



## Easter in Exile

Jeremiah 29:1-9 & John 20:19-31

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Once again, Happy Easter! It is still the Easter season – we still get to celebrate the good news that Christ is *risen!*

When we talk about *good news*, what comes to mind for you? What is your reaction, or your response, to the proclamation of *good news*?

I was intrigued this past week with a couple conversations amidst fellow clergy. For the past month, we've spent a lot of our time in the church thinking through and processing what it means to celebrate and have Easter worship without gathering in the church building as a people. We've had to shift our focus from creating this welcoming space to creating an entirely new environment to gather as God's people – as the church. Easter is always an exhausting endeavor, as the church spares no detail to proclaim the good news of Christ's resurrection – of life having the final say over death – of God proclaiming we will have new life, sure as Christ was given life after the grave.

And yet, this year, the response to Easter has seemed a bit odd to me. Barely 48 hours after we proclaimed the grave was empty, after we proclaimed the resurrection of Christ, after we sermonized and sang about the good news, I heard these questions popping up everywhere: "What are we going to do when we get back together as the church?" "How are we going to celebrate our reunion in our church buildings?"

I don't raise this to be critical of my colleagues, but more because this question hit me in such an odd way. We've just finished celebrating the promise that *he's not here*, that Christ is *gone*, that he's not in the *tomb*, that he's going ahead of his disciples to meet them – where? Back in Galilee where they are all from – back in their home town. And yet, it seems we have this question and focus in the church that has sprung from the Easter celebration, asking, "what happens when we're back to normal?"

As I reflected on these questions being asked, I had two immediate responses.

First, I couldn't help but wonder, "*when* are we expecting this re-gathering to take place?" The idea of re-opening the country, of returning to some form of "normalcy" (whatever that means anymore) has brought about some contention in the past week. We've seen large gatherings in Michigan and other states, where people are, for lack of a better word, revolting against the shut-down. I know that we all *want* to get out of our homes, to get back to work, and to have some reprieve from this social distancing and self-isolation that is our necessitated response to

the coronavirus. But, when do we expect that to happen? Are you using the University of Washington projections? Perhaps, if they're right, we might be gathered back in some fashion by late June. But what if the University of Virginia projections are more accurate? Might it be even later before we are even able to think about regathering as a congregation? I'm confused at our need to return to "normal" so quickly.

And secondly, just to piggy back on the first, what is *normal*? I hear these desires to *return to normal*, and all I can think about is the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness, pointing back to Egypt and saying, "Moses, why did you bring us out here? We were better off back there than we are wandering here in the wilderness."

If, by chance, we can stop looking back, and perhaps accept that a new normal is coming, that life will be quite different when we get through this wilderness ... if we can look to the future – as far as we can possibly see – are we saying anything other than, "*there* is the promised land. I can't wait until we get *there*." Looking back – looking forward ... I can't help but wonder, what is in the here and now?

This is all new for us, and yet, I can't help but think that God's people have been in this kind of exile before. This is not the first time those who proclaim faith in God have found themselves longing for what *was* – or hoping for what *will be* – and in either situation, being quite discontent with what *is*.

The reality of our situation is that, for most of us, shy of staying home and preventing the spread of the virus that is keeping us at home, there's not much we can do to quicken the timeline of our re-entry back into the normalcy we have known to be our lives. We are, to put it succinctly, *powerless* – a posture that God has been trying to get his people to acknowledge for centuries. We are not God – we do not have the knowledge of when this will end – and we do not know quite yet what this world will look like when this season is over. And in some ways, I can't help but hear God say, "and that's *ok*."

For the next four weeks, we're going to stay in this uneasy and powerless space that I'm calling *Easter in Exile*. What does it mean to proclaim the good news of Christ's resurrection – the good news of God that death does not have the final say – even while we are confined in an exilic experience? Each week we're going to hear from the prophet Jeremiah, as he speaks to Israel in their Babylonian exile, while also proclaiming the story of Christ's resurrected presence on earth.

I have chuckled a number of times this past week at just how fitting Jeremiah 29 is for our current life situation. During the Babylonian exile, while most of the Jews had been sent out of their homeland to Babylon, there were a number of Jews who were left at home, back in Judea, back in Jerusalem where the Temple was located.

One of the prophets who remained in Jerusalem was Hananiah. If we back up to Jeremiah, chapter 28, we find that Hananiah had offered a prophecy that the exile would last just two

years. In 28:3, we read, “Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord’s house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon.” There was this hopeful promise made that the exile would last just two years. No need to get comfortable – just suck it up, and you’ll be home soon. There’s always someone promising a quick return.

And yet, in chapter 29, Jeremiah writes to refute Hananiah. Near the end of this morning’s text, in 29:8, Jeremiah writes, “For thus says the Lord of hosts: 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.” 2020 is not the first time those who were trying to predict the future had a disagreement on just how long the time of exile would last.

Clearly, Jeremiah doesn’t think the exile will be complete in two years’ time. Jeremiah has a much more reasoned and faithful expectation, proclaiming on behalf of God that this is not a year-to-year kind of situation. Though Jeremiah does not, in this text, tell us exactly how long this exile is going to last, he doesn’t shy away from naming the reality of the situation. Beginning in verse 4, Jeremiah proclaims, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: 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.”

