

On the Other Side of Ruin: Finding Ourselves Far from Home
The Story of the Hebrew Exile (attached)

Someone asked me this week what I was planning to say to you about the terrible shooting in the Texas church that happened last Sunday. I don't know, I thought. What is there to say in response to one more gun violence tragedy? This thing that happens in our country that feels so unnecessary and wrong and still, somehow, inevitable. I imagine you heard this week, as I did, heartbreaking stories from that congregation—about whole families lost to one another. Children who now face years of surgeries. The trauma of watching what happened while they sat next to their parents in church.

And I wonder if you feel sometimes, as I do, that a sort of numbness sets in to me. An inclination to look down and occupy yourself with small things, just to try and hold your balance in a world that seems to have veered off its tracks. There has been an accumulation of disorienting conditions in this year, I think: politics; natural disasters; some weird, looming threat of nuclear war. Our whole country—maybe the whole world—seems to have lost its bearings. All of that gets layered on whatever is going on in your personal life: a frightening illness; a child—or a parent—you are worried about; a situation at work that feels out of your control. Changes you were not ready for. Suddenly you look down and realize that the ground beneath your feet is not as solid as it once seemed, or as you need it to be. 'Home' feels like a very small patch of ground...or maybe like it's not there at all.

This is what it feels like to be in exile, far from home. We heard this morning a short version of the biblical story of Exile. The people of Israel were literally, physically, overrun by an army that tore down their landmarks, stripped them of their addresses, and marched them into a foreign land. That's not so likely to happen to us, but exile is a good metaphor for when the things we used to lean on—life as we knew it—seems to be disappearing. We know something about what exile feels like. Frederick Buechner says, "To be homeless in the way people like you and me are apt to be homeless is to have homes all over the place but not to be really at home in any of them." To be really at home is to be at peace. We keep trying to grab and hold onto that peace. And it keeps slipping out of our grasp.

At first the Israelites' response to their Babylonian exile was lament, despair. Of course it was. We hear it in their poetry, their songs: "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered [our homeland]...How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" They couldn't imagine they would ever get back home, or any reality larger than the one they found themselves in. That's the danger in exile: to become so preoccupied with your loss that you can't even imagine anything else. You lose your energy, your courage, your freedom to dream.

I know this. Many years ago, about a year and a half after my husband died, while I was still deep in my grief, I had a dream. In my dream I was living in an apartment in a city, in one of those brownstone-type buildings that has a living space a few steps below ground level. Inside that space—my home—there had been a fire. The space was entirely burned out, charred,

completely black. Ugly, uncomfortable conditions—not a chair or a bed anywhere—but it was my place. In my dream I too was dressed in black, shrouded, as if I was wearing a burka. I opened the door of my apartment and went out into the sunlight for a moment, just to put a bag of garbage out on the street. And when I turned back to the door, it was locked. I tugged and I tugged; I turned the handle, rattled it. All I wanted was to get back into that ugly, charred place that was my home. And I couldn't open the door.

I'm not someone who generally hears God speak out loud. But I believe God spoke to me in that dream. Found me and shook me in a way I could hear. That dream became a turning point for me. I heard in my dream a message: I had to leave the darkness I had gotten comfortable in. I had to choose to live again in daylight. Sometimes we need something that will jar us out of our comfortable discomfort.

That's what happened for those Hebrew people who were exiled to a strange place, to Babylon. Terrible things had happened. They found themselves far from home, in a landscape they didn't recognize. They were sure that God was punishing them. That God had left them, in fact—withdrawn from his promises and his people. When they were in Judah, they had known where to find God. God lived in that familiar place. Now, here, in a strange land, how could they still be God's people? Far away from the Temple in Jerusalem, where they *knew* God could be found, where would they go to find peace and order and well-being?

For sixty years the people of Israel lived in Babylon. That's a historical detail, but it's also an important piece of the metaphor. Three generations—long enough for children and grandchildren to be born in that foreign place. The people had no choice but to learn a different language that might have eroded their identity. They got jobs and went to work every day in a culture whose values were not the ones they had grown up with. Lived in a country that made laws *designed* to steer them away from loyalty to the God and the commitments that had set them apart, the traditions that made them 'a people'.

