



Roanoke, Virginia

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Found In Exile: The Moment

II Kings 25:8-17, 21 and Lamentations 1:1-7a

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Introduction:

As we come to our scripture passages for today, Israel has long been divided into two kingdoms (see map, p. 7) – the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom had been destroyed years ago by the Assyrians. All that is left now is the southern part, called Judah. Judah was a small piece of land, smaller than modern-day Israel, and it was surrounded by big empires. In 586 BCE, that small remnant of a kingdom, Judah, is taken over by the Babylonians, the mightiest empire of the day.

As awful as war is today, perhaps it was even worse back then. The Babylonians attacked everyone and anyone—from the king all the way down to the shopkeepers and carpenters. Nearly everyone they could find was rounded up and forced to march to Babylon, more than 500 miles away (see map, p. 7).

Can you imagine such a fate? Being forced to leave the only life and land you've ever known, and taken against your will hundreds of miles away to a foreign land? ... Given the news in recent days, perhaps you *can* imagine it.



About 10 years prior to our passages, Babylon had already taken control of Judah. Having placed their puppet king Zedekiah in command of the Southern Kingdom Judah, they grew impatient as he rebelled against them. Finally, the Babylonian empire takes swift and violent action in retaliation.

Scripture: II Kings 25:8-17

⁸ In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. ⁹He burned the house of the LORD, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. ¹⁰All the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. ¹¹Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had defected to the king of Babylon—all the rest of the population. ¹²But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest people of the land to be vine-dressers and tillers of the soil.

¹³The bronze pillars that were in the house of the LORD, as well as the stands and the bronze sea that were in the house of the LORD, the Chaldeans broke in pieces, and carried the bronze to Babylon. ¹⁴They took away the pots, the shovels, the snuffers, the dishes for incense, and all the bronze vessels used in the temple service, ¹⁵as well as the firepans and the basins. What was made of gold the captain of the guard took away for the gold, and what was made of silver, for the silver. ¹⁶As for the two pillars, the one sea, and the stands, which Solomon had made for the house of the LORD, the bronze of all these vessels was beyond weighing. ¹⁷The height of one pillar was eighteen cubits, and on it was a bronze capital; the height of the capital was three cubits; lattice-work and pomegranates, all of bronze, were on the capital all round. The second pillar had the same, with the lattice-work.

And from v21: So Judah went into exile out of its land.

Our second reading comes from the OT book of Lamentations. Lamentations expresses the humiliation, suffering, and despair of Jerusalem and her people following the destruction of the city by the Babylonians.

Lamentations 1:1-7a

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.
³ Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,



and finds no resting-place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

⁴ The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.

⁷ Jerusalem remembers,
in the days of her affliction and wandering,
all the precious things
that were hers in days of old.

Sermon:

I wonder whether you have ever woken up or stood back and thought to yourself: “This isn’t what I had planned.” Or “This isn’t the way it was supposed to go.”

Maybe you lost someone you loved above all else, and you’re not ready to travel through life without them.

Maybe the marriage you once thought was so firm is shaking or dissolving beneath you. You wonder who were those people that made those promises all those years ago.

Maybe your body, as it grows weaker or sicker can make you feel like you’re on an involuntary march to a foreign land where the abilities you once took for granted slowly (or swiftly) fade away.

Maybe the work or study that defined you is no longer yours for one reason or another, and you feel lost, adrift, afraid.

“This isn’t what I had planned.”

“This isn’t the way it was supposed to go.”

This is a language we understand—it’s a frame of mind we can grasp.

In July, 586 BCE, Babylonian soldiers broke through Jerusalem’s walls, ending a starvation siege that had lasted well over a year. They burned the city and Solomon’s temple and took its king and many other leaders to Babylon as captives, leaving others to fend for themselves in the destroyed land.



The land of Israel was a gift, and now that gift had been taken away. What followed was heartbreak. God's people knew they could not return home again. And so, they did what we do when faced with heartache: they wept. Psalm 137 tells us they sat down by the rivers of Babylon and they wept when they remembered Zion. They wept because they missed their city. They wept because they were afraid. Without the Temple, how could they be assured of God's presence? How could they sing God's songs in a foreign land?

There are moments when the tectonic plates of history shift beneath our feet and things are changed forever. 586 BCE, or centuries later in 70CE, when the Temple is destroyed again—this time by the Romans. Closer to our modern era, 1914 or 1939 or the 2020's—nothing predetermined that these would be years when darkness would descend.

We have all heard the news. On February 24, Russia revealed that its military training maneuvers were indeed a devastating attack on Ukraine. Since that day, a humanitarian crisis has been unleashed. Women, children, and elderly are fleeing as they are able, hunkering in makeshift bomb shelters, and men are conscripted into service to defend their home and protect those civilians still left within the country's borders. It's a scene that's hard for us to imagine. Yet (I imagine) God's people in Judah knew it quite well.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon sent his military might into the small kingdom of Judah to obliterate its infrastructure, its property, its religion, its morale. In II Kings we read how they stripped the place of any beauty, wealth, or strength. Objects from the beloved Temple in Jerusalem were even stripped bare, sent off to be melted down and repurposed for Babylon. Anyone of any importance was marched 500 miles away from the life they knew, and the poor were left to tend a burned-out land on behalf of their new empire.

