

Back from Exile

Romans 6: 12-23

Jeremiah 28: 5-9

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Romans 6: 12-23

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jeremiah 28: 5-9, 29: 1, 4-9

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet."

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. It said: 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. For 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, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

Of the 12 tribes of Israel Judah was the most important, the most powerful of them all. This was the line of David and Solomon and the family line that prophecy foretold would be from where the Messiah would one day come.

In the early seventh century BCE, most of Judah was taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar II who destroyed the Temple, the city of Jerusalem and ultimately Israel itself as Judah was deported to Babylon. Here their exile lasted 70 years until Cyrus the Great released them so that they could return and rebuild. Only the poorest farmers and vinedressers were allowed to remain as all others fled as refugees or faced force deportations.

The once vibrant tribe of Judah was now scattered, and they had to find a way to, as the psalmist asked, "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" There was no Temple, no community, no familiar lifestyle or traditions. No longer referred to as 'Judah' but as the 'Jews' the Babylonian Captivity, the Diaspora, changed the world that they had known since God had covenanted with Abraham and Sarah, that a great nation would come from them. Everything was different.

As all of this loss is beginning to happen, the prophet Jeremiah prophesied to Judah that they can stop this from happening, that the Lord has been angered by their worship of idols and their failure to walk in the ways of the covenant. He compared them to an unfaithful wife, and as rebellious children. He tried to remind them that war, famine, and pestilence were the price that they would pay unless they repented and turned back to God. He reminded them that actions have consequences.

Yet even in the midst of this, the people refused to hear Jeremiah. His message of doom and gloom was not welcomed. This weeping prophet was shunned. Instead the people hear the false prophets such as Hananiah who promised peace was coming soon. They did not call for repentance, just patience. They promised that what has already been lost will be returned, that soon all things will return to just the way they were before. Good news is welcomed, facts were not.

As Jeremiah realized that nothing he could say would change their minds and hearts, he coached them with advice for what lied ahead, as now the road to exile must be traveled.

"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." Dream your own dreams he said, but do not be caught up in their lies and their pagan ways.

He advised the people that they must accept what has happened, they must accept that their lives have been uprooted, and so must make the best of what has happened. And just as they had heard the false prophets encourage patience for the good that would soon happen they must instead be patient for the true good that would one day be revealed by God, in God's own time. While in exile they must also trust in God, turn back to God, and trust again only in God's ways instead of the pagan idols they had come to worship. Trust in the future with hope and faith as God's plan will unfold. Beware now, as well as in the time to come, of false prophets who bear only the good news you want to hear, as they are not sent by God.

Many people heeded these words during their exile as they entered the civic and commercial life of the Babylon nation but never truly assimilated. During their captivity, the Jews built synagogues in which they met to hear the reading of God's word, so that their religious life was strengthened rather than broken down. Only now did they turn from the pagan

idols and instead treasured the fragments of the law and writings which had been brought to the foreign land.

When the time of release came three generations later, most Jews chose not to return to Jerusalem as these descendants did not have the memories and rootedness that their ancestors had once grieved for. Their world was different than what had been left behind.

In time Paul will speak to these Jewish communities of Rome, Ephesus, Colossae, and others in a prophetic way, encouraging them to present themselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life under grace as the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus.

Exile. Sent away to a foreign land in a geopolitical upheaval so all that had been their life was no longer the same, everything had changed. They suddenly found themselves creating new lives and adapting the old as best they could. Their routines and rituals were suddenly set in foreign, alien, ways.

They let go of the pagan idols and found strength and solace in reclaiming what they had let slip aside before as once it was gone could it now finally and truly be appreciated. The temple was destroyed so they built synagogues so that they could rebuild their faithful covenant with God. The bits and pieces of the law and the teachings that had gone into exile with them became important and cherished.

When the opportunity finally came to return from exile, many chose to stay where they were, where their new roots were established. They had long ago returned spiritually, and that was enough for them. The world was a much different place, and there could be no going back to what once was. They had seen too much, learned too much.

Exile. A word we can better understand over these past several months as we too have had to sing our songs in a foreign way and soon will not be singing at all. We too have been suddenly sent away in a situation beyond our control, closed off from one another, and from life as we know it. Our farmers and our vinedressers-- our essential workers-- have carried on while we, the majority, have been in exile.

While the Covid-19 virus has not been a punishment sent from God, this indeed has been a time for us to reflect upon the ways that we have not been the people God created us to be, the people that God blessed with caregiving dominion over nature and humanity, but that we have instead followed the path of the false idols that led us away from caring for creation, that led us away from the equality of all God's children, that allowed us to see disparity and accept it.

We are now discussing the time in which we will return from exile. We were all sent away, deported, at the same time but our return will be a personal one. For some people this return is already late, for others it is far too early. The thing is, there is no one right time. Each one must decide wisely for himself, herself, what is right. Later today we will choose an ad hoc task team as we begin to strategize safely and wisely, knowing that peaks and valleys can reset us back to exile.

As these past few months have shown us all, a spiritual return happened already as worship moved online, as new people joined us from home, as we all learned new ways of being Church. Our spiritual return also happened as we watched nature quickly begin to rebound, as we found new ways to connect as families and communities while masked and socially distant. And we spiritually returned when we finally began to tell the truth of the African American history, systemic prejudice and injustice, and we began to act in positive, healing, restorative ways.

The world we will return to will be different. We have learned that we must repent in order to rebuild. Welcome back, welcome back. Amen.