

Church as Exile

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-15

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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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.

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.

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For 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. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I 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. (Jeremiah 29:1, 4-15)

I asked that photos of Syrian refugees be shown as our scripture was read this morning.

I did that because I want us to resist the temptation to spiritualize what is reality – that is, what is reality for exiles, for refugees.

I want us to resist the urge to use exile as a metaphor for the church's mission before we all go our separate ways for lunch.

As we gather around Jeremiah's letter to the exiles,

I want us to remember stories like these, from *the Washington Post*:

He saw her in the market, a rare breath of beauty amid the misery of his life in the refugee camp. Someone said she was from his village back in Syria, which he fled when a Syrian government plane dropped bombs that destroyed his home.

And now, on a hot afternoon two months later, Samah al-Saud, emerges in a white satin dress, fully veiled with a tall hood covering her head. Dozens of friends and neighbors crowd in close as she and her groom step into an old blue Opel taxi, the only car amid all the refugee tents and trailers. It has come to

carry them to their new life.

With kids running behind it, the car pulls out down the dirt roadway and eventually reaches the camp's main drag, known as the Champs-Élysées, where the necessities and luxuries of camp life are for sale. A few people stop to wave at the passing wedding party, which arrives 15 minutes later at the groom's family house. Music is blasting, Young men dance in the dirt, next to open pits filled with trash, kicking up rocks and dust with their joyous steps.

"I am happy to be married," her new husband says. "'But real happiness will come when I go back to my country. This is my temporary home, and it is fine. But I will only be happy in my village.'" He says he and his bride will hold off on children, at least for now. "I don't want to bring children into this life," he says. "It's better to die without children in Syria than it is to bring children into the world as refugees. How can you build a life on a foundation like this?"¹

When Jeremiah sent his letter,
Jerusalem had been destroyed,
and its people had been deported to Babylon to live as refugees, as exiles.
Babylon was not just a strange place.
It was a hostile and threatening environment.
The people of God were a small, persecuted remnant,
living within a hostile power --
a hostile power that they depended on to survive.

"How can you build a life on a foundation like this?"

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept," Psalm 137 says.
"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion,
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you, the psalmist says.
"Real happiness will come when I go back to my country," says the groom.
"I will only be happy in my village." (Psalm 137:1-6, NRSV)

¹ Kevin Sullivan, "Samah el Saud: Wedding Day", *The Washington Post* (2013),
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/syrian-refugees/story/refuge> [accessed on October 10, 2019].

How can you build a life on a foundation like this?"
Living in exile, wouldn't you cling to words promising an imminent return?
Wouldn't you welcome them, enfold them, hold them, in the same way
that a bride or groom would embrace their new spouse from their home village on their wedding day?
Wouldn't you search for words or return, saying that your nightmare would soon be over?
Wouldn't you grasp for them, gasp for them, take comfort in them
like an infant nursing at her mother's breast?
Of course.

And so it's no surprise those Jewish refugees in Babylon
were particularly receptive to prophets like Hananiah and Shemaiah.
Hananiah and Shemaiah were telling people that their release was near,
that their return was imminent, that the Temple had not yet been destroyed.
Soon, those prophets said, they could pick up the life they knew in the land that they loved.
Wouldn't *that* be a message that would help you forget yesterday,
live through today, and deliver you to tomorrow?

It's not hard to imagine that Jeremiah's letter to those refugees
must have been received like certified mail
serving you notice that you've been named in a lawsuit.

Build houses. Settle down. Plant gardens.
Eat what they produce. Marry your sons and daughters. Welcome grandchildren. Increase in number.
Seek the peace and prosperity of Babylon, pray for it, for its prosperity means your prosperity.
And, oh, don't listen to those other prophets giving you the words that you want to hear.
I didn't send them.
Thus says the LORD.

Can anyone who has been violently uprooted from their home embrace these words as good news?
What about justice?
Where is the God of the Exodus?

The eleven year old boy comes each day to a pretty park in the center of this industrial city in southern Turkey where 100,000 Syrian refugees now live. He carries a black plastic bag filled with packs of tissues, and he walks all afternoon along the winding paths peddling them to everyone strolling by.

"I give the money to my mother to buy food," he says. "Sometimes I give my sister some money." She is hungry a lot.

Asked what he misses about Syria, he answers immediately:

“My bicycle. I miss riding my bicycle and going around the neighborhood. It was so nice. But there were too many planes and too much bombing.”

The boy’s mother says she does not want to give her name, or her son’s, or allow any photos that would identify her family. She says they are scared and are considering returning to Aleppo. Refugee life is too hard, she said.²

They are considering returning to Aleppo – Aleppo – because refugee life is too hard. Think about that.

German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt was once a Jewish refugee who fled from Nazi Germany. She writes this about what that meant:

*We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life.
We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in the world.
We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures,
the unaffected expression of feelings.*³

Yet, from Genesis to Revelation,
it’s the life of the refugee, the exile, that is a dominant theme for God’s people.
Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden,
and all of humanity became refugees from their home as God created it.

