, they had no temple – no place for sacrifice and worship of God. So they turned inward and established a new covenant with their Lord in prayer and thanksgiving and they overcame the struggles of their situation.

It was during the Babylonian exile that much of the Old Testament as we know it today took shape. The books of Esther and Ruth were written along with a retelling of the law and stories of Moses we now know as the book of Deuteronomy. Jewish culture and tradition as we know it today was given birth during the time of the exile. Finally, there arose a new way of learning making God's word more

accessible to all the peoples: the way of the teacher or rabbi as they would have called it. Nearly 600 years later a rabbi from the town of Nazareth would travel the lands of Israel giving new meaning to that word and making it truly accessible to all nations.

Peace

Tuesday

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you 'Violence!'
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgement comes forth perverted.

(Habakkuk 1:2-4)

Arise, cry out in the night,
at the beginning of the watches!
Pour out your heart like water
before the presence of the Lord!

(Lamentations 2:19)

As much as yesterday's reading was about hope and staying positive, today we focus on the reality that the times we are in are stressful and for some they are incredibly scary. While my family and I imagine most of you are fortunate enough to be able to survive this crisis, many are in very dire circumstances.

Today's passages are taken from two books in the Old Testament which I'm guessing many of you may not be familiar with and might take you some time to find in your Bibles! Both are thought to have been written during the time of the Exile, the minor prophet Habakkuk and the book of Lamentations attributed to the prophet Jeremiah.

Do you notice anything about how the text is constructed? It is presented in stanzas like a poem.

Besides being a literary trick to take up more space on a page (Remember that the next time one of your teachers gives you a minimum page limit and you are running out of ideas!) it is also part of a very important device in Jewish literature. The word of the Lord is said to be like fire, in fact when the Torah is read in synagogue you will often see people bowing and raising randomly. That is because fire moves and it never moves the same way. As we read the word of the Lord it can show us new meanings every time we read it. So what does that have to do with spacing?

The belief goes farther: that there is black fire and white fire. The black fire being the words on the page but the white fire being the white space that exist on the page. To the devout Jew it is just as important to notice what is not said (in the white fire) as it is in the word (the black fire) itself. So when we see this device, we need to pay special attention to what surrounds the word, especially its emotional context.

The prophet Habakkuk is mad! And who is he mad at? God – and he lets him know it! I often say that my favorite minor prophet is Habakkuk because he shows us it is ok to cry out to God in anger and frustration, letting Him know how you feel. In fact, there are a number of Psalms that if put into today's language would make us very uncomfortable because they are an outpouring of raw emotion.

If this specific situation makes you angry or scared or frustrated or lonely – cry out to God! If the family situation you live in is not always healthy and you really needed the space of school – cry out to God!!

The second passage from Lamentations tells us to pour out our hearts like water before the Lord. There is a Jewish prayer practice called *hitbodedut* which literally means "seclusion". In the practice you are to walk with God alone and talk to Him. More importantly you are to talk to God in your own native language. In the Jewish faith, almost all prayers are said in community and are spoken in Hebrew. Here, the practice is exactly the opposite and it is this practice that we see Jesus model in the gospels where he goes off by himself to pray. I like to think that talking in my native language means that there are no rules, no formal structures to the conversation, no things I can't say, no phrase or emotion too raw. God wants to hear it – so cry out!

Peace

Wednesday

Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, 'All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come to the king for thirty days.' When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.' (Esther 4:9-14)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,

enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted;

they trusted, and you delivered them.

To you they cried, and were saved;

in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

Psalms 22:1-5

At first glance these two passages don't seem like they go together. The first is from the book of Esther, a story about an orphaned young woman who becomes a princess during the latter part of the Exile. Her bravery in the end saves her people and that act is celebrated during the Jewish festival of Purim. The second is a psalm of David which was said to have been written when he was grieving the death of his son Absalom. Many of you may find the beginning of this psalm very familiar for in fact it's what Jesus quoted on the cross right before he died.

