



Roanoke, Virginia

February 27, 2022

## ***“Found in Exile: It is Happening”***

*Jeremiah 6:13-15, Luke 19:41-45*

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The season of Lent begins next Sunday and the pastors are going to offer a sermon series called, “Found in Exile.” Because this is the introductory sermon for the series, half my time will be spent offering background and half my time will be spent preaching on the texts. Don’t worry, I won’t go long.

The Babylonian Exile took place when the southern half of Israel, called Judah, fell to the Babylonians. The nation was overrun, the Davidic line of reigning kings ended, the temple destroyed and much of the populace was exiled from their homeland.

The shocking surprise of history is that this terrible calamity led to a faith and vision that not only changed forever how the Jews see the world and their place in it, but also changed forever the vision and religions of the people around them. In a talk I heard Jason Bingham give Friday on leadership, he said that good leaders see adversity as potential advantage. Broadly speaking historically, that is what the Jews made of the Exile.

Think about being a people in exile. Think about two millennia in which there was no sovereign nation on earth in which the Jews were the majority population. Somehow, over time, the Jews found a way to bloom where they were planted. Not always, not everywhere, but over and over again in history, they bloomed. And one of the ways they bloomed is that they developed a strong *Exile identity and theology*.

Well, not all the Jews. Then as today, some were nationalists who believed that being a strong nation with a strong military is the end all and be all of being a strong people. But there did develop a vision and faith that was..., well, landless and nationless. Out of the Exilic faith and



identity came the formation of what we recognize today as the Hebrew Scriptures. It was a faith that told the honest story about boundaries and abuses of power. The visions of justice and peace of the faith were so compelling that they were absorbed even more as expectations of the people around them, and eventually their rulers had to at least pay lip service to the idea that the weak and poor have rights.

The contributions of the Jews were not always appreciated by the people of the lands in which they lived. You know how it is when you share a good idea and it magically becomes the idea of the person you told it to. Well, magically, others often took credit for the contributions of the Jewish people, and then blamed the Jews for being separatists who set themselves apart looking out only for themselves.

There was some truth to that. If you are a minority people who want to maintain your specific identity and sense of community, you follow your own customs, observe your own rituals and festivals, tell stories that keep alive the memory of ancestors that help your children and grandchildren know who their people are, and maintain disciplines of prayer and worship.

But, to say the Jews were out only for themselves was a gross historical slander that was repeated through the centuries. While the Jews certainly kept to their own customs and faith, the result was the creation of a service community. Again, think about being a minority community in whatever land you live. You want to flourish, and that means you have to find ways to be of use and service in the larger community. Living on borrowed lands—whether you had title to a property or not—they learned to serve with mind and imagination. We have heard that we have today a service economy that has moved away from manufacturing—an economy that is based on knowledge and education. Don't think this is new. In nations where the advantages of the land—herds and crops—were often closed to the Jews, they created a service economy that worked for them and added value to the world: providing the goods of intelligence, education, and imagination.

Sadly, as we know from history, where they flourished they often inspired jealousy, resentment, and hatred. When they became too prosperous, they often were persecuted and, when not killed, often forced to leave their adopted homes... forced over and over again into new exiles. This was, of course, unjust and cruel.

And that is how their magnificent theological vision bloomed. Nationalists tend to care about justice only for their own. The Jews in Exile who had no nation came to see that justice could not just be for them.

- Dependent as they were on the protection of the Law in lands where they were not the majority that made the laws;
- needing the good will of people who did not share their faith;
- and seeing how in Empires there are the vulnerable, weak, and oppressed all around them who were not Jewish;

they developed a vision of a realm of God where justice was even more *for all people*, not just for the Jews. This was not a new notion. Amos and other pre-exilic prophets had universal themes. But it was an affirmation in Exile that those prophets were right.



So, these people who remained apart and developed a strong sense of *personal ethics*, envisioned a world where they could live at peace with others and thus developed a stronger sense of *social justice* for all people.

