

Coming Home

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delivered October 29, 2006

The text I am about to read to you was written when the Jews were in exile in Babylon after having been defeated in battle by the Babylonians.. That puts the dating of this text in the late 500's BC –sometime after 587 BC.

It is written by the prophet Jeremiah. In it, as you will hear, Jeremiah lays out a vision for his fellow Judeans. He promises that one day their exile will end and they will return to their beloved homeland. It is, then, a text about homecoming. Cool! Isn't that appropriate for today? On a first reading of the text, this last week, I was struck not only by the fact of homecoming, but also by the similarities between the imagined homecoming of the Jews and our own homecoming. I will share these with you as I read the text. Listen now for the word of God.

Jeremiah 31:7-9

Exile. It's difficult to imagine what exile must have been like for the Jews. I have always envisioned something like 6th century BC refugee camps—tents encircling a central water source; people sick and listless, scratching out a meager living from the land. According to archeological evidence that is not the case at all. I've had to revise my ideas. From my readings this week I have learned that the Jews assimilated well in Babylonia. Cuneiform tablets from that time reveal that in Babylonia the Jews took up various professions, including international trade and banking. There is even proof that their language, Aramaic, replaced Babylonian as the common language in commercial transactions. They weren't so different, then, from the many, many immigrants who have migrated to the US and have successfully assimilated into our American culture.

Yet, for sure exile, while not totally devastating, was a sad experience, particularly for the first generation of Jews to that foreign land. We have it from other Biblical sources, just how sad that time was. Listen to this description of exile, for example, from Psalm 137: By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for song, and our tormentors, asked us for mirth, saying, "Sing to us one of the songs of Zion!" How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right

hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!”

The Jew’s sadness motivated them to preserve their old life customs for posterity. And that has been a boon for us. Just as we put together photograph albums so that our grandchildren and great grandchildren will know something about their roots, so the Jews, in exile, finally got serious about writing down their stories for future generations. A great deal of the Old Testament, which up until the exile had been transmitted orally, was written down during this period. For sure, without the exile, the Old Testament would be less of a book and more like a pamphlet!

This week I have been thinking about homecoming—gee, I wonder why? But I have also been doing a lot of thinking about exile. I don’t know why you, our visitors, are here today—maybe it’s just because you received a nifty invitation in the mail; or you wanted to take a drive in the country and marvel at the change in leaves. Maybe, though, you are here because you were drawn to the notion of homecoming. You came because you had an urge to come home to your roots—to where you grew up, or to reconnect with old friends, or to worship in the same place your parents or grandparents worshiped; and to revisit the grounds in which your great-grandparents and even great-great grandparents are buried. The fact that we call this a homecoming is revealing, I think. It points to the fact that you, like the Jews in Babylon, are homesick; that you have a sense that you belong somewhere other than where you live. You might say that you have a sense of living in exile.

If that is true, you are not alone. Walter Brueggemann, probably the premier Old Testament scholar of the 20th century, suggests that exile is experienced by all people. He says, “The course of human existence is by definition exile.” (from *Cadences of Home*) I had to stop and think about that, and for sure a depressing thought, but after some consideration, I really believe he is right. I think it is only as children that we have a true sense of home. When we are very young we never question our place in our families, do we? We just are. We never question whether our home is really our home, either. It just is. And most of us, as children, really do feel loved unconditionally, don’t we? But as we reach adulthood, that feeling of being part of a family, of being home and of being loved unconditionally, is replaced by one of separation, which I think, is a great synonym for exile. Separation equals exile.

I even think I know when the feeling of exile first takes hold in us. See if you don’t agree. Last week I was talking with a man who shared with me a vivid childhood

memory. He says he was around ten years old. He and the rest of his family were living at the beach year round. There had been a spell of cold and rainy weather and he was anxious to get outside and play in the sand. Finally, the cold and wet subsided. He gathered his toy trucks and tractors and headed out to the beach. Then he bent down and began running those trucks and tractors back and forth creating mini tire tracks in the sand. Vroom, vroom, vroom, back and forth, back and forth. But something was different. He could not fathom why he was doing what he was doing. It seemed so silly, this pretending. He says, “The magic was not there anymore. I stood up and looked at the horizon, where the sky met the ocean, and I thought to myself. ‘Ok, what now? What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to be?’” At that moment, even though he was only ten, he says he made a major move toward adulthood. For our purposes here today we could say that he had taken his first step on the road to Babylon.

