

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Holy God, on this day of new beginnings and new life, we greet you with thanksgiving, praise and joy. We worship you for the wonder and awe you alone inspire within us. We worship you for the meaning you give each facet of life, in the good times and in the bad. We hold both in our hearts today as we come to you in prayer, God. We lift up the turmoil of our world and the turmoil of our inner selves. We lift up the joys of our world and those we each celebrate today. With so much in our world we cannot control, we turn to you to find what we can do to ease its pains. With so much beyond our power, we seek to be powerful as messengers of your Gospel life in the here and now. Hear all that is on our hearts and guide us toward faithfulness on this Sunday and all our living days.

Indeed, Holy God, this life is complicated. Sometimes we live in perfect harmony with you; other times we find that nothing seems to be connected. We feel out of sorts in the daily routines or the routine has been disrupted. Sometimes, God, we find ourselves in the feeling of exile, separated from what is meaningful and fulfilling. We can easily give into hopelessness, but then we remember scripture's promises, God, that you walk with us toward restoring new life. Help us, God, to seek out faithfulness in the darkest times, to see and to take hold of where you are moving. Ultimately, we remember, God, that you have not and will never abandon us, always guiding us home. We hold this promise throughout all turbulence as we pray in the name of Christ the prayer he taught us, saying...

SERMON

Moving into 2016, I realized something when I was writing this sermon. I use a lot of sports metaphors to explain ideas. And with good reason. The way that sports fans live their lives, the range of emotions, the connectedness we have to our favorite teams and

players...well, it mirrors the way we live our lives. For example, people from Nebraska. We live and die by our football team. In recent years, the best way to describe our devotion to our team is wandering through the wilderness. We won three national titles in the 1990s, and since then, we've hardly been competitive on the national stage. We feel that this is where we belong: we should be producing the greatest athletes and the biggest trophies, but this season, all we could put our hats on was winning the Foster Farms Bowl...hardly a national title. We feel like we are in a place where we don't really belong, and we're waiting for a savior...some kind of savior...to bring us back to where we are meant to be.

But when we get down to the brass tacks of life, we feel a lot of similar things. Life has its times where we feel totally connected, totally in touch with the world and people around us. We know exactly what to do; we know exactly what God's calling us to do. We feel well connected and where we ought to be. Other times, we feel detached; we feel estranged from meaning, perhaps separated from the place where we most belong. We feel separated from God and from those we love. It feels like God has abandoned us and, perhaps, that everyone else does not care. This is not just a personal problem; this is a condition that happened to some of the greatest heroes in scripture. This, in biblical language, is the feeling of "exile."

We feel it alone; we feel it among others. It is, most clearly, a separation from that which gives us life and well being, such as a place or among people we care about. While the Nebraska Cornhuskers make a good way of summing up the idea, real feelings of exile are not as easy as displeasure with a football team. It's not commonplace in everyday life as "I can't find my keys." It's no small inconvenience or offense. It's much deeper and darker in the pit of your soul. It's the feeling of lack of direction, even in the midst of things

we find familiar. It can be personal or it can be a group condition. Life has changed and we may not feel changed along with it. The future and all that we felt certain of is in question. This is exile. But if there's one thing to remember from scripture, even when things feel most empty and directionless, God is still there. God is there through the times of plenty and the times of empty. In the time of exile, God leads the people back to where they belong and provides hope for the future, even if it wasn't the place where they first began or the future they may have wanted. Either way, it is exactly where they were called to be.

That is the backdrop for the passage from Jeremiah. What we hear from the Prophet Jeremiah is a hopeful message in dark time that never seems to end. We remember that the people of Judah were ripped away from their homeland and taken to Babylon as was the custom for conquered peoples in that day. This is a quite literal physical exile. They were taken away from everything they knew, everything they learned to rely upon in this world, into exile in a strange land with strange people. They were seemingly forgotten by God in Babylon. And that was their question: did God forget us? Even more of a legitimate question to them was: is God dead? In that time, if your land was conquered, it was believed that your god was conquered by the foreign god. After all, your protection was seemingly gone; the true victors show their faces. Now, we know better, but when you're in the midst of a deep, dark hole, that's the easy conclusion: God forgot us or God is gone. With no God and none of the promises seemingly left, there seems to be no future. What this passage reminded the people of Judah and Israel so long ago that God is not dead; God is not gone. God is at work and will reunite those who were lost to where they belong. Everyone was included: the powerful, the least powerful, the widows, the blind: all God's people. Even in the midst of weeping, a new hope comes; the people will find celebration.

