

Gratitude in Exile
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

The year was five hundred-and-ninety-seven Before the Common Era.
The people called themselves Israel after their ancient ancestor who (so the story went) wrestled with God.
Jacob, renamed Israel: *contender with God*...
Israel: a people who continued to wrestle with God.

The twelve Tribes of Israel had been in the land –
the fruitful land of promise – for many generations;
but it wasn't until David became King just 400 years before
that the people remembered their roots as siblings – children of Jacob all –
and they united: one family Israel... but you know how families can be.

So unity only lasted through the reign of 2 heads of household – 2 kings – before the family once again splintered.
Siblings separated back into disparate tribes, living side-by-side but relatively disconnected.

There they were, this people Israel –
contenders with God and, apparently, with one another –
where our text for today finds them.
They had known strife before, in Egypt and the wilderness, and even within the land.
But now they were accosted from the outside.
The family of Israel was torn from each other and from the land by their neighbor Babylon.
Brought out to a foreign land.
Exiled, so the prophets told, because of their contention.
Exiled from the comfort of home.

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There are many ways of knowing exile.  
For Israel exile was from the land:  
they were taken from the earth that provided sustenance,  
from the heart of giftedness and blessing.  
To the people, it seemed this was exile even from Israel's God,  
for the Temple, the dwelling place of YHWH, existed only in Jerusalem.  
Exile from home, from family, from fruitfulness, from God.  
*What's left?*

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This is a family story: the family of Israel and the family of our faith.
Who doesn't have family on their mind this time of year?
Whether you will be visiting the homes of relatives or
doing last minute cleaning to welcome them to yours –
if you have none to be with this holiday or
if you call on the memory of loved ones gone –
family imprints itself on many of our thoughts at Thanksgiving.
Certain smells and traditions can return us to Thanksgivings of the past, take us there.

Today's reading is also a story about home. Home that is lost in the past. Home in the present as well.
This month I asked our Hilltoppers fellowship group to share with one another: Where is home for you?

Home may be the house you currently live in or the one in which you grew up.

You may subscribe to the old saying that “home is where the heart is”.

Where is home for you?

For me, home is bigger than a house,

but it *is* where I first began to explore the world.

Home is the autumn vista of the Delaware Water Gap in the Appalachian Mountains

and the determined river that helped forge it.

Home is the endless cornfields I knew by foot and by heart.

Home is the earthy smell of our cellar with its one yellowed light bulb and cracked cobwebby walls.

Home is the comfort of knowing each of these intimately and the longing to return there.

Home is a feeling of those remembered places ...

to which I can never go back,

because it would not really match what I remember at all.

What is home for you?

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Exile takes many forms.

The news reminds us that there continue to be exiles of nations;

the displaced by war and disease;

refugees of natural disaster;

those who cannot return to family because they are deemed “too different”

from how they were raised and therefore “ought” to be.

But exile can mean more than being removed from home or family.

This time of year, when we participate in such ritual practices as giving thanks to God for bounty and the preparation period that *is* Advent,

I become especially mindful of our various *spiritual exiles*.

Some of you may have an inherent sense of what being aspiritual exile means in your life.

For me it touches many levels.

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Some of us know a feeling of being exiled from the simple God and faith of childhood, where everything seemed so clear.

In that faith we were given the surety of clean answers, concise directions, unarguable conclusions.

We were taught: “If you follow faithfully, your life will never know doubt.

Even in the challenges you will have meaning”.

I don’t know about you, but I doubt. I don’t have answers.

In fact, I have more questions than the faith I was fed can answer.

This is spiritual exile: from that original faith, from the God of youth.

There are times when I long deeply for such certainty,

for the reassurance which that uncomplicated faith could provide.

But I am an exile...and can’t return to that place.

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I also note the spiritual exile that many of us experience from our own scriptures...

