

Settle Down

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Jeremiah 29:1,4-7

“seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile...”

Movement 1 – Exile and Longing

The Israelites were in exile. These Israelites were taken from their home, forced to march, forced to leave, and forced to live in a strange land far away from their roots. The Israelites were not in Judah, or Benjamin, or Israel, but were in Babylon. The Israelites were in exile.

It is important for us to realize and remember what happened to the people of Israel for it left an indelible mark on the Jewish story through scripture, practices, and current understanding. Around the year 597 B.C.E. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians after a time of siege. Nebuchadnezzar, then the king of Babylon, ordered the upper class, the educated, the elite, of Jerusalem to be taken back to Babylon. These were the first in a long line and experience of exile for the Israelites, these educated and elite from Jerusalem. These were the ones that Jeremiah was writing to in the passage we read today. Jeremiah was not forced to march, but stayed back in Jerusalem, writing a series of letters to the people, like Paul writing to struggling churches. Jeremiah wrote words of instruction and words of support to the ones in exile. These were the ones who wept and longed to return to their home, which looked forward to march back, and desired with great intent to find themselves again in their homes, on their land, and their beloved Jerusalem. These were the ones in exile.

Yet we should not stop at a simple history lesson, reminding ourselves of the simple facts, of the events as they have been passed on to us. We should not stop at an academic and intellectual understanding of a period of exile. No, we need to remind ourselves what it might have been like to truly be in exile. We need to consider the possibility and the experience of exile so as to begin to hear the words from Jeremiah.

Think of the experience of the Cherokee tribe in 1838 when they were forced into temporary forts, akin to internment camps, and then forced to walk 1,200 miles from Georgia to Oklahoma in what is now called the “Trail of Tears.” During that walk, somewhere between 4,000 and 6,000 died during that ordeal (with is between 25-30% of the then total population). Imagine the horror of the march itself, and then the struggles trying to settle in a new land. Imagine the difficulties trying to reclaim identity, especially when so much of their identity was tied to their geography. Imagine the longing to return home, the anger against their oppressors, and we may be able to begin to understand the experience of the Israelites in exile.

We know of other examples of people who have experienced exile; the refugees in Darfur, Ethiopia, or Tanzania. Iraqis who have fled to Syria for safety still try to hold onto their sense of culture and identity even when they are but a few miles from their home country. The Japanese who were interred during World War II experienced the life of exile even as they were still in America. They were forced from their homes, and forced to live a different and restricted life. We have countless examples of groups of people in exile. We can turn our historical eye to each of them, to those who were

removed from their roots and forced to live in a different land under different conditions. They were in exile.

Imagine and remember and we can begin to understand the experience of the Israelites. Imagine and remember and we can conceive the possibility of the experience. Remember the longing, remember the despair, and remember what it is to be in exile.

Movement 2 – Contemporary Exile

Are we also in exile? Are we living in a land that we cannot claim as home? Are we struggling to find our roots, and to truly live with freedom? Are we living in exile?

This is a difficult question for many of us in this time and place. Many of us have grown up in this area. Some of us can remember this town for years back, some can remember this neighborhood decades ago. Some of us had our children here, and watched them grow up and move out. Some of our children are still here in the church with their own children. Some of us have our roots here, and could not conceive being in exile.

Some of us have moved here willingly and freely. Some of us decided to live here. It may not be where we grew up, it may not be our home, but we can make it our home. We decided to live where we are living. We decided to be a part of a specific school district, to pay taxes in one township or another, and to live in a specific county. This may not be our home, but this is where we have chosen to live.

Are we in exile? The question seems to be moot in our context. The question seems to be lacking any possibility of a yes. In this land where freedom is prominently displayed, and has become a part of our civic vocabulary, how can we say yes?

Yet I wonder. I wonder if there is a way in which we still feel like we are in exile. I wonder if there is a way in which we feel as if we are living in a foreign land and we do not feel free. Maybe not as citizens, maybe not as individuals living in Bryn Mawr, in Havertown, in Newton Square, or in Ardmore, but what about as Christians. As a Christian, do you feel as if you are home? As a Christian, do you feel as if you are in a place where you are free to be the person that Christ calls you to be, or do you feel restricted and forced into a different lifestyle? As a Christian, do you feel as if you are in exile?

Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory Jones argues that the church should see itself as an entity separate from the world in their powerful work, *Resident Aliens*. In this work Hauerwas and Jones claim that the church doesn't fit completely in the world, and seems awkward in the world. They claim, "The Bible's concern is whether or not we shall be faithful to the gospel, the truth about the way things are now that God is with us through the life, cross, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth" (22). This is a powerful and subversive message. We have a faith that calls us to question the teachings and practices of the culture of the world. We have a faith that is so bold as to suggest that peace is more powerful than hate. We have a faith that is so bold as to teach that love always takes precedence over violence. We have a faith that is so bold as to suggest that we are to be concerned with the least of the world more than the greatest. We are to give our preferential treatment to the poor over the rich. We are to witness to the outcaste over the included. We are to love our enemies, to bless those who persecute us, and pray for those who hate us. We are to live life without a drive for power, wealth and material success. We are to live a life without a fear of death. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel

that we are called to live, and it doesn't fit with the world. It is subversive, it is dangerous, and it is counter to the currents of our culture. Are we in exile?

