

Living in Exile

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March 15, 2020

Scripture Readings: 1 Peter 2:11-12; Daniel 6:6-23

Today is the third Sunday of Lent, which means it is the third Sunday of our series “Sunday Morning, Monday Morning.” We are focusing on theological and Biblical concepts or words from our tradition that may seem a bit too “churchy” to use in our everyday life. Words like sin, image of God, sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit — all seem a bit lofty and for Sunday morning use only. But, during this series, we are seeing how they can translate from Sunday to Monday.

Today’s concept is Exile. I can’t think of a more appropriate concept to talk about at this moment. Our sermon topics, titles, and Scripture passages were picked out weeks ago, so this is definitely an example of God’s providence and the work of the Holy Spirit. Because in this moment, we are all living in Exile.

Exile is an important theme in the Bible and our lives. When someone is exiled they are forced to leave their homes by some other power or people. They are forced to leave a place of community and security. Exile is an experience of disorientation. It stirs feelings of fear of the unknown and longing for return, redemption, and safety.

Exile is a theme that runs throughout the whole Biblical story starting in Genesis with Adam and Eve being exiled from the Garden of Eden. Much of the Old Testament Scriptures are dealing with the Babylonian Exile which started in 597 BCE. God’s people surrendered to Babylon and the Temple of God in Jerusalem was destroyed. Thousands of Israelites were forced to move from their homes to Babylon and other surrounding areas. The question became: How can we worship God in this foreign land? How can we worship God as exiles who long to return to our home? Our story from Daniel speaks to these questions. Even after the return from Exile years later, the Israelites always lived in the shadow of an empire and were always impacted by that exilic mindset.

The concept of exile is an important image for the early Christians as well. Christians in the early church considered themselves to be exiles in the world where their religion was just beginning and they were different from everyone else. They were forced to answer questions like: how can we continue to live as God’s people in the face of indifference or opposition? They were concerned with carving out an identity in the world as they waited for Jesus to come again. Our passage from First Peter is just one example of this in the New Testament.

Living in exile is a popular theme in the Bible - in both the Old and New Testaments. Yet, we often don’t realize how exile impacts our own lives. I mean, the Babylonian exile and diaspora happened thousands of years ago. And, we do not live under the thumb of a

conquering empire. And, Christianity has been an established religion for quite some time so we don't have to worry about making it legitimate against dominant culture.

But, really, we all experience elements of exile in our own lives. As Christians, we are called by God to live differently in the world. We are called to live lives characterized by love, forgiveness, humility, and grace - so different from the selfishness, greed, and power of the world. We are still waiting as metaphorical exiles in this world as we long for Jesus to come again for God's final restoration of heaven and earth to be complete. When we think about it, Exile is the human condition. We always find ourselves in times of longing - longing for safety, longing for community, longing for something more.

We may be able to all personally relate to exile at this time in history as we live not under the shadow of a ruling empire but under the shadow of a virus. As I'm preaching, I must admit, I feel a bit awkward and strange preaching to an empty sanctuary. There is not a single part of our lives that has not been impacted by this virus as schools and universities shut down for weeks, people are highly encouraged to work from home, and everyone seems to be rushing to the grocery store to stock up on two weeks worth of essentials in case of isolation. And of course, in person worship and church events are canceled. Pastor and theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote an amazing tweet about the impact of Coronavirus and said, "It's also now a pandemic of human disappointment. Cancelled trips, art openings, sporting events, book tours, concerts. Things folks have been planning for, working toward, and excited about-that's a lot of grieving on top of sickness."

We have been urged to practice social distancing which is actually a way to fulfill our calls to love our neighbors and protect those who are vulnerable in this community. Yet, I still find that I miss seeing everyone. There is a longing for fellowship with our church community and for gatherings such as worship, Youth Fellowship, bell practice, and the Prayer Workshop. We long for those moments of fellowship and connection with each other and with God.

There are several things we can learn from our story in Daniel today to help us through this time of exile. Daniel is a beloved book of the Bible. It has some of our favorite Bible stories in it that are popular in Sunday school like the fiery furnace and the lion's den. Many popular phrases like "that's the writing on the wall" originated in Daniel.

The first six chapters of Daniel which includes our story today were passed around while many of the Israelites were in exile. The exile was an experience of military defeat, deportation, and oppression in a new and strange land. The most crushing reality was the disruption of normal life and the constant reminder that they were a conquered people.

The Israelites were forced while exiled to come up with creative ways to continue being the people of God. One creative way to create community and identity was telling the stories of Daniel. The story of Daniel and the Lion's Den was passed around through the communities waiting in exile and gave them hope for a future. Hope that God was still there. We also see

Daniel praying three times a day toward Jerusalem. New rhythms of prayer were created while in exile as a new form of worship began.

We are in a similar moment of exile where we are not able to gather in our church home. We are not able to gather in this sanctuary now and a lot is unclear about how long it will last. Our community must take this exile opportunity to find a new way to worship together. Worshipping online is just one example of using our creativity to experience community and fellowship together during this time. The first lesson we learn from Daniel is that exile gives us an opportunity to stretch ourselves and find new ways of worship and fellowship.

Our second lesson from Daniel involves Daniel's act of faithfulness. Daniel was faced with a challenge. Members of the court schemed and plotted to get Daniel in trouble with the King. They knew that Daniel prayed three times a day and it probably wouldn't even take a month to catch him in the act. Sure enough, Daniel faithfully prayed to God despite the consequences during this difficult time.

Mahatma Gandhi considered Daniel to be one of the greatest examples of passive resistance. In the face of certain death from lions, Daniel still continued to pray. Daniel demonstrated the need and power of continuing spiritual practices even during a time of exile, trial, and unfairness.

During this time of exile for us, we also need to be intentional about our spiritual practices. We may not be facing an execution if we pray. But we do face challenges like complacency, anxiety, or forgetfulness. So, our second lesson from Daniel is that we must faithfully continue trying to practice our spiritual practices or activities that bring us closer to God even in times of exile.

The final and I think most important lesson we learn from Daniel comes from his experience in the lion's den. Daniel spent one night in the lion's den. I can't imagine the fear that Daniel must have felt going into that pit as the stone was placed over entrance and all light went out. The lions and the darkness would have created such a terrifying situation and on top of that, Daniel must have felt all alone. But Daniel wasn't actually alone. God was with him in the pit and saved him from the lions. Daniel must have felt so much fear, but God was present with him in those moments of fear and saved him.

There is so much fear in the world today. Fear of this new, unknown virus; fear of the virus spreading; and fear of actually contracting the virus. In this time of fear and longing for safety and security, Daniel reminds us that it is alright to fear because God finds us in our fear and we encounter God's presence through our fear. God is present in this empty sanctuary right now and God is just as present with you at home. God is with us no matter what we are feeling, no matter what our circumstances, God is with us.

During Lent, this Biblical concept of Israel has truly become real for us. We are unable to meet in our place of safety, security, and fellowship at Lewinsville. We long for the social distancing to be over and for us to be able to experience physical presence together. We long to come home. But we are reminded through stories like Daniel that we can use this exile to find new creative ways to worship. We are encouraged to follow in Daniel's example and continue or find new spiritual practices like prayer. And we are reminded that even though we fear, God is present with us. God is always present with you and God is always present with me as we live in exile. Thanks be to God.