



Exile Redeemed
Jeremiah 33:19-26 & John 14:1-14
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How is it in exile? Are you doing alright?

Growing up, my brother and I used to have a game we enjoyed playing on our computer called *Myst*, which was a ground-breaking game at the time for its life-like video quality. The idea of the game was that you were stuck on a mysterious island, and the only way to find yourself off the island was by completing a series of riddles that were found on age-worn letters and locating these magic books that would transport you to new levels of the game.

When I think of being stuck in exile, that game comes to mind. In some ways, I wish that game were the reality of life today. It would be a global escape room scenario, and if we can just find the clues, and solve the riddles, we'll locate the magic book that will lead us back to reality.

That or, perhaps Ashton Kutcher can go ahead and jump out from behind the veil and tell us we've all been *Punk'd*.

If only exile ended so easily. If only life returned to what we had come to know as normal with such ease and expediency. Not so fast. If we pay attention to the Biblical text, we find that the exile isn't quite over.

As we have named in recent weeks, Jeremiah is writing from Jerusalem – from the land of Judah, which had been spared in the first Babylonian conquest. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been sent to exile, but Judah, and Jerusalem, had been left behind.

Here in Jeremiah 33, Jeremiah is writing a word of hope from Jerusalem to the exiles of Israel in Babylon. Yet, the immediate future shows that no hope is imminent. In fact, as Jeremiah is writing this text, the Babylonian army, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, is on its way to plunder Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah had created himself an enemy of the Babylonian king after prophesying that God would smite the Babylonians. In his proclamation that Israel would one day return – even without giving a timeline to that return – he had also named that Babylon would fall. The King was not appreciative of this doomsday proclamation, and so he took his Babylonian armies and marched on Jerusalem, devastating the people and leaving it in ruin.

Even though Jeremiah had been imprisoned, and even though the sacred city was about the lie waste because of the Babylonian conquest, Jeremiah is writing a promising word of hope to the people.

Jeremiah frames the word of hope to the people Israel in two motifs:

First, Jeremiah claims that this hope is as sure as is the truth of nature itself. Verse 20 reads, “If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time, only then could my covenant be broken.” In other words, unless you can stop the cycle of the earth around its axis, unless you can stop our spherical planet from spinning, unless you can stop the sun from rising and falling, unless you can cease creation from being, you cannot break my covenant.

The people of Israel were well aware of the covenant of God. They knew the covenant of God included the promises of God’s provision, of God’s steadfastness, of God’s continual and everlasting care. To say that this covenant could not be broken unless the earth ceased to spin was to offer a strong word of hope that God is not through yet, regardless how dire the situation may be in exile.

The second claim Jeremiah offers is that the Davidic line is not over. Verse 22 reads, “Just as the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will increase the offspring of my servant David, and the Levites who minister to me.” Jumping to verse 25, the prophet continues to speak on behalf of the Lord, “Only if I had not established my covenant with day and night and the ordinances of heaven and earth, would I reject the offspring of Jacob and of my servant David and not choose any of his descendants as rulers over the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes, and will have mercy upon them.”

To the Israelites in exile, who thought that King David’s lineage of rule was to be no more, this proclamation offers a renewed hope. Not only are we being told that God’s covenant remains, and thus we know we are under God’s protection, but we’re also being told that David’s lineage remains, and that offers the hope of our community as a people. We not only have the hope of faith, but we have the hope of one another.

This hope is two-fold. “[God’s hope] was unconditional, since it rested on a transcendent divine will, and yet it was concretely embodied in the necessity to achieve realization in an actual form of human society. As a hope it remained solidly this-worldly and concrete, not other-worldly and abstract.”ⁱ Jeremiah isn’t just saying, “at the consummation of the world, God will redeem you.” Jeremiah isn’t offering, “when you die, you’ll realize the fullness of God’s love.”

Jeremiah is saying that in the midst of creation, God is working to redeem humanity. God is working to restore daily life to the idyllic vision first created in the Garden. “This word of tenacious hope is spoken to counteract all of the life-scraping, despair-inducing evidence to the contrary.”ⁱⁱ

It is this promise, this hope that is offered for the here and now, this proclamation that God is not waiting to perfect creation, but is seeking our salvation in this liminal space, that we find Jesus proclaiming in John, chapter 14.

Jesus's words of hope are offered in a similarly difficult situation as Jeremiah's. Jeremiah was offering words of hope to a people who were in exile and at the risk of harm because of the power of their captors. Jesus is speaking to a group of disciples who are fearful for their own well-being. Jesus had been crucified, and there was a real fear that the disciples were next on the chopping block. There was a legit concern for their safety and personal well-being.

And yet, Jesus begins by offering this communal statement of anxiety-reducing hope, "Let not your heart be troubled." ... The translation here does a poor job of capturing the communal aspect of this text. The NRSV, which was read for us this morning, uses the word *hearts* – "Let not your *hearts* be troubled" – using the plural form of the noun. Yet, the Greek text offers *heart*, as a singular noun: "Let not your *heart* be troubled." As the author of the gospel, John is offering that as Jesus is speaking, we are understood to be of one heart – one body – one being.

Any why would they be troubled? Because they know that Jesus was about to leave. Jesus has already told them he would soon be departing. Along with their fear for their own well-being, the resurrected one was about to ascend and depart, and they couldn't imagine life without Jesus in their presence. They had already lost him once, at his death, and now they feared that same anxiety of losing him again.