What is interesting though is Jesus was not the first in the scriptures to quote this psalm. It was believed that Esther said this psalm to herself as she walked the halls of the palace to confront the king as her uncle Mordecai had asked.

This takes us to today's reflection. Yesterday we talked about the flood of emotions that accompany times of exile and isolation. Probably at the root of those feelings is fear, more specifically the fear associated with uncertainty. With the steady rise in the number of reported cases of COVID 19, our minds start to go to those places of uncertainty – how will graduation work? Are we going to be able to go on summer mission trips? What about Montreat?

Esther was faced with the uncertainty and fear that she might risk her own life in approaching the king without being summoned. Often when we are uncertain, we feel abandoned but here is the important part – Psalms 22 does not stop with a crying out in fear of being abandoned. Reading further in the text we see the psalmist hold on to the promise that in times of trial and exile – God is still there with us. No coincidence that the very next psalm reminds us that He is our Shepherd who is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death.

When I face these types of situations, I look for a single verse or statement that I can hold on to as a source of comfort. I have to admit that this week that source was rather surprising. It was not the poetic words of the Psalmist or some Jewish midrash penned by a scholarly Rabbi. It was from Princess Anna in Frozen II. In these uncertain times I “take a step and then step again. All that I can do is the next right thing”.

Peace

Thursday

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, 'The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, ... For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.' ... All these had married foreign women, and they sent them away with their children. (Ezra 9:1-3; 10:44)

And as I watched, the beast was put to death,
and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.

As for the rest of the beasts,
their dominion was taken away,
but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven.

And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.

To him was given dominion
and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed

(Daniel 7:11-14)

Yesterday you might have been wondering how the passages went together. Today I am sure there are at least a few of you wondering if today's readings might be a typo. Am I reading the correct verses???? What does this have to do with exile?

Today's passages are admittedly obscure, especially the one from Daniel. As a child and into my teenage years I spent my Sunday School hours in a number of different fundamental evangelical churches where this passage from Daniel was always top of mind, because it is the quintessential passage of the end times – the apocalyptic times when Jesus will return as the Messiah, and what proceeded that return: some sort of global disaster.

In contrast, the passages from the book of Ezra are set at the very end of the Exile, when a group of faithful Jews move back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Often when you hear mention of Ezra you will also hear the name Nehemiah and in fact, in the Hebrew Bible, the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah are contained in a single book. When the Jews came back to Jerusalem to start over, Ezra was really into making sure that the new Jewish nation remained pure. So much so that he created a series of laws that forbade men from marrying women of other cultures. In this scene Ezra is commanding all the returning men that were married to foreign women to divorce them and turn them and their children away. When we are faced with situations of great distress, uncertainty, and fear, the knee-jerk reaction is to want to blame someone else and create an “us versus them” mentality. This was true then and is unfortunately true now. You have probably heard COVID 19 and the corona virus referred to as the “China” virus in order to assign blame. There have been reports of anti-Asian sentiment and violence against Asian American because of this. It was no different in the time of the Exile, Ezra wanted to separate us versus them. It is perhaps no coincidence that his cohort Nehemiah’s first action when returning to Jerusalem was to build a wall so that “us” can keep “them” separate. What is fascinating though is the response of the Jewish scribes and sages. Scholars now believe that the book of Ruth was written at this time and was in direct opposition to these new laws set out by Ezra. When faced with an attitude of us and them, we have a story of the epitome of loyalty found in a Moabite woman (a foreigner; one of them) who blindly trusted in God and married a Jewish man. In fact, the offspring of that marriage led to the birth of King David and ultimately to Jesus. This story was used to show the problems with Ezra’s logic and served as a reminder that the Jewish nation had been called during the covenant of Abraham to be a light to all nations.