It doesn’t take a genealogical specialist to know that if I’m going to get married, have kids, get my kids married, and get my kids to have kids ... if we’re talking about two new generations of children being born ... this is *not* a two-year excursion. Jeremiah is making it clear that they better get comfortable, because this is life for the foreseeable future.

Old Testament Scholar, R. E. Clements, offers, “For Jeremiah, hope and assurance were not to rest on naïve patriotic and unreasoned expectations that God would swiftly put an end to the power of Babylon and so send the exiles back to their homes. Rather they were to be built upon the painful acceptance of the reality of Babylonian rule in the present. Consequently they had to adapt to this situation and learn to endure it.”<sup>1</sup>

Jeremiah’s invitation is life altering. Instead of offering this promise that they would be returning to life as normal *quickly* – instead of taking the tone of Hananiah and telling the people what they wanted to hear about going back – instead of suggesting that returning to the normalcy of what was before would happen swiftly – Jeremiah proclaims a new way. Jeremiah proclaims a necessity of accepting a new normal.

And the new normal is one that, for the people of Israel at that time, is quite revolutionary.

See, for the people of Israel at that time – somewhere in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE – they held a firm belief in the residence of God being in the Temple of Jerusalem. To tell the people they better get comfortable being apart from Jerusalem was like telling them they better get

comfortable being apart from God. But Jeremiah doesn't tell them they'll be living apart from God – Jeremiah's revolutionary invitation is for them to accept that God will be a part of this new exilic life.

Just after the invitation to set up homes and to give birth to these two new generations, Jeremiah continues in 29:7, saying, "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 will you find your welfare."

To clarify the language of this text – the Hebrew word translated as *welfare*, which shows up three times in this sentence, is the word *shalom*. *Shalom* is best defined as "peace and wholeness, which can only exist in the fullness of God's presence." To tell the Israelites in the Babylonian exile to seek the *shalom* of the city where they have been sent, because only through this exilic space's *shalom* will they find their own *shalom*, is to say, that the key to survival and hope in this exilic space lay in joining with God where you are in the work of creating a just and compassionate space that offers peace – wholeness – God's presence – to everyone. "Jeremiah shows that their religion does not depend on access to power," that is, access to the Temple, where God's power was thought to reside.<sup>ii</sup> God, Jeremiah proclaims, is wherever you are, and there should you be actively participating in sharing God's peace – the *shalom* – in the community.

What Jeremiah is proclaiming to this community in exile is the Easter promise.

Too often, we as a people of faith, limit where we think God can show up – just as the disciples were convinced that Jesus would be condemned and contained in the grave, so too, we think that God has an isolated penchant for showing up in the church building – as if God is only present for us in these four hallowed walls of brick and mortar.

On that Easter morning, the women went to the grave, not to celebrate the resurrection, but to condition a decaying body.

That evening – even after hearing from the women that Jesus had been resurrected – the disciples still met in a locked room, for they were fearful for their own safety. If Jesus had been crucified, would they be next? They were unconvinced of the final outcome.

And yet, in their midst, Jesus showed up. He stood beside them, showed them his hands and his side. And he said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit." Jesus is not showing up in their locked room to encourage this kind of closed door behavior. Jesus showed up to drive them out – to fill them with the Spirit that they might go and proclaim the good news to the world. In this first gathering of Jesus with the disciples, Thomas was absent. And so a week later, the disciples were again gathered – only this time, Thomas was with them. Thomas, who we like to call the doubter, was skeptical of the proclamation he had heard from the disciples' earlier visit with the resurrected Lord. Thomas didn't want some metaphorical resurrection – he wanted to see the wounds, to feel the hands of Jesus.

Jesus shows up again, and invites Thomas to see the wounds, and to touch his side. Jesus proclaims to Thomas, “do not doubt, but believe.” Thomas responds with a faithful proclamation, “My Lord and my God!” ... I’m always so proud of Thomas for his worthy response. Chalk one up for the namesake. ... Only Christ continues to say, “Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet come to believe.”

See, I think, like those in the Babylonian exile, we are as of yet unconvinced that we can truly encounter the full glory of God in any place but the Temple. We think that by being isolated and at home, we are missing out on something more beautiful – more powerful – more luxurious – or more freeing. And there is our error – there is nothing more freeing than the glory of God in the resurrection of Jesus Christ that promises us, that where ever we are, there too will be our God. Wherever we may be, so too will there be the power of Christ, for he is not here – the tomb could not contain him, and more than the walls of the church building. Here is not here, for he is risen.

So, if I might be so bold as to proclaim the words of the prophet: Build your homes. Live in them. Plant gardens. Go for an isolated walk. Enjoy the sunshine. Make a zoom call and get to know your people. I’ll let you decide about the marriage and kids stuff ... but let us not think we must rush back together as if God is not present in our midst right now, even as we are socially distanced. Friends, the Lord is Risen. Celebrate the good news of God’s resurrecting love, and live where you are knowing God is there with you. It may be a while before we are able to come back, but we are not alone and without God in our socially distanced places. Reach out your hands, feel the wounds, see the glory of the empty tomb. For we are God’s Easter people, even in exile. Let us proclaim in our space – wherever that space may be – that he is risen in deed!

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<sup>i</sup> R. E. Clements. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Jeremiah*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988.

<sup>ii</sup> Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon. [Politicaltheology.com](http://Politicaltheology.com). Retrieved on April 16, 2020.