In our state of exile, which is an exile from our youth, we realize that children can’t drive backhoes, or fly like superman. That is, we cease to believe in our own magical power. We also come to understand that the world does not revolve around us. We are not loved unconditionally by all people—as we move further into adolescence we may wonder whether even our PARENTS love us unconditionally. And probably when we do those things that adolescents do—wreck the car, or break curfew, our parents wonder the same thing. As we move further into adolescence we become restless living in our childhood home. We yearn to leave our parents’ houses and strike out on our own. Our move to college or to an apartment, though, exacerbates our nostalgia. Exile may be necessary, but it is not altogether a happy experience. It’s like broccoli and chocolate cake-- both served on the same platter.

Brueggemann believes that we create/or perhaps God provides/ remedies for our feelings of separation. Those remedies, while always a part of Jewish culture, became critically important to the Jews who lived in exile. They are or can be important to us as well as we struggle with our own sense of exile. (See *Cadences of Home* by Walter Brueggemann)

One of those remedies is participation in a sacramental life. There are religious rituals that keep us grounded in a sense of our specialness and our connectedness to each other in community and with God; our sacraments also remind of God’s unconditional love or *Hesed*, which is the Hebrew word for unconditional, steadfast love. For the Jews, that specialness, connectedness and *Hesed* was played out in circumcision and the celebration of holidays in community; For Christians they are played out primarily, I think, in Baptism and Communion. In baptism we are recognized as a child loved unconditionally by God. In Communion we speak of eating Christ’s flesh and drinking

his blood which those outside the Christian community may think sounds cannibalistic. But when we participate at the Lord's Table, we are not practicing cannibalism, we are becoming one with Christ by symbolically ingesting Christ. I mean, how much closer can you get?! In participating in those sacraments and in remembering our participation in those sacraments we lose our sense of separateness not only with God, but with each other too, since these are public events and in them we are symbolically united with each other in community .

Sabbath is also important in combating the feeling of exile. When we practice Sabbath we are, in essence, refusing to be defined by our production. Most of us don't really practice Sabbath anymore, if by Sabbath we mean Sunday afternoons spent sitting on our front porches watching the chickens scratch and the cows graze. That's the way my grandparents practiced Sabbath, anyway. However, we do have our vacations! Having just come back from vacation, I will confess to you that I did not pick up a pen, and I made very few phone calls in relation to my job as pastor. I slept late, hiked jockey ridge, and ate lots of seafood! Vacations, if we do them right, remind us that we are human beings and not human doings. We are children of God first, loved for who we are and not for what we produce.

Finally, our churches—as for the Jews in exile, their synagogues—keep us grounded in our sense of home. For those of us here in this sanctuary, presumably it is Cove Church that keeps us grounded in a sense of home. Cove has no bouncers and requires no background checks. For heaven's sake, we don't even charge an entrance fee! You are welcome, and not in the way that Walmart says you are welcome, as a ploy to get your money. You are welcome simply because you are part of us and you belong to us as we are part of you and we belong to you. We are all of us part of the family of God.

As I said, sacraments, Sabbath and our church communities are antidotes to our separateness—to our sense of exile. However, they are not efficacious. They are only partial remedies. They lie somewhere in that vast expanse between panacea and cure; nostrum and healing balm. So it is also with returning home.

Jeremiah gives the exiles a vision of homecoming. Presumably that vision kept them going in the hard times, helping to overcome their depression and despair. But the reality was different from Jeremiah's vision. We pick up the story of the exiles in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The exiles return home to find a land that is much changed from the one they remember. Imagine rodents, and insects burrowing and scavenging in what was left of houses and fields. The Jews' beloved temple, too, lay in ruins. The walls that were broken and scorched by the Babylonians had not been repaired in the 50 years

since their leaving. In a sense they were STILL in exile. They were in exile from their memories of home.

Which leads us to conclude that even homecoming does not relieve our sense of exile. You can go back to the town you grew up in, go the house you once lived in, even sleep in the very same bed you used to sleep in, and still be homesick. The tree in your front yard, the one you used to climb and have picnics in, has been chopped down—the bed you used to sleep in so comfortably is suddenly much too short, so that your feet hang over. Will we never, ever recover from our homesickness? I don't think so. Sorry to say, it is just not part of God's plan.

We read in the Old Testament: A wandering Aramean was our father. And in the New we read, "our Lord has nowhere to lay his head." So it is with us. We must second what Augustine says, "My heart is restless until it finds its rest in you." We are made for God. We are made to seek union with God. Our childhood and our religious practices give us a foretaste of what that homecoming will be like. Until that time, we wander this earth, doing our best to become all that God would have us become but always restless to be on our way home.

Amen