

Headed Back Home

Jeremiah 29:1-14

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We're remembering the history of journeys made in the Bible, with hopes that these ancient journeys might have something to say about our own journey to the place God is calling us. We began with the journey of Abraham, called to a new place and to be a blessing to the ends of the earth. We then followed with the journey of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, on a God-led journey through the sea and away from oppression. Next we read the journey of the Israelites in the wilderness, maintained through their desperation by the grace of God and the leadership of Moses. And last week we read about the call of Joshua, the courageous and faithful one, called to lead the people out of the wilderness and into the promised land.

The Israelites finally returned to the promised land around 1400 BCE, as twelve tribes, who needed some centuries to figure out how they would best be governed and led. Finally they settled on a monarchy, which culminated in the great reigns of David and Solomon in the 10th century BCE. These were the greatest days in the history of Israel, which would come to be squandered by lesser rulers in the ensuing centuries, who formed alliances with other rulers, and loosened rules against worshipping foreign gods. Israeli power eventually broke down, and gave way to the mighty Babylonians in 597 BCE, when the Babylonians raided and sacked Jerusalem, and took many of the Israelite leaders and people into exile in Babylon, to the northeast.

It is this period, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews during which the prophetic work of Jeremiah appears. Jeremiah, now, was a bullfrog, was a good friend of mine. I never understood a single word he said, but I helped him drink a-his wine. Jeremiah was also a prophet who stood in the face of Israel as they strayed from Yahweh and their called purpose, and saw the Babylonian destruction as inevitable. But after many Jewish leaders had been led away into exile, the prophet Jeremiah writes to them this follow up word.

Jeremiah 29:1-14 (NRSV)

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. 2This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. 3The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiyah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: 4Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6Take 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. 7But 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. 8For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream,* 9for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

10 For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. 11For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. 12Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. 13When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, 14I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

This was a letter from home, a prophetic letter from Jeremiah in Jerusalem. Jeremiah was the doomsayer of Israel, the prophet who warned the Israelites of their faithlessness and their coming

destruction, he was the doomsayer who'd been right. As Jeremiah had warned, Babylon had in fact invaded and conquered and destroyed the temple, the sacred place of worship and identity for the people, the place where Yahweh lived even. The conquering was complete, they'd taken the land, the temple, and sent many of the leaders of Israel-Judah into exile in Babylon. Many Israelite leaders and people were carried away from their homeland, carried away from their place of comfort and identity, and lived in exile. So this letter from home, if you will, might have been received a bit like a letter to a kid who had been sentenced to boot camp from his or her particularly judgy and patronizing mother. A letter you want to read because it's from a reliable source, but you're just not sure you can take all the "I told you sos."

Now exile, the condition of being expelled from your homeland, is, of course, a defining experience in the memory of the Jews, and a key theme in the story of the Bible. A wealth of biblical literature was born out of the exile, seeing it coming, dealing with it, overcoming it. Exiled, can't get home.

This was a defining experience in the life of a people, can't get home, perhaps because of its drama, but perhaps also because of the chords exile strikes in our spiritual lives. Can't get home is a common condition of the spirit for those of us who ever have to grow up and move on. There is often an unsettledness away from home, a crisis of identity, away from the place of your youth, away from the place where folks were looking out for you, away from the place where you learned about the world.

There is a classic scene in the movie *Shawshank Redemption*, in which the protagonist Andy Dufresne is dealing with life in prison. While in this state of exile, Andy got a little leverage with the prison staff by using his accounting skills, and negotiated a brief moment for his friends on roof detail, a few cold beers. In this brief moment of respite from their exile, which his prison mate named Red narrates like this: "We sat and drank with the sun on our shoulders and felt like free men. [Heck], we could have been tarring the roof of one of our own houses. We were the lords of all creation. As for Andy - he spent that break hunkered in the shade, a strange little smile on his face, watching us drink his beer... You could argue he'd done it to curry favor with the guards. Or, maybe make a few friends among us cons. Me, I think he did it just to feel normal again, if only for a short while."¹ A chance to feel normal again is what is so compelling about Andy's character, perhaps because a chance to feel normal again is something so many of us covet.

