

After Exile: A Future with Hope
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
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Last week Pastor Joe preached a sermon on exile and return. He did a beautiful job of walking us into the age-old story of the Israelite's exile to Babylon and eventual return to Jerusalem. Now, we may feel very removed from the ancient Israelites, but their story as the people of God, is part of our story, even all these centuries later. It matters that we know what they did, what happened to them, and how God was present to them through it all. Like Joe said, exile is something that happens to us all, so we have something to learn here.

Now, maybe you can't relate to exile... maybe you grew up here and this is home for you. You've never left. Or maybe you can relate to themes of exile, all too well... Utah might be home now, but it's for a different place that your heart really longs.

But friends, here's the thing; exile is about more than just moving away from home. Exile can be geographic... but it can also be spiritual. Exile can be about a place, but it can also be about so many other things. You can literally be far from home... but then, you can also have a season where, you haven't gone anywhere, but you *feel* far from home. Now, maybe that manifests in feeling distant from God, or distant from what used to be normal, or distant from the person you used to be. But, whatever your exile might be, it is so very normal to find yourself deeply homesick, longing for life as it used to be.

What are you longing for today? What "home" do you feel far away from? What about your life feels distant, or different, or difficult? Are there ways in which you feel like you're in exile?

When our family moved to Princeton so I could finish up another degree, we knew it be a three-year move. Temporary. Our intention was to return to Utah. I mean,

we knew the future was uncertain, and we were open to whatever God would do... but we had this sense that our time in Utah was not over.

So, here's what we did. We put a bunch of our stuff in storage. For example, we left behind all our Christmas decorations, most of our décor/art, most of our family pictures, my grandmother's China. I mean, we were only going to be there three years, so no point in moving all of that stuff across the country. No point in unpacking it all, to just pack it all up again. No point in really settling down in in Princeton.

Now, Princeton was a self-chosen exile for us. It was where God was leading, and we chose to follow. We weren't being forced from our homes or evacuated because of some tragedy; we chose this path. But even still, we were leaving what felt like home, to transplant somewhere else. But because we sensed this wasn't permanent, in my mind and heart, there was no point in settling in.

Until we got to the first Christmas, and the kid's stockings and all the ornaments were packed away in a box in Utah.

In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet writes this letter of warning and consolation to the people as they are taken into exile, into a foreign land, far from home. And he gives them some advice... advice that I wish I would've heeded when I packed up our life and headed to Princeton. He writes:

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Get married, have children. Grow your families. 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 you will find your welfare... For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; when you seek me with all your heart.” -Jeremiah 29:5-7, 10-11

Exile is never the end of the story... but it takes some time to find our way home. Even more, sometimes our seasons of exile end up leading us to new homes, places where we might never have chosen for ourselves, but for which God is helping us plant gardens and build homes and make space for a new life that we didn't see coming. It doesn't mean you won't be homesick for what used to be... but it does mean that we can trust that God is with us wherever it is we happen to live now.

We'll dig into this more next week, but I just want to leave you with one thing to think about as we continue to consider the themes of exile and return. Notice that Jeremiah commands the people to live. To settle in where they're at, and to trust that life can be good, even if it doesn't quite feel like home right away. God told the Israelites... build homes, plant gardens, make a new life. Even if you're homesick for what WAS, settle in fully to what IS.

We are encouraged to live fully, no matter where we are currently... no matter our current circumstances. Settle into where you are now. Are there ways in which you've consciously or subconsciously, refused to put down roots? You've chosen to keep yourself at a distance, refusing to settle in? You've been delaying unpacking the moving boxes? You've refused to bring the Christmas ornaments?

The advice in scripture is to be present to the life you actually have, to settle in fully, to unpack all the boxes, to make friends, to commit to where you are, to decorate the Christmas tree. We are invited to trust that God is with us, and has a future filled with hope, no matter where it is we call home today. Amen.