So, what about that passage from Daniel? Well, the other slant on times of extreme uncertainty, especially and unfortunately when they are accompanied by death, is that we are entering the end times – that time when God will come to judge the righteous and the sinners. The logic here is that anything bad that happens on a global scale must be the judgement of God and a sign that the world is coming to an end (aka what Daniel was writing about). The problem with this argument is that it is most often used to again strike fear and perhaps, more importantly, remove personal responsibility. I mean if the world is coming to an end, then hey, why not go out and have a huge party together – forget this social distancing policy! As you can see it can be dangerous.

Now, there is a place for the visions of Daniel as well as the other apocalyptic book we have in the New Testament, Revelations, but they are both very complex and have puzzled scholars for years. Daniel was one of the last books to make it into the Hebrew Bible and John Calvin (one of our Presbyterian forefathers) wrote a commentary on every book of the Bible except one: Revelations.

The point being: don’t let fear rule the day. Don’t let it cause you to start looking at people suspiciously or fall into the trap that this is all happening because of some great sin. What those thoughts tend to do is take you away from focusing on what you can do to stay positive and help in these trying times!

Peace

Friday

Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, 'Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours. (Jeremiah 32:6-7)

If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next-of-kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold. If the person has no one to redeem it, but then prospers and finds sufficient means to do so, the years since its sale shall be computed and the difference shall be refunded to the person to whom it was sold, and the property shall be returned.

Leviticus 25:25-26

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Isaiah 40:3-5

In our final readings about the Exile we return to the prophet Jeremiah and a rather curious action he took while Jerusalem was under final siege by the Babylonian army. Bringing this back into context, King Nebuchadnezzar had already invaded Jerusalem several times and each time had taken people back to Babylon to place them in captivity. In this part of the story, Nebuchadnezzar is fed up with these people from the Kingdom of Judah and lays siege to the capital, Jerusalem. After a year of laying siege, he finally invades, destroys the Temple, and burns down the entire city.

However, Jeremiah takes a break from all his prophesying to buy some land. This is most peculiar and would be like me buying a retail store or a restaurant that was for sale while we are all sheltering at home. It is probably not hard to see what Jeremiah is trying to say to the people that are still in Jerusalem: We are coming back some day! His message to the people was one of hope, one that as bad as the situation appears today, and it was really, really bad, it will get better. We will overcome!

What is also important to note is the circumstance under which Jeremiah buys the field. Back to my

example: There could be a reason I might buy a restaurant during the middle of social distancing – I will probably get a good deal and then once this crisis is over, I can sell it and make a big profit. Ouch, that dilutes the message doesn't it? It reduces Jeremiah to an opportunist who is using his knowledge of the Exile and return as insider trading advice on now being a good time to buy up land. There is only one problem with that logic: Jeremiah was buying the land from a relative and thus fulfilling a responsibility outlined in the book of Leviticus referred to as kinsman redeemer.

Our second reading is from the 25th chapter of Leviticus and it refers to the obligation that a relative would have to buy the land of a family member should they fall into financial trouble. But here is the best part, once the family member was able to get back on their feet financially then they could buy the land back at a commensurate price (aka no profit taking). The message: Someone who has means during trying times is obligated to help those who are in trouble. What Jeremiah is showing us is not only a message of hope but a message of compassion. Reaching out to others who are in more dire situations than ourselves is always something that God wants us to do, but even more so when there are times of trouble. There was no financial gain to be made by Jeremiah. He was just holding the land until his cousin Hanamel could pay him back.

In the final passage we see familiar words of encouragement from the prophet Isaiah. This text was quoted by John the Baptist in Matthew 3:1 as part of the opening scene of Jesus' baptism. It may also cause you to hum a line from Handel's Messiah or the opening of Godspell, the musical. However, what is easy to miss about this passage are the words at the end of verse 5, "and all people shall see it together" emphasis on all. The point here is the universal message of compassion and hope. Isaiah is reminding the people of Israel that they are to be a light to all nations. We as Christians see that fulfilled in the life of Jesus but the message is clear. During this time of crisis, we need to always make sure we do not lose sight of that fact that we are all children of God. Taking care of one other extends farther than our own families.

Peace