



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Found in Exile: The Right Kind of Homecoming”

John 20:19-23, Revelation 21:1-4, Philippians 2:1-11

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During the Sundays of Lent, we have looked at what it means to be a people of God in Exile. Let’s reflect a bit on some of what we have learned along the way.

When Judah, the southern nation of Israel, falls to the Babylonians, it is thought to be the worst disaster possible. The visible markers of being a nation of God are lost: national boundaries, king, temple, laws that supported a state religion—all lost. [“Will the Jews survive the Exile or would it destroy them?”](#)

That turns out to be the wrong question. The Exile turns out to be where the Jewish faith has its most powerful spiritual awakening. This happens because many find a new and powerful way to be the people of God. They come to a startling realization: [“Our home is not in a nation, but with God.”](#)

- To be Jewish is not to be a nation but to be a people among the nations.
- It is to be a people who seek blessing from God in order to be a blessing in the world.
- It is to be a people who live according to the moral commands of a tradition-
 - witnessed to in sacred writings
 - and passed on through the wisdom of parents, teachers and preachers.
- It is to be a people who seek justice and compassion not just for their own people but for all, including the Babylonians in need around them.
- It is to worship in homes and local synagogues rather than to think that God is honored only by worship led by high priests in some majestic Temple far away.



- And it is to understand that obedience to God is not satisfied with being a good citizen of a state but in keeping moral commands. Indeed obedience is motivated not so much by outer coercion but by inner conviction.

Christians sometimes think that the Hebrew Scriptures are rendered irrelevant now that we have Jesus to go by. That bias is unfair not only to the Jewish faith but also to the Bible. It is time we honored our elders. Hearing of the spirituality of the Exile, Christians in America have many reasons to give thanks to the Jews of Exile. So much of our theological DNA-

- our beliefs in the authority of scripture,
- our call for inner conviction and public witness,
- the priesthood of all believers,
- our doctrine of grace,
- the separation of church and state-

all become strong convictions during Exile...

These convictions become even stronger when the Exile ends when Persia allows exiles to return to the homeland if they want and many Jews decide, “Thanks, but no thanks.” Many remain in foreign lands that became their homes because they found there a home with God. They are the “Dispersed” and become know as “The Diaspora.”

But let’s be clear. To speak of the Jewish faith coming into its most mature expression is not to say that all Jews fall in line. There are many Jews in exile and left behind in Israel who cling to the nationalistic hope that they will only be the truly blessed people of God if they become again the mighty nation of Israel. This hope feeds the enthusiasm of many who wave palms and shout hosannas when Jesus enters Jerusalem. But, as last Sunday’s sermon made clear, it is the “[wrong kind of homecoming](#).”

Today, let’s consider what the [right kind of homecoming](#), and that is finding God where we are. I want us to honor

Jesus as a king in the line of David—

but a different kind of king

Of Jerusalem as a holy city,

but not the Jerusalem that Jesus entered.

Of the kingdom of God,

but not a kingdom with defined and defended borders.

Of the Law of God

being the commands of Love, not of the State.

I want us to honor the God of Exile

by celebrating the God of the Resurrection.

Listen to part of John’s account of the resurrection, then to a reflection on its meaning from Revelation, and then to a reflection of Paul. I know it’s three passages but, don’t worry, the sermon is short.



John 20:19-23

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Revelation 21:1-4:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."

The third passage is a theological affirmation of Christ who came, Christ who lived, Christ who died, and Christ who rose from the dead. As I read Philippians 2, listen for the call for followers of Jesus to be the people who seek the blessing of others.

Philippians 2:1-11

² If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.



⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

I would love to dive deeply into all three passages, but today we'll simply celebrate the nature of God to whom these passages attest. I want to celebrate the God of Exile- not the Jewish exile of history that some date as 586-538 BC, but the exile we know: the exile of searching—of sin—of death—of life itself—of *each of our lives*.

Jesus is the “Word made flesh,” John’s Gospel tells us. And this Word that was with God did not count equality with God as something to be grasped but emptied himself and lived among us. The love of heaven *is exiled to earth*. Love lives in the far country as God makes a home in our humanity.

Look how the story of Jesus is told by the Gospels. Jesus is born when his family is in Exile, being placed in a manger because there is no room for them in the inn. He dies in Exile, crucified and buried outside the walls of Jerusalem. In between, all his good works are done and good words are spoken as he is *on the move*, having no place, he says, to rest his head. He is on the move:

- eating in other people’s houses,
- moving from town to town,
- moving from towns out into the wilderness,
- traveling in Jewish places and then moving out into Gentile lands,
- teaching and healing Jew and Gentile,
- teaching that forgiveness of enemies is at the heart of what it means to love. (and this includes Babylonians and Samaritans who have Assyrian blood in them)

And the—Oh yes—let’s remember the resurrection. The grave, the place of death becomes the source of life. And the resurrected Jesus gives these final instructions to his disciples: Go to Jerusalem, and beyond to Judea, and beyond to Samaria, and beyond to all the world and make followers of all nations- not citizens of Israel, or those who agree to a creed, but followers in the way of Jesus- the way of justice, love, compassion and reconciliation.

That theological affirmation that God’s love is exiled to our humanity leads to this theological affirmation: Home is where we belong, and that is with God. In this world, we will always live in exile. When we accept that-

- when we accept our morality,
- face our own sin,
- and see the foolishness of thinking that power is virtue and that lies are truth,



then we can know the homecoming of grace. We can know the good news of the first beatitude which I offer in this way: blessed are those who know their need for God for then they find a home in God.

The new Jerusalem of which Revelation speaks is not a city found in a hill in Israel, but is the community of those who promote justice and show kindness. The Kingdom of God is not some nation with defined and defended borders, it is the community of the redeemed who by grace and out of gratitude join with others in witnessing to all people how to be a people of justice and compassion.

No matter
 where we live,
 or where we are in life,
 or who we are-
we have a home with God.

We are in the world but not of it. “Resident Aliens” is the term Stanley Hauerwas used. Our true home is not the address on the front of an envelope or as a citizen of some nation on earth. It is not some cause or ideology. We begin to find our home in God’s love and in loving others. And then, when we are exiled from this life we lead, we will then come to that place that Jesus prepared for us. Then we will know, not in part but face to face, what a true homecoming is.

Until then, let’s be faithful as we live in the exile of our lives seeking to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

