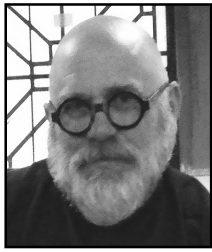


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A Sermon by:

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Embracing the Exile and the Exiled

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 13, 2013

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, and Luke 17:11-19

Cause and effect are notoriously difficult to determine in human affairs. This is why the future is hard to predict. And yet we want to know. Why did this happen? How can we prevent it from happening again? This desire to know the future keeps astrology columns in our newspapers and palm readers on our streets. This desire to know what happened keeps news reporters on our televisions 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It is as if we review the footage one more time we will know what really happened in this flood or that act of terrorism and be able to somehow predict or avoid some future catastrophe.

Jeremiah the prophet was born a long time before the television was invented. Scholars estimate that he was born around the year 627 before the Common Era (BCE). He grew up and realized that things were not going well. Political leaders were failing to live up to the responsibilities of their office. Religious leaders were not living faithful lives. And ordinary people were not acting responsibly. Jeremiah, being a prophet, saw that this unfaithfulness to the covenant with God could not end well. And of course, being a prophet, he felt it was his job to let people know what he was thinking. And so he predicted that Jerusalem would fall and her people carried into exile.

As you might imagine this did not sit well with the leaders or the people of the day. It has been said of Jeremiah that “no other prophet of whom we have knowledge was as completely rejected by his people. They not only rejected his words but also made every effort to keep him from saying more.” They beat him, imprisoned him, dropped him down an empty well and left him to die. No matter what they did and what they said he kept prophesying. In 597 BCE, when Jeremiah was only thirty years old, the Babylonians came to the southern part of Israel called Judah, conquered it, and carried the leaders and the people into exile. They installed a puppet king; and when he rebelled in 586 BCE, he was punished and the Jewish temple was destroyed. Now this was a catastrophe. For the Jewish people the loss of the temple and relocation to Babylon represented the loss of access to God.

Telling everyone that the political, religious, and social order are all coming to a bad end is reason enough to have people reject you. But Jeremiah did not stop there. He went so far as to interpret the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians as punishment from God for the sins of the people. Losing access to God was bad enough, but now Jeremiah was insisting that God might act in human history by using the Babylonians to punish God’s people. This thought was unthinkable and treasonous.

You could understand why Jeremiah might have thought the unthinkable. These were the same people who rejected him and mistreated him. You can’t begrudge him a revenge fantasy or two.

Personally I don’t believe in a God who punishes people, even people I think are really very bad. This may be because I am not a prophet, but my theology is that of a forgiving God. My theology is more like the blessing that we use from time to time, which says the past is forgiven and the future is in God’s hands. I also do not believe in a God who strengthens people through suffering. I know that some people do believe that everything happens for a reason; in fact I know a lot of people who do, but even if there were some cosmic reason that one is suffering, that fact is not likely to be seen as comforting by the person who is suffering, and it could even be perceived as hostile. We know that the people in Jeremiah’s day didn’t take kindly to his words.

The interesting thing about Jeremiah is that he didn’t stop there. He went on to write a letter to the exiles, which is the first lesson that was read this morning. In this letter he tells the exiles to settle down, “build houses, plant gardens and eat whatever they produce, contract marriages and multiply

there. Seek the welfare of the city, pray to the Lord on its behalf for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Now this is something new. Whenever catastrophe strikes it is human to want to blame someone or something. Sometimes we blame ourselves and sometimes we blame others. Sometimes we blame God. None of these strategies are very useful and all of them take energy away from the critical process of grieving the loss and moving on. Grief, according to Kübler-Ross, begins with denial and ends with acceptance. For the Jewish people, the thought that one could not only live but prosper in exile was new. This is the beginning of a prophetic tradition in Hebrew Scripture that would be carried forward by Ezekiel and the second Isaiah. This is a strategy for exile living. An old friend of mine, John Fortunato, describes this strategy, the strategy of acceptance of the conditions of exile, as embracing the exile.

This is a way to live beyond catastrophe. It is important today because exile can be seen as a metaphor for any number of catastrophes or losses that can befall us. War. Terrorism. Global warming. Famine. Persecution. The inability of the Congress to pass the budget or raise the debt ceiling. The loss of a job. The death of a loving relationship. Diagnosis with a life-limiting illness. Or the ultimate human catastrophe, the death of a loved one. Any loss can lead one to question, to feel isolated and alone; any loss can be the loss that drives us into exile.

Take the story of Adam and Eve, for example. They are exiled from the garden. At that moment the person entering exile has a choice. They can spend their days in denial, blaming, shaming, anger, depression or bitterness, or they can embrace the exile. Think about Adam and Eve again. Some of their children always remember a better time and a better place and long for it. They are in denial of their current circumstances and unable to live in reality. There are other children of Adam and Eve who do not long to return to Eden but rather seek to inhabit the world where they find themselves and make the best of it. Longing for a past, real or mythical, is a form of denial of the present reality. And you don't have to be a prophet or even a social worker or psychologist to know that denial always ends badly.

By moving on we are not diminishing our loss or the importance of what we have lost, but rather using our remaining strength to make a new beginning. The hard part of grief is not saying goodbye, for in life's real catastrophes we have no choice but to say goodbye. The challenge in grief is making that new beginning. The hard part of learning to live after loss is learning to embrace the exile.

There is a corollary to this truth that Jeremiah did not describe. For those of us who are not currently experiencing life as an exile, our job is to learn to embrace the exiled. Not offering blame or shame or even trying to explain their loss, much less tell them everything will be ok. No, our job is to embrace them. Help them to remember that they are loved and that life is worth living. Now this runs counter to the human tendency to run away from disaster, to avoid contagion and flee from the afflicted. It is so hard to know what to say or to do at times of catastrophe that we often do nothing and say nothing and leave the exiled to their exile. Embracing the exiled is hard work. In order to do this work one has to be convinced of the goodness of God and the goodness of humanity, and one must avoid the human desire to blame or explain. Embracing exiles is hard work, but I am convinced that it is the way of life and peace. It is the way of Jesus.