Judah wasn't the only kingdom that faced such devastation. Surrounding kingdoms suffered the same as Babylon's empire grew. People the region over were scattered from their homelands, uprooted from family and friends, forced to start over in a place with little more than the clothes on their backs.

Valentynaⁱ arrived at her oldest daughter's home in New Jersey on March 1, with her two younger daughters in tow. The family left behind their father, conscripted into military service. "They completely turned off the lights in our city and the sirens was going off and I'm trying to panickily put stuff in the suitcases and it's terrifying, the panic," Valentyna said.

Olenkaⁱⁱ traveled with her grandmother and 10-year-old brother from their home in western Ukraine to Poland, where they have found shelter. She left behind her parents. The adolescent girl tearfully said, "You get onto the bus, and you don't know when you will see them again."

If we have learned anything in the past two years, it is that the way things are—the way we live, the life we value is fragile.



On Ash Wednesday, I placed the ashen sign of the cross on many of your foreheads for the first time in two years. That practice has always been meaningful for me, but after two years of a global pandemic that has taken nearly six million lives worldwide, we've had ample opportunity to witness life—beautiful, singular, robust human life—crumble to dust and ashes. This week, as our brothers and sisters in Ukraine and Russia face the terrors and losses of war, we are once again asked to consider what it means that we—all of us—are small, mortal, vulnerable, and defenseless.

The violence and destruction that befell Judah was brought down upon all their neighboring kingdoms, as well. Whole civilizations were laid to ruin. That question—whether God would be with them without the Temple—was quickly answered. Thanks to prophets like Jeremiah, and evidence from the psalmists and scribes of their day, we know God indeed was with them. The difference for Judah from their neighboring kingdoms was that they survived, despite the loss of home and resources, despite fear and grief and uncertainty. God made for them a way when there was no way. As we will see in the weeks to come in our sermon series, God's people more than survived the terrors of exile—God's people thrived.

The time that scholars call the “Babylonian exile” inspired religious leaders to revise parts of scripture that had been passed down to them. It also sparked the writing of entirely new scriptures and the revision of ideas about God, creation, and history. These theological developments built a resilience that would later allow Judaism and Christianity to flourish even in the midst of disruptive changes. In fact, our faith heritage itself was in a real sense born in captivity. What we know about ourselves as people of faith in the God of Israel, we owe in large part to the Babylonian exile's literary and theological riches. Yes, the seven decades of exile were fraught with suffering and uncertainty. The future remained closed, difficult if not impossible to envision. But despite this crisis, human imagination and hopefulness did not shrink back, but grew.

Zuzannaⁱⁱⁱ is a young mother and citizen of Poland. She saw friends of hers offering their homes to refugees on social media and decided that she had the space, too. Sheltering young Olenka, her grandmother and younger brother, along with one other Ukrainian family, she said her job is to make sure that everyone there is safe and comfortable. “I want to make sure that it feels homey, that it feels safe,” she said. “This is their place to rest.”

At Berlin's central railway station, hundreds of volunteers in brightly colored vests and jackets distribute sandwiches, hot drinks, diapers, toys, warm coats, and a helping hand to the thousands of Ukrainians disembarking daily.

News reports tell us about Kati^{iv}, a 36-year-old mother of four from Berlin, who says she can offer a room for a family of four. Another woman holds a sign that read she could take another girl to share her small flat. Alexander, a retiree, passes out bottles of water and tells reports that he had to come down to the station to help. Doing nothing was not an option for him.



Again and again throughout the history of God's people, and in the person of Jesus, we are reminded that God is with the victim. God is on the side of the oppressed, the outcast, the alien. Even in the dark moments and hours of fear, loss, and destruction, God is there. Judah need not worry about God's presence without the Temple still standing. We need not wonder whether God sees evil and cares what becomes of us. God was there in the exile. God is here in this exile. God is passing out bottles of water, offering shelter, a ride to safety. God is comforting children in makeshift shelters, giving words to parents trying to explain war to their children, and whispering words of peace in the Russian soldier's ear. God is with the priests who stayed to counsel and pray for conscripted fathers and brothers and sons, and the chaplains who wait in busy bus stations and waystations just beyond the border.

In the face of exile, we must remember this truth: God goes before us, God goes with us, God never leaves us.

Today, we ordain and install new elders in our church. They will stand and kneel before our congregation and declare that God is indeed at work within them and in this place. They will help remind us that the Body of Christ is not in a place, but in a people. They will help us discern the ways we live out our call as disciples—the ways we respond to our neighbors in need—the ways we move and stretch and grow in the light of God's Ever-Living Spirit. It can be a daunting task—I know. And to those new elders, I pray they remember the promise: God goes before you, God goes with you, God never leaves you.



May we all remember and rest in that truth.

ⁱ <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/video/how-one-ukrainian-family-escaped-the-war-zone/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-60621252>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-60621252>

^{iv} <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/04/1084571029/ukraine-refugees-germany-flee-russia-invasion>