For some, spiritual exile may be a yearning for something in the past, a yearning to go back home, to a simpler, safer-feeling time. For others, spiritual exile may be a yearning for something that hasn't yet come. Can't get home, can't get to that home imagined in the future, that place of promise and peace that would be unlike anything we've known. Home can be what you remember, but home can also be what you picture, and in our shared faith we imagine home as the promised land, the reign of God on earth.

To the people of the exile, Jeremiah writes a word from the Lord, and for a change this word from Jeremiah is a hopeful one. But for a people in exile, the word is perhaps a bit unexpected. To all the exiles, make homes, plant gardens, build families, and seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you, in Babylon, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. This was not just a message about returning home, this was a message about enduring the exile, about doing work, and about forgiving the enemy, and about reconciling yourself with those around you, for in the welfare of the community you will find your welfare. This was far more than a message to "make the most of it," the language used here, build, plant, and multiply, that is the language of God's relationship with the people, language used in the creation stories, language used in the call stories of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. This was a very significant and meaning-filled message to the people in exile, because the message behind the message is – God's promises and presence still apply. In all your experiences of alienation and marginalization and dislocation and disconnection, O exiles, says the Lord, I have not abandoned you, I have not forgotten my covenant with you, I will be faithful to you. It may feel different, you may be among strangers, you may even be among your enemies, but even there my faithfulness applies

¹ *Shawshank Redemption*, written by Stephen King and adapted for screenplay by Frank Darabont. Castle Rock, 1994.

and my call to you applies, you are still children of Abraham, you are still blessed to be a blessing, and to build and to plant and to multiply and to be makers of peace.

I will fulfill my promise and bring you back to this place, Jerusalem. I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare, a future with hope. And while you may not get home in the way you imagine it, you can use this time to experience being home with me, the Lord your God. There's a modern cathedral in England -- a cathedral built within the lifetimes of many of us -- that features one whole wall made of glass, and etched into the glass are the huge figures -- four feet wide and ten feet tall -- of saints and angels. They're doing something rather ridiculous, having a party -- blowing trumpets and making merry and swinging from the chandeliers and dancing across that massive wall of glass. The glass wall looks upon the city, upon the world outside that is characterized by hardship and anguish, hunger and disease, war and murder, and acid rhetoric over power and religion. It seems absurd, throwing a party over times like these, looking through the lenses of a party upon a world and a city that are hurting.

That cathedral is located in Coventry, which helps understand the whole thing. For, in November of 1940, Coventry suffered the longest air raid endured in any one night by any city in England during World War II. It was an air raid which killed and destroyed and reduced the whole city to ruins, including its cathedral. When they built the new cathedral, they chose, as the purpose of its ministry, the theme of "resurrection through sacrifice." Of carrying on in faith through it all, and trusting in and experiencing the new life that lies beyond this kind of being.

So to look through that modern glass wall, beyond all the saints dancing in heaven, is then to see the painful ruins of the old bombed-out church. The rubble of those ruins, that so aptly symbolized life in the middle of time, cannot be seen through that glass wall except in light of the promise from beyond time -- the promise that God gathers up all of our flawed history, gathers it up into God's holy and redemptive purposes -- and such a visual encounter with God's promise for the future permeates that pile of rubble with meaning that is not otherwise there. The Church, in the middle of time, as we journey forward through it all, as we build and plant and make relationships and trust in God, is the embodiment of resurrection through sacrifice!²

Journeying forward and carrying on through it all, in hope, in trust of God's presence even in the places of exile in our lives, is participating in this process of resurrection through sacrifice. It is trusting in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, the words of the Lord. This kind of trust was exemplified by a confederate soldier who penned a poem, found in his pocket after his life had been lost on the battlefield of the Civil War. His words are these:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve; I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked for health, that I might do greater things; I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy; I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power, that I might have praise; I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life; I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for--but everything I had hoped for...³

To live not out of asking, but out of hoping, not out of wanting, but out of trusting, to carry on this way even in our places of exile, is living the life to which God has always called us. Living in this kind of hope, we are surely, as God intends, always heading back home.

² Credit to Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw, President of Austin Presbyterian Seminary, for this illustration of the gospel.

³ Credit to Rev. Joanna Adams, former Pastor of Morningside Presbyterian Church, for this illustration, from the Poem of a Confederate Soldier.