Hauerwas and Jones claims, "Our world recognizes the subversive nature of the Christian faith and subverts us either by ignoring us or by giving us the freedom to be religious as long as we keep religion a matter of personal choice (152)." We have been dictated the terms by which we are to live out our faith. We have been told the conditions through which we are to display our devotion to the Lord. Are we in exile?

Look at the Amish. Some would look at that Christian community and claim they are in a self-imposed exile. Yet at the same time, are they living their faith without apologizing? Are they living the radical nature of their faith as they understand it? Are they doing everything they can to stay true to their understanding of the gospel? Yet they are not living in the world, but almost in a different land. It is as if they have stayed in Israel and the rest of us have been taken across the country into Babylon and are living in a strange land, struggling to live fully with our faith. Maybe they are free in their Jerusalem and we are in exile. Are we in exile?

I remember when I used to go to summer camp I would love the freedom to speak my faith openly. I relished in the opportunity to share my faith, to share my questions, to push and to try new and different things in my walk with Christ. I was free to live as a Christian. Yet when the school year would begin again I felt as if I had to hold back, to temper my speech, and to be cautious with my questions. I felt as if I was in exile.

Are we in exile? Do we, as a church, as an institution feel as if we completely fit in with the rest of the world? Do we feel as if our values, our approach to life conform with society? Do we feel as if we are accepted at the civic table? Or do we feel like a banana in a bowl of apples. We look different, we seem different, and we even taste different than all those around us. Are we in exile?

Movement 3 – Longing

In exile we experience a longing. It is a longing that moves from an itch to a burn and back to a dull ach in the back of our mind, yet it is a longing that always seems to nag and be present in our lives. We have a longing to break free and be the people we believe we are called to be. We have a longing to shout out our faith, to truly and fully celebrate our festivals, and to be honest with our faith.

Think about the longing that the Israelites must have felt. They were in a ghetto surrounded by Babylonians who practiced their own cultures and their own way of life. They were surrounded by reminders of how they were different. When Daniel and his friends were chosen to study and learn in order to serve the king, they were expected to eat and pray and live in a certain way. Daniel had to plead and persuade his superiors that his way of living, the Hebraic way of living, while different, would offer just as good if not better results. They were separate and longed to return home. Think of having to learn a new language, of having to adjust to new cultures and customs, and the longing to return home must have increased. The people must have tried to insulate and keep looking towards home, towards Jerusalem, hoping and yearning to return. They longed to return.

It reminds me of the immigrant experience in the mid 1800s and early 1900s (and still today). People coming from Ireland, from Italy, from Germany, from Poland, and from other countries, would find themselves in a land with a different language, with

different customs and different cultures. You can imagine the longing and the desiring for their motherland. You can imagine the desire to celebrate St. Patrick's in Dublin, to celebrate the feast of St. Anthony in Sicily. You can imagine the desire to eat sausage that was from Poland, and to drink beer brewed in Germany. The longing and the desire for their homeland was strong. Hence the ghettos, the enclosed neighborhoods where their customs and culture could be continued and supported, because then, for a moment the longing may be satiated. Then for a moment the yearning and the desire may be filled.

It reminds me of Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. This was someone who did not fit where she lived. She was a mermaid, but she did not feel as if she belonged with the mermaids. She longed to be on land, to live on land, with humans, even collecting trinkets, baubles and stuff that came from above, hidden in a cove where she could go and be the person she felt she truly was. She felt as if she was in exile in her land longing for something different, for something else.

As Christians we long to be in a place where we can fully and freely share our faith, our questions, our struggles and our joys. We long to be in a place where we can speak out loud to God without apologizing, where we can pray in restaurants without worrying about the stares and where we can serve others without having to explain ourselves. Yet we are not there where we long to be. So we go to church so that we can, if only for a short amount of time, let down our guard and fully be Christians. We go to church so that we can seclude ourselves from the world and work on fully being a Christian. Hauerwas and Jones advocate this approach, claiming that the church should be a community where we can be formed as Christians in a secular world. Yet then we leave and return to the world, yearning and longing to find ourselves back at the place where we can fully be the Christians that God has called us to be.

We have a longing and the danger is that it can lead to despair, to a distress as we feel that we are in exile. We have a longing as we struggle to be and live strangers in a strange land. We have a longing.

Movement 4 – Dissonant Instructions

Yet Jeremiah calls the people to be present where they are. Jeremiah is calling the people to live, to be engaged, and to stay where they are. He calls the people to build houses, permanent places of living. He calls the people plant gardens and to eat what they produce. He calls the people to take wives and husbands. To have sons and daughters. He calls the people to seek the welfare of the city where they live. Build, plant, take, bear and seek in your life, Jeremiah is saying. Be a part of the city, live in the city and be present in the city.