Their moral vision was a *moral virus* that spread among the peoples around them, and the day came when powerful rulers, even in pursuing ruthless and selfish ends, had to at least pay lip service to the notion that they were serving the greater good.... sort of like invading another country to establish a “peacekeeping force.”

The final thing that I will say in this long introduction of the sermon series is that if we are going to *find direction by following Jesus*, then understand that his life and ministry is the life and ministry of Exile. The New Testament presents Jesus as a prophet without a home, and to follow his story is to go on a journey from place to place, land to land—sometimes banned from towns (even expelled from his hometown), bearing witness to a realm of God that is for Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus is a separatist in the sense that he does not want to deviate from the Torah Law but fulfill it. Yet he is a universalist in that he knows that keeping the Law’s heart is to love God and neighbor, including those neighbors who are different from you like the Samaritans and perceived as enemies like the Romans. Even the persecution of the cross cannot keep who he is and what he has to offer from being resurrected from the dead. Now we know by his witness, that all of us with our sin are in exile from God, but that when we are lost, we are found by God in Exile and we can gain an identity as God’s adopted children. Thus in gratitude, we bear witness to the God who hears the voice of the voiceless, gives power to the faint, healing to the sick, and stands for justice for the persecuted... no matter who they are.

That is my introduction to the entire sermon series. This being the Sunday before Lent, let’s go back to Israel before the Exile—before 587 BC. Let’s go to a day of hope—of *false hope*; a day of peace—a day of the *façade of peace*.

### **Jeremiah 6:13-15:**

- <sup>13</sup>For from the least to the greatest of them,  
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;  
and from prophet to priest,  
everyone deals falsely.
- <sup>14</sup>They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,  
saying, “Peace, peace,”  
when there is no peace.
- <sup>15</sup>They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;  
yet they were not ashamed,  
they did not know how to blush.  
Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;  
at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,  
says the LORD.



So spoke the prophet, Jeremiah when he lived in Judah before the Babylonian invasion. Let's move now from one *prophet* to another, from Jeremiah to Jesus. To get to Jesus, I'll draw a historical line that moves from one *power* to another. We begin with Judah which has had a series of kings, most of whom fit the description of those “**who are greedy for unjust gain.**” **Judah** is a weakened nation economically, politically, and militarily. But though they are not a military superpower, they think they *have a superpower* and that is being *the chosen people of God*. They trust that God will never abandon God's people and the Davidic line of kings will last forever.

But it doesn't. Judah falls to the military superpower that is **Babylon** and the king and much of the populace are exiled from their homeland. Babylon, now that is an empire is going to last forever.

Only it doesn't. A half century later, Babylon falls to **Persia**, and Persia allows exiled Jews not only to return to their homeland, but also scatter throughout the Persian empire. The Persian Empire *will* last forever.

Only it doesn't. Two centuries later, Persia falls to the **Greeks**, led by Alexander. Jews in Exile are now allowed to scatter throughout the Greek Empire. The conquering general, Alexander, is seen as a God and *his* empire will last forever.

Only it doesn't. The Greek Empire fades. When the Battle of Actium is lost 177 years later, the final military nail is hammered into the coffin of Alexander's dream of eternal empire and there arose the **Roman Empire** of which there will be no end. The emperor rules over vassal states with puppet governments. One of those vassal states is the land of Israel, with a king whose claim to the throne is not by being a descendant of David but being the chosen puppet of Rome.

Which brings us to the time of **our New Testament passage**. The passage tells of a moment when Jesus approaches Jerusalem. He knows that there awaits in the city powerful people—both in government and in religion—who resent his preaching, his success and his following. Never mind the gifts that he has given—that he has healed the sick, fed the hungry and given hope to the poor—his authority and following is seen as a threat. Jesus crests the Mount of Olives and when the city comes into full view, this happens:

#### **Luke 19:41-44:**

<sup>41</sup> As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, <sup>42</sup> saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. <sup>43</sup> Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. <sup>44</sup> They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

Now, my very brief sermon:

I have sympathy for those ordinary citizens of Judah who heard the prophet Jeremiah tell them that the peace they want and the invasion they want to avoid are not theirs to have. I bet many Ukrainians could sympathize even more.