We have been made exile,

alienated by the uses people have made of the Bible:

to justify violence and hatred and judgment;

alienated by our distance from the stories of ancient tribes
 who lived and told of the violence and fear in their own lives;
 alienated by our insistence that Biblical accounts are either fact or fiction,
 God's inerrant Word or the fantasy of fanatics.

This is spiritual exile: from our ancestors in faith and from our stories;
 from Jeremiah in today's reading and
 from the people Israel to whom he writes.

Some of us never want to return to these scriptures that are ours.
 We are in exile.

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I contend with yet another spiritual exile:

that of being Christian in our modern culture.

Our faith tells us to live generously –

our culture tells us to guard what we earn;

our faith teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves –

our culture teaches us to beware of love because it can come back to bite us in the butt;

our faith insists that we take intentional time to reconnect with the Divine –

our culture insists that any time which is not quantifiably productive is wasted time.

Our faith urges us to prepare for the birth of Christ through Advent awareness –

our culture urges us to get up early on Black Friday to prepare for Santa Claus.

This is spiritual exile:

from our chosen faith's principles;

from our desire to be faithful while *in* the world.

And there are moments when I believe many of us would like to

cut ourselves off from the expectations of one or the other:

our faith or our culture.

Give me a cabin in the wilderness where I can seek only God,

where I'm not subjected to the lure of capitalist pursuits and materialism,

where I might even grow my own organic vegetables...;

and if not, if I can't choose to live wholly in and through my faith in a quiet, unknown place,

then let me forget that I am intrinsically connected to all else in God's Creation

so I may live without guilt for those good and right things which

I do not accomplish each and every day.

We are in exile. What do we do?

Do we rebel?

Do we attempt to "return home" where it is comfortable and familiar?

Is there even a home to return to?

What do we do?

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles...:

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".

Build your life there, where you are.
 Carry on with what brings you joy.
 Do what is important to you and keep the covenant of your faith.
Live and continue life.

This is Jeremiah's advice.

Later in the story he warns the exiles against listening to false prophets,
 those who would convince the people to hold their breath,
 to wait anxiously for a return home.

No!

Build your life in this place where you are.
 This is the story's teaching
 given to a people long ago
 in a situation quite unlike our own ... and yet...
 as a people in a new time, with new cares,
 we can find ourselves in the story.

Where are you in exile?

Where are the places of your own alienation –
 from God,

from who you long to be
 or how you desire to live?

Can you build your life here - where you are?

Can you give yourself to the everyday joys,
 seek out the life-giving-ness of this place where you had not thought to be?

Can you reflect upon the blessings of your early home and faith without immediately turning to the ways in which
 they fall short?

Can you try – once more – to approach scripture with an open mind and heart and spirit (even knowing how it has
 been used for harm) and search it for *your* story and the stories of other striving seekers?

Can you center yourself in the spirit of the Living Christ as you do your Christmas shopping (not just at the
 Alternative Giving Fair), and remember that the gifts you share are a reflection of joyful thanksgiving for the
 amazing gift of Christ's birth?

You can! You can at least try.

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We are all exiles who must learn to live in the lands in which we find ourselves.

We cannot find peace in resistance and rebellion,  
 in raging against our exile or against how we wish things were not.

We cannot find peace in longing to return to what was or  
 to what we once *thought* was.

We cannot find peace in any of these,  
 but we can build our lives in this our current land...  
 and in doing so, we can build peace within.

Build your life in this exile, even though it's not where you expected to be.  
 BUT DON'T LEAVE IT THERE –

Instead, remember the final verse of this morning's reading in which Jeremiah encourages the exiles of Israel to "Seek the welfare of that city where [God has] sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare".

This Thanksgiving and in the upcoming season of Advent, take the opportunity to seek the welfare of this culture in which we build our lives –

be a subversive,

generous,

loving,

intentional and

aware people

living your faith in and for this land.

Build your houses and live in them;

plant your gardens and eat what they produce.

Do what is joyful and significant right here,

where we are,

for ourselves and

for this land in which we dwell.

And give thanks to God!