After murdering his brother, Cain was exiled from the land, a restless wanderer on the earth.
When people came together to build the tower of Babel,
the Lord confused their languages so that they would be scattered over the face of the earth.
In calling Abraham and Sarah, God said,
“Leave your country, your people, your father’s household, and go to the land that I will show you.”
Wanderer. Exile. Refugee.

And all this just gets us to Genesis, chapter 12.
It goes on.

Joseph was exiled to Egypt when his brothers sold him into slavery.
And then, he was reunited with his family only when a famine made them refugees.

² Kevin Sullivan, “A Child Goes to Work: A Businessman at 11,” *The Washington Post* (2013), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/syrian-refugees/story/refuge> [accessed on October 10, 2019].

³ Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees.” *The Jewish Writings* (ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman) (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 264-265.

The people of Israel cried out to God as refugee slaves in Egypt.
and then they wandered in the wilderness for forty years
before being delivered to their home of promise.

It continues with the exile in Babylon.
And it continues when Mary and Joseph and Jesus became refugees in Egypt
after fleeing a murderous King Herod.

The thing is, even after returning home, Jesus' refugee identity never really left him.

As it says at the beginning of John's gospel,
Jesus "was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.
He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." (John 1:10-11)

When questioned by Pontius Pilate, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world.
If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders.
But now my kingdom is from another place." (John 18:36)

The epistles pick up on the idea of exile as central to the identity of God's people,
in the sense of both where they had been,
and how they are to live in this world.
"I urge you," 1 Peter says,
"as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul."
(1 Peter 2:11)

Finally, in Revelation, the fulfillment of all time is presented
both as a return home from exile
and as an arrival to a completely new, beautiful world.

Is it, in the exile, in the refugee, that we find our proper place, our real identity, our home, in Christ?
Is it that God asks to embrace where we are
instead of longing for an illusion of how things used to be?

Build houses. Settle down. Plant gardens. Eat what they produce.
Marry your sons and daughters. Welcome grandchildren. Increase in number.
Seek the peace and prosperity of Babylon, pray for it, for its prosperity means your prosperity.

When you live as a refugee, as an exile,
you are forced to recognize that you are not in charge.
You are not in charge of your life.
You are not in charge of the lives of others.

You certainly have no illusions about ruling.
In short, you live without sovereignty.
You depend on the mercy, upon the grace of others,
yet you often receive the indignity, the humiliation, the worst of others.

The exiles in Babylon were forced to recognize God's absolute sovereignty,
their helplessness, and their utter dependence on God.

In his letter, Jeremiah informed the Jewish captives in Babylon
that their exile would not be a brief hiatus from the land, a momentary interruption,
after which Israel would return to the land, the monarchy would be restored,
and life would continue as before.

Rather, it's more accurate to say that what was happening in Israel before the exile
was the interruption from which God was rescuing them.

The exile was an opportunity for Israel to return to its true home, in covenant with God.
Babylon marked a new beginning for God's people,
a return to God's sovereignty and utter dependence on God alone.
And from the early church to the Jewish diaspora,
the theme of exile would be used to teach how to live in faithfulness both with and without land.

To hold these refugee stories in one hand with Jeremiah's words in the other,
we who possess land need to think carefully about how we live among those who possess none.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, writes, "When you agree to live simply, you put yourself outside of others' ability to buy you off, reward you falsely, or control you by money, status, salary, punishment, and loss or gain. This is the most radical level of freedom, but, of course, it is not easy to come by. When you agree to live simply, you do not consider the immigrant, the refugee, the homeless person, or the foreigner as a threat to you or as competition with you. You have chosen their marginal state for yourself—freely and consciously becoming "visitors and pilgrims" in this world, as Francis puts it (quoting 1 Peter 2:11).

A simple lifestyle is quite simply an act of solidarity with the way most people have lived since the beginnings of humanity. It is thus restorative justice instead of the very limited notion of retributive justice.

When you voluntarily agree to live simply, you do not need to get into the frenzy of work for the sake of salary or the ability to buy nonessentials or raise your social standing.

You enjoy the freedom of not climbing.

When you agree to live simply, people cease to be possessions and objects for your consumption or use. Your lust for relationships or for others to serve you, your need for admiration, your desire to use people or things as commodities for your personal pleasure, or any need to control and manipulate others, slowly—yes, very slowly—falls away. Only then are you free to love.⁴

I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

How can you build a life on a foundation like this?”

In a world where refugees fleeing for their lives find cold hearts and barbed wire fences,
we long for the day when all people will dwell in peace within the land which God so graciously gives.
But, until then, we also must make a home here,
holding our possessions lightly, living our lives rightly, and gripping the message tightly
that a new reality, a new possibility, a new creation, a new kingdom
has broken into the old,
like a wedding in a refugee camp to which everyone is invited.

⁴ Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi* (Franciscan Media: 2014), 38, <https://cac.org/cant-bought-off-2016-10-07/> [accessed on October 11, 2019].