

Reflection

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Our group of parishioners who are trying to read the entire Bible across this program year is coming to the end of the Old Testament this week. This is no small feat, and those who have endured deserve to be commended. These last weeks have been spent in the books of the Prophets—the big names like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and the smaller ones like Hosea, Haggai, and Habakkuk (among others). As we have been reading them, it has become increasingly clear that the most formative historical event for many of these prophets was the Babylonian exile of 586 BC, when Jerusalem was conquered by the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar and the people of Israel were expelled from their homeland, sent into exile, and separated from their community. As part of this exile the Temple, the central locus for communal worship and religious practice, as well as community and religious identity, was destroyed. This was utterly devastating for the people of Israel on every level. Their understanding of their relationship with God as the chosen people crumbled along with the walls of His holy house. Because who were they if they weren't in the Promised Land? Who were they if they were not able to gather as a people? Who was God—*where* was God—if not in the Temple?

It does not take a great deal of imagination to see in the Babylonian Exile something of the situation we find ourselves in today. We suffer only a small degree compared to what the people of Israel suffered—at least we get to stay in our homes and with people we love. But our community has been expelled from our Temple, and we can no longer see, or hold, or pray or sing beside our family of faith. This is no small wound for us to suffer, though it is one we suffer willingly, if not always happily, for the literal health of our broader world. We have not been conquered, but we have in some ways been exiled. And we are left asking some of the same questions the Israelites were asking in 586 BC: Who are we if we cannot gather together to pray? Who is God—*where* is God—if we cannot come into the sacred spaces we so often find Him? We are doing our best to continue the worshipping life of this community through technology, which we hope is helpful, but it only exemplifies—for your clergy as much as anyone—how essential the gathered congregation is to the identity of the Church; how essential *you* are to Body of Christ.

One of the prophets most impacted by the Babylonian exile was Jeremiah. He lived through that fateful day and gives us a first-hand account of what it did to the soul of his people. Jeremiah is not afraid of strong word of woe (we don't get the word "jeremiad" from him for nothing) but as exile happens, he softens in tone (a little bit). In the later chapters, he seems to recognize that there was no value in preaching doom and gloom to a defeated people. What he needed to preach was hope. And more than hope, he needed to find a way to help his people hang onto their God in the midst of their exile, so that a physical exile did not become a spiritual one as well. This was a big shift to make because the Israelites' religious identity was so wrapped up in their identity as a *particular* people, in a *particular* place, worshipping and living in a *particular* way. All of that now had to change, at least for a little while. So Jeremiah writes this:

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they

broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord..." (Jeremiah 31:30-34)

What's needed for this new reality is a new covenant, not a covenant inscribed on tablets of stone but on the tablets of their heart. God can no longer reside in the Temple because there no longer *is* any Temple. God is no longer worshipped in communal ritual because there is no community to gather. And yet, despite this shift, God will still be their God, and they will still be His people. Maybe even more so.

During this time of exile from our sacred spaces and community gatherings, when we are trying to find new ways to connect with one another, we may have to shift the way we connect with God, too, much like the Israelites did. We cannot depend on the usual means of spiritual nourishment that come from robust, communal Sunday morning worship and regular fellowship and formation. This is deeply disappointing, coming especially, as it does, right in the heart of our Church year. But rather than see this strictly as a loss, I wonder if it might also provide us with an opportunity: the time and space to really see if God is written on our individual hearts. The time and space to perhaps pick up on some of those practices and disciplines we always talk about during Lent (reading The Bible; praying; fasting; almsgiving) but are often too busy to really engage with. The kind of practices that incarnate that new covenant Jeremiah was talking about; that make the presence of God felt and known in our mind and heart and shown forth in our lives.

What could that look like? Well, if you're not already, you could use some of your newly flexible time to delve into scripture. Don't start with Jeremiah though, he'll just depress you. Try the Psalms, many of which were composed by a people dealing with the very same exile he was. If you're looking for some ways to stay centered while all your normal routines are in disarray—why not pray, like really pray? Could you sit in silence and open your heart to the presence of God, breathing in the love of Christ, breathing out all your anxiety and fear for...5 minutes? 10? 20?! The picked over grocery stores may already have us fasting whether we like it or not, so that discipline may be covered. But if the cratering stock market didn't wipe out all of your funds, are there ways in which the resources you have amassed in your life could be used to alleviate the current and impending suffering of those for whom this time of exile is not just frustrating, but also life-threatening? My friends, you do not need someone to tell you or teach you to know the Lord, as Jeremiah says. You can do it yourself.

Our activities may have come to a standstill, but our souls need not remain stagnant. This is a hard time, but it need not be wasted time. For could you imagine if each of us, across these weeks, took up the opportunity that Jeremiah offered the people of Israel, and that God is offering each one of us, to use this time to find and fall in love with a God who is closer to you than your own breath, and whose presence transcends any distance? Could you imagine if we spent eight weeks drawing ever closer to the arms of the Almighty and came through this time *more* convinced of the way God is at work in us and around us and through us in this world? Could you imagine what that would do for our parish and our community when we gather together again (and we will gather together again); the body made infinitely stronger for the strengthening of each member? Could you imagine what torrents of Spirit and effulgence of joy would burst forth on that great and glorious day? I can. And it's what's getting me through.