But this was not the only exile to be. Another one was to come, and that exile took on a different tone. One of my favorite Christmas Carols is “O Come O Come Emmanuel,” for it speaks of the state of Israel in the time of Christ. “O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here.” Indeed, the state of Israel in the time of Christ was exile but one of a different kind. Oh yes, they lived in their promised land. They had the temple; they seemingly had everything that they needed to live their lives faithfully according to the Torah. But things weren’t right. They were occupied by the Roman Army. They were forced to live under Roman Rule; they seemingly had no control over the future. Even in the midst of the familiar, there was exile from the freedom that God provided. The promise of then held once again with new meaning as a child was born. This child took on the promise of being the presence of God in a whole new way, as this child WAS God come as a human being. This child brought a new kind of freedom from the captor and a hope for the future for those who would see it. In all kinds of exile, there is a way forward. God always paves the way, in the ways we expect and the ways we do not.

Exile, after all, is a horrible thing in the big ways and the small. We will not experience the same conditions of the ancient Israelites with either a removal from our land or an occupation, but the principle still holds true. In many ways, one can be taken away from the familiar, the comfortable, and find one’s self in a new situation with new problems and new struggles. Exile can be described in so many ways in today’s world. We aren’t necessarily going to have the same issues as the ancient people of Judah, but we will have our own places of displacement. It can be a case of clinical depression. The loss of something or someone important, bringing about deep grief, leads us into a place where we don’t feel like we belong. Change, big and small, can bring a feeling of exile. It might be the

literal displacement of moving, taking a new job, or giving up a job in retirement. In those times of struggle, it can easily feel like God is nowhere to be found. The familiar is gone; the new is uncomfortable. Life feels without the connection that kept us grounded.

Even so, we are not without hope in this season of light. Scripture teaches us that God leads the exiles back to where they belong over time. The theme of Christmas, after all, is that God comes at the right time, but not the most expected time, to lead us out of exile. In the same way, the exiles we feel are not without help. The help may not lead to the same place as before, but they are where one can become grounded once again. Life doesn't bring us back always to what we want. Returning from the feeling of exile in loss does not mean we are back where we began or have regained what we lost, but we are back in a place where we can be more grounded once again. Finding a feeling of home in a new phase of life doesn't mean that we are back to the comfortable old place but are in the place God led us. After all, nothing could change scripture's Exiles' past, but they had a future.

Here's the secret of scripture's truth: scripture's truth is not that it was fulfilled but that scripture is fulfilled time and time again. Christ did not come once; Christ came and Christ continues to come into our world in ways we don't always realize. Christ didn't just heal the sick and set the captives free; that is the continuing work of Christ throughout the world. Scripture isn't fulfilled once; it is fulfilled time and time again. Exile is no different. God calls God's people out of exile time and time again. It happened with Ancient Judah out of Babylon. It happened in a way they did not expect with the coming of the Messiah of God, who has led and will continue to lead us toward wholeness. In Christ's service, we are being called out of exile and into something new, something we may not expect.

I can recount many times where I have felt this lack of direction and hope. I can easily find myself in that space of exile with the passing of many family members. One feels it most pointedly at Christmas. My Uncle Bill died over four years ago, and yet, when you hit something like Christmas, a time when we come together as family, we can easily feel back in those places of loss and mourning. Grief, in my experience, is not a straight line but a spiral. It's a spiral because sometimes I revisit places of grief I thought I was done with but comes back to bite me in the behind. Life can easily loop back to old feelings of exile.

But they never have authority over my life. What gets me through each struggle is knowing that God has never abandoned me and never will. I have the community and support around me, the members of the Body of Christ, that prove it. In each struggle, life's small and great exiles, God provides the tools to bring us out when our eyes are open and looking for your movement. In depression, in grief, God provides professionals and counselors that can process and direct through the struggles. We are never alone. For Methodist pastors, every late winter and spring year can feel like a kind of exile, for the cabinet meets to decide the movement of pastors across the conference. I remember that period in early 2012 coming out of seminary, and I truly felt like I could not see the way forward. I was a newbie; the Cabinet didn't really know me and my skills, so I had a hard time understanding what it would be like. Nevertheless, I know that God was at work in them and in me. I had a great support system that knew me and encouraged me along the way. I was never alone, even though I felt like it. Although the process felt without direction for a season, I look back and see how God was working: not on my schedule but definitely working, and that is how I came to be among you, sisters and brothers in Christ. In the end, God's purposes bring us to where we belong. That is the theme of Christmas:

those who are lost will be found. If you ever need tangible proof, the people seated around you prove that God never wants anyone to be forgotten or alone.

It may feel that way with your favorite team, but it goes deeper. Exile will happen in all phases of life. It will be literal and metaphorical, where you find yourself physically or mentally away from home, feeling disconnected. Grief, depression, an overall feeling of not belonging. They feel so disengaging from life. With God, these are but for a season. God leads us out of exile and back into faithfulness when we take hold of the opportunities God offers us, sometimes those being the support networks we have available and the companions who walk with us. That is why Christ came. Scripture was, is, and will be fulfilled that God never leaves the exiles on their own. Even in the midst of exile, God is there, and God has plans for restoration...and a future. Thanks be to God for this and so many promises that have, are, and will be fulfilled! Amen and Amen.