I told those who joined me late Thursday afternoon for conversation and prayer that I heard a news commentator say something that described me. He said many Americans knew intellectually that the Russian invasion was probable. They heard the news of the buildup of forces on the Ukraine border and the news of intelligence reports that Putin already deciding to invade. Yet, they just couldn't make themselves believe it. First world countries in Europe haven't invaded each other since the Second World War. Surely that can't happen today.

The commentator was speaking for Americans, but what he said was true of people around the world... including many living in Ukraine. If we watched the news and postings on social media, we heard many Ukrainians urge the west not to assume the invasion would happen. Some thought that there might be a takeover the eastern Donbass region where there are many Russian sympathizers, but they did not think it would affect their lives in places like Kyiv.

And then on the first day of the invasion, bombs and paratroopers were dropped right outside of Kyiv (I can't take my eyes off the news and my prayers are with all those at threat).

["Surely our king will reign and our nation will not fall. There will be peace."](#)

That is the belief and message of many of the priests and prophets who surround Judah's king. And, oh, how the citizens of Judah want to believe it. They adopted what we might call "Judean Exceptionalism." They bank on God's promise to make of the people of Abraham a great nation of which there will be no end.

Jeremiah, though, sees Babylon growing strong and, more to the point, Judah growing weak..., morally weak. Judah is in hard economic times and yet the powerful and rich do everything they can to watch out for their abundance while neglecting the needs of those who struggle to survive day to day. He sees the threat of an outside power, but he also sees inside corruption.

Over Jeremiah's half-century career as a prophet, he proves to be a prophet of hope. But he begins by being a destroyer of false hope—a truth-teller who pierces denial. The king is surrounded by paid prophets who tell him what he wants to hear, that there is no threat to the status quo. The people of Judah have been assured of "Peace" when the reality is that violence is knocking at the door and is maintained within.

What Jeremiah pierces is what we today call "Confirmation Bias," seeking and believing only what confirms what we want to be true. It is natural and inevitable that we all have it, but it can be the biggest barrier in the way of overcoming dysfunction and flourish in life. I have spoken of the dangers of this bias in international terms, speaking both of Ukraine and Judah. On Friday, Jason Bingham spoke of it in business terms when he spoke of businesses that sometimes think that adversity is only to be outlasted rather than an opportunity to re-set in order to thrive. It could be spoken of in terms of communities that think they can resist change happening in the world that will overwhelm them if they do not change (I think of the deep south of my childhood where so many thought that the segregation of schools and the enforcing of Jim Crow laws could last forever- they would make sure of it). And the bias can be found in relationships, such as when a relationship is toxic and someone in that relationship thinks that it will get better without the toxicity being faced.



Confirmation bias can be so strong that the only way it can be pierced sometimes is by a voice from the outside getting through. Jeremiah is honored as a prophet because he knows that hope begins when false hope is surrendered. True peace sometimes comes only when trouble begins.

Our Lenten journey into Exile will lead to the good news of living in God's realm. But, as I advise those who suffer a tragedy, it is not a good strategy to try to be happy at first. The priority is to be healthy. And when something hard has to be faced, the first healthy step can be facing a truth one wants to deny.

In that light, Jeremiah's first goal is to inspire grief over what will be lost. "Open your eyes and face it because it's happening!" is his message. And right now, he offers no "but." It is not the time to jump quickly to, "We'll get over it." It is not the time to speak of how lemonade is made or how a smile is the reverse of a frown, or how when a door closes a window might be found open. Yes, our whole sermon series will be about wonders and blessings that can be found in loss. But at the point of denial, the true prophet's best work is to inspire grief over what was thought to be eternal... but is not. This hard moment can be the beginning of the miracle of a healing, and the beginning of a journey to real peace.