This is a radical teaching and instruction that Jeremiah is offering. This is something that goes against the grain of the exiled Israelites. Jeremiah is not only calling the people to be engaged in the land where they live. The commentator, Clement, points out that Jeremiah is calling the people to seek the welfare of their enemies, and to work for the good of their city. The very ones who took them away from Jerusalem are the ones whom the Israelites should support in all that they do as they live in exile. Perhaps the most radical aspect of Jeremiah's teaching is that he is calling the people to trust in God. Trust in God, even as they seem to be in a hopeless situation. Trust in God, even as they seem to be in a despairing predicament. Trust in God, even as they seem to be in a

barren place for their faith. Jeremiah is calling them to trust in God and to be involved in the land where they live.

There was a family that was always on the move. It was a family that was following jobs, like migrant workers moving with the crops that were in season. They would live in one town for a couple of months, and then move to another town. Yet in each town the mother always planted a garden that she carried with her. Her plants were in pots, in boxes and in cans. Each place they would go she would carefully place them outside in a way that would look like a well-planned garden. They would grow for a few months and then she would take them out, put them back in their containers and move to the next place. Once, when she was digging the holes in the ground one of her children asked her, “mother, why do you put these plants in the ground, when you know we are going to be moving again in a couple of months? You know this isn’t our home, so why do you plant.” To which his mother stopped, put down her trowel, looked at her son and said, “right now this is our home, and I take pride in my home. My plants make the home beautiful. They claim this place as our home as long as we are here. This is our home.”

This is what Jeremiah was calling the people to do. To make the bold move to plant in a place they did not expect to be for long. To make the bold move to settle down, and plant roots. To make their home beautiful, to make their city beautiful, and to pray for the welfare of all those around them. Jeremiah is giving the dissonant instruction to settle down and be present where they are.

Movement 5 – Contextual Living

In a similar way we are called to be present and engaged where we are. We are called to look through our state of exile and live in the land where we are. We are called to engage, to build, to plant, and to seek the welfare of the city where we live. We are called to be present and engaged where we are.

Shane was living in the west as a gun for hire. He was someone who was always on the move, who always had his gun, and was ready for anything. He wore clothes for riding and for fighting. Yet when he found himself invited to stay at Joe Starrett’s home, to help with the work, he fully embraced the new life. He bought new clothes, he hid his gun, and he embraced the life of a farmer of the land. He planted himself in this new lifestyle and this new land.

Jeremiah is calling us to adopt the life of the land where we live. He is calling us to be a part of our community and our world. We are called to vote and pay taxes. We are called to attend the festivals, and the meetings. We are called to do whatever we can for the welfare of our land. This is still a strong statement, for many Christians feel that they need to seclude themselves from the world. Maybe feel as if they need to separate themselves from the things of the world. Christian music, Christian movies, Christian copies of what is popular in the world are what are offered so that we can enjoy life but on our terms and in our way. Rob Bell, the founding pastor of Mars Hill church in Grand Rapids, Michigan claims that “this idea that Church waits to see what the culture is doing then produces a D grade version with some sort of clever Jesus twist to me is utter blasphemy.” (from Wittenburg Door interview). Bell claims that good art, music, movies are places where Christians can engage and be a part of something that also engages the rest of society. He claims that Christians should not live in exile from the world, but be fully engaged in the world. He is following the call of Jeremiah.

Yet we are not called to be completely of the world. We are not called to be like everyone in the world. If you go to a sports event, that is one thing. But if you go, and get drunk, and shout obscenities, and make a fool of yourself, that is another. Go to the sports event, but be a Christian at that event. Be a witness and an example.

We are to build, but build in the way that Christ shows us to build. We are to live, but in the way that Christ shows us to live. We are to plant, but for the sake of Christ. Imagine planting a garden, which is not that odd of a thing, but then giving half of your produce to the poor, which is an odd thing. You are living in the world, but as a Christian lives in the world.

The apostle Paul talks about living with an already/not yet mentality. He says in Philippians that we are looking forward to being in the commonwealth of Heaven, but in Romans he reminds the people to follow the government authorities. We are already living in a different life and a different place, but not yet fully there. So while we are here, we live, and engage and become a part of the culture.

I knew a priest who would go to a bar every Saturday with his collar still on. He went there because he believed that the people in the bar needed his outreach more than the people in the church. He believed in being a part of the culture where he lived and being engaged in the culture where he lived.

Plant your perennials and be in the place where you live. Work for the welfare of your home, of your city. Work for justice and peace and mercy. But do it on Christ's terms. Be present and engaged where you are.

Movement 6 – The Foundation of Living

Settle down, but don't forget your roots. Don't forget that this isn't the end. Don't forget that we are still yearning to return to Jerusalem. Don't forget that we are still yearning to return home to that great and glorious land. We rest on the promise of the Lord that one day we will be there. We rest on the hope that some day we will no longer feel as if we are in exile. Some day we will no longer feel as if we are far from the Lord. Some day we will get there, but until then, as you build, and as you plant and as you seek, hold onto your accent, hold onto your Christian character which makes you different from all the rest. You stand out, you are stared at, yet you beam because you know that you are a child of the Lord.

You will be there, in the glory land. You will be there in the midst of Christ, and we will truly and fully be home.

AMEN