Thomas asks, "Jesus, how are we to know where you are going? How will we know the way?"

Jesus responds, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know the Father. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Philip doesn't seem to quite grasp Jesus' proclamation, so he chimes in, "Jesus, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

Jesus responds again, "Philip, have I been with you all this time, and you still do not know me? I am in the Father, and the Father is in me. If you don't believe me, based on my saying this alone, look at the works that I've done. You should know that these works were only possible because the Father is in me. And honestly, if you believe in me, you too will also do these great works, even greater works, because I am going to the Father. And though I will be with the Father, anything you ask in my name, I will do it."

John's gospel echoes to the followers of Christ the same sentiments of hope that Jeremiah's proclamation offered to the exiled Israelites. See, both congregations believed that the promise of the prophecy – the promise of Christ – was that in the future, at some undetermined date, perhaps in some magical fairyland we call *heaven*, that we would get to enjoy the fruit of God's labor. Both communities – the Israelites in exile and the early disciples in their fear of Christ's

departure – were anxious, shattered, fearful, and unsure. And both the words of the prophet Jeremiah, and the words of Christ, speak this unexpected word of joyful hope: “You don’t have to wait! Why are looking to the unexpected future?”

The prophet says, God’s covenant is already in place – it’s enacted, it’s here, and it’s not going anywhere. God’s promise to be your provider and sustainer is as sure as the day and the night, and unless you can stop the day and night from coming, you can’t stop the covenant from being. Jesus says, why are you asking for more than I’ve already provided – when you look at me, you see the Father. As sure as I am standing before you, you should believe that God is here in your midst.

In the midst of this Easter in exile, “we are confronted by this larger vision of God’s realm. Out of that vision comes the question of how we, the people of God, called together in the name of Jesus, can embody the justice and righteousness of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ It’s the same trouble that the Israelites faced in Babylon, and the disciples faced prior to Jesus’ ascension. They wanted to get to the future to find the glory of God, and the promise offered in return is, God’s already here – what are you doing about it?

I want us to be gathered back together, don’t get me wrong. I want to see your beautiful faces in these pews. I want your brokenness; I want your fullness; I want your joy, and I want your pain. I want your whole being back in this space. But we’ve still got some time in exile to come. And honestly, if we’re paying attention to the Biblical text ... our gathering in this space is not why we were created as God’s church. Our calling as God’s church – our calling as God’s people – our calling, even as a people who are lingering in exile – is not to yearn to have things return to normal.

Our calling as God’s people is to see creation redeemed. Our prayer, in the echo of the words of Christ, is that God’s kingdom may be known on earth as it is in heaven. We aren’t told to wait idly until the exile ends, or until the eschatological finale of Christ’s grand return – we’re told to be living in the here and the now as if we have witnessed God in Christ, and as if we have received the power of God in the Holy Spirit, so that we might be doing the works of God in this world, and even greater works in this world than Christ himself. And if you think for a second that our world doesn’t need this kind of redemption right now, you’re just not paying attention!

“This embodiment can take on a variety of forms, but all reflect God’s love for all creation. This might involve both those first responses, taking care of immediate needs, like providing food and shelter, but ultimately it involves pursuing systemic change, so that [God’s] vision might be fulfilled.”^{iv} We need to be actively engaged in God’s work in this world so that no longer do black men have to fear going for a jog in their neighborhood. We need to be actively engaged in pursuing the kingdom of God here on earth so that our brothers and sisters of color do not have to face a different reality, where in global pandemics affect their communities more negatively than white communities. Did you know that, here in the City of Alexandria, while the Hispanic community makes up less than 15% of our population, they account for over 55% of

our confirmed COVID-19 cases? We do not live in an equitable and just world – the world does not look like God desires.

The prophet claims, and Christ confirms, this is not the way of God. It's not the way God created it ... it's not the way God will consummate it ... and it's not the way God desires it in the interim. The hope that is offered to those in exile – the joy that is offered to those in fear of the future – the promise of both the prophet and Jesus is that we don't have to wait for such perfection to come in the future. The promise is that we are already instilled with God in our hearts and in our midst, so that we might participate in the work of redemption here, now, today ... *even while in exile.*

And this is not hope that shores up any *isolated* community's future. That's not hope, that's selfish ambition. This is hope – this is joy – this is glory that unites us under God's eternal love, where in every one of humanity receives the mercy of God, to live as they were created to live. It is God's promise in the covenant with creation that all humanity may know eternal love. So do not waste the exile as if some future day will come when we might rejoin in God's presence to work again, but proclaim the good news of God's love for all people, that even today – even in separate locations – even in socially distanced spaces – even in the midst of a global pandemic, we can, we should, and we are empowered to join in God's work of proclaiming the love of God for *all people.*

It may be Easter in exile, but we are not left on our own to fend for ourselves. We are empowered by the risen Christ to claim that new life, eternal love, and God's glory are designed for all people. Proclaim the good news, and let us work together, because friends, we have work to do. People's lives literally depend on it. Speak up. Show up. And proclaim God's glory for all people. For the glory of God, may we live in to our call as God's people. Amen.

ⁱ R. E. Clements. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Jeremiah*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Kathryn M. Schiffendecker. "Commentary on Jeremiah 33:14-16." November 29, 2009. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved May 5, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Cornwall. "God's Righteousness Revealed." November 27, 2018. Bobcornwall.com. Retrieved May 5, 2020.

^{iv} Ibid.