And then God spoke to them—not in a dream, but in the words of prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah. Poets, prophets, who were hearing God say a new word, something they had never heard before. 'I have not abandoned you,' God said.

*The mountains may shift,
and the hills may be shaken,
but my faithful love won't shift from you,
and my covenant of peace will not be shaken...*

Isaiah 54:10

Even now, the prophet said, even here, in this place that looks nothing like what you thought the world was supposed to be...God is at work to bring newness out of your defeat.

And so, against their better judgment, all their common sense about what was reasonable and safe and prudent, even—and maybe especially—when they didn't *feel* like it, the people began to live their lives *as if* they were in their homeland. They resumed the practices that had only made

sense at home: resting on the Sabbath, baptizing their babies¹, sharing the rituals of Passover, praying together out loud. They told the stories of their tradition, about the times when God had led their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt, and saved them from being drowned in the Red Sea. For the first time, they wrote their stories down, because they knew now that those stories could be lost.

It was *in exile*—those lost years when the Hebrew people lived in captivity, far from home—that the Torah was first written down. The first five books of the Bible, the story of how God came and found them. The stories that told how a straggly group of slaves became a people. God’s people: a light to the rest of the world. The *Exile* became the most vibrant time in the development of Israel’s culture. Storytelling and art and music, development of their intellectual traditions—all flourished. It was in exile that the people learned that being God’s people wasn’t just about a place. It meant that no matter how far away from home they were, they lived in freedom. There were possibilities that nothing in the world could take away. They could refuse to accept Babylon’s verdict about what was impossible, what couldn’t be done. They could wait for as long as it took for life and joy and wholeness to return, because they knew—they finally knew—that the God who brings those things is everywhere.

Recently I heard someone tell about a time when he needed to dig a well on his property somewhere in one of those middle states of the country. It was winter; the ground was hard and cold, icy. The well driller came out and looked around, found a spot, and said, “Yeah, we can drill a well here.”

“You’ll have to wait until spring, of course,” the owner said; “for the ground to get softer, and for the water to start to run again underground. It’s too cold now.”

“Nope,” said the crusty old driller. “We’ll do it now.” And then he said this: “It’s easy to find water in the spring. But if you find it in the winter, you know it will always be there.”

If you find water in the winter, you know it will always be there.

Practice faith—live *as if* God were right beside you—even when you feel far from the home where those practices felt normal and natural. Let us tell the stories that have brought us here, the times that God has saved us before from what seemed like certain ruin. God has not abandoned you. If you can find yourself when you’re far away from home, you can never be lost again.

¹ Circumcision—a forerunner of the mark of baptism practiced by Christians.

The Story of the Exile—from 2 Kings

The 137th Psalm begins, “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remember Zion...How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

This poem of lament comes from a time in Israel’s history known as the Babylonian Captivity, or The Exile, in the sixth century BC. The story is told in the Hebrew Scriptures, mostly in the Book of Second Kings.

Historically, the Exile followed the reigns of King David and King Solomon, when the Kingdom of Israel was largest and most productive. Under King Solomon, an elaborate Temple had been built in Jerusalem—a place for God to live and to be worshiped. But after Solomon’s death, the country fell into hard times. It divided into two parts. Its rulers were corrupt and unwise. The people forgot who they were; they lost their sense that they were a special people, in covenant with God.

So when the Babylonian Army, under King Nebuchadnezzar, swept through that part of the world, Jerusalem fell quickly. The wall around the city and the Temple were destroyed—burned to the ground. With the intention of fully erasing the civilization of their new colonies, the Babylonians deported every person who might have held Israel’s memories and culture. The educated, the wealthy, the powerful—all were taken into captivity and re-settled in Babylon. The only ones left behind were the poor, the slaves.

For three generations the people of Israel lived in Babylon, far away from the land they believed God had promised them. Their children and grandchildren did not return to their homeland until the Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Persian Army, almost sixty years later.