

Proper 23C-25 Sermon
October 12, 2025
Trinity Episcopal Church
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Today I want to talk about exile. There is the Babylonian exile, when the Israelites were taken from their homeland, their temple and city destroyed. (This is the exile during which the prophet Jeremiah speaks the words we heard this morning.) But exile isn't just something that happened in history. It comes in many forms. At its core, exile is the experience of being sent from home, or feeling far from home, whether literally or metaphorically.

In our reading from Jeremiah this morning, we hear a surprising message: that even in exile, God wants the people to make a home; that God's presence somehow follows them into Babylon and they are to put down roots there. This would have been a shocking message to the Israelites, whose very identity was tied to their homeland. How could they experience God's presence if their one place of worship was destroyed? How could they make a home in Babylon when all they wanted was to return?

Yet this is what Jeremiah says to the people: Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce, marry and raise families. Multiply. It echoes the creation story in Genesis, suggesting that even in exile, something new can be created. Something fruitful. And more, Jeremiah says, "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." The Hebrew word for welfare is *shalom*, peace, wholeness. God asks them to seek the *shalom*, the peace, the wholeness, of the city.

When *we* hear Jeremiah's words, they might sound lyrical and lovely, but to the ears of the exiles, they might have sounded cruel. How dare God tell them to settle in Babylon? Imagine how this would sound to Palestinians forced to flee a war-torn Gaza? Or to enslaved Africans torn from their homeland, forced into exile and bondage, never to return? And yet, Jeremiah says, "Make a home, even in exile."

We are hearing this story today during the Jewish festival of Sukkot. It's a time to celebrate the harvest, but also a time of remembering. For one week, Jews build temporary structures, called *sukkahs*, in their yards and synagogues. Made with plant materials, these fragile tent-like structures represent the huts the Israelites lived in during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus. Wandering without a home, they experienced God's presence with them. Just a few days ago, local interfaith clergy were invited to Temple B'Nai B'rith to share a meal under their *sukkah*. Rabbi Daniel shared the history and beauty of this tradition from the Exodus. Much later, during the Babylonian exile, when the Temple could no longer host these rituals, families began building *sukkahs* in their yards to commemorate this time of wilderness wandering. And now, they invite friends over for meals under these structures and some even spend the whole night there, remembering the journey of their ancestors and the provision they found.

There is a beautiful Jewish belief that God's indwelling presence went into exile with the people. That God suffered with them, and stayed with them. They called this presence the Shekhinah, often compared to what Christians would later call the Holy Spirit – a divine presence that dwells within us, even when we feel most lost.

So yes, there is the historical exile of Jeremiah's time. But there are other exiles, too. There's the exile we can feel in relationships. Or the sense of exile we face if we feel abandoned by God during a difficult time in our life. There's the exile within, the restlessness of being human. Some say we carry a God-shaped hole inside us. A longing to return to the Love from which we came and to which we will one day return. A deep homesickness of the soul.

The theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes about this homesickness, which he believes *is* God within – the Shekhinah, which he describes as the part of God that is separated from God's full presence, and now dwells with us in our exile. It yearns to return to God. And that yearning acts like a homing beacon in our souls – calling us toward wholeness. Calling us toward God. Always. He writes, "It suffers in the victims and is tormented in the perpetrators. It goes with sinners on the wanderings of their estrangement. The Shekhinah does not leave us. Even in our most frightful errors, it accompanies us with its great yearning for God, its homesickness to be one with God."

Every day, we move between exile and return – between feeling far from home and then suddenly, finding it again. Can you relate? Like ... you are caught up in thoughts about your day, irritated, ruminating, and then something catches your eye and you notice the soft pink light on the mountains and suddenly you are in the present moment, feeling gratitude that you get to live in such a beautiful place. Exile and Return. Or when you're caught in the exile of shame and a you risk sharing it with a trusted friend who surprises you with a "me, too," and the shame is lessened. Exile and Return. Or quite literally you are holding your breath as you watch the news images of the people of Gaza walking the long road back to Gaza, carrying their possessions, wondering what will be left of their home. Or the images of Jewish people just waiting in a plaza in Tel Aviv, waiting to see the hostages they haven't seen in two years, wondering how it will be. Exile and Return.

Marcus Borg says the entire biblical story can be understood as a great liberation from exile – both historical and personal. To be Christian, he says, is to join in this movement of return – away from inner exile and toward the transformation of the world, over and over again. The thing is, that return can happen even in exile.

Which brings us back to Jeremiah. Why does God ask the Israelites to build homes, plant gardens, and seek the welfare of the city? Maybe because it's what we all must do – in whatever exile we find ourselves in. Whether exiled from a homeland, from a relationship, or from a sense of divine closeness – we are called to make our home here. Now. And not wait until the exile is over, or until things are easy or harmonious. And God is with us in that work.

I'd say Americans are experiencing a kind of exile right now, as our society is severed, and we can't find our way home to each other or to the dream we want this nation to embody. Those of us in privilege are just beginning to feel it. Others have lived with this exile all along. And into

this moment, Jeremiah still speaks: seek the welfare of the city, he says. There we might experience a return from exile even in exile – a re-connection to God who dwells in us and suffers with us and longs with us for justice and peace. Go local, we hear Jeremiah saying! Seek the welfare of Santa Barbara, and of all who dwell therein. There are so many ways to do that.

Just last Tuesday, people showed up at a County Supervisors' meeting to support immigrants threatened with losing healthcare, and to stand with public health workers facing layoffs due to federal funding cuts. The people showed up and the leaders paid attention. At La Casa de la Raza downtown, a quiet movement of care is happening to support immigrant families. You can seek the welfare of the city without leaving your home by simply purchasing items from their Amazon wishlist, (<https://www.lacasafounders.org/general-7>) which will be delivered straight to people in need, or by just stopping by to ask how you can serve. There is a local effort called Santa Barbara Neighbor Walks that hosts guided walks to explore our city's needs and hopes. One recent walk looked at achieving a bike and car-friendly Santa Barbara. The next walk in November is around the issue of food insecurity with a walk to the farmer's market. But you need not walk in order to seek the welfare of the city. You can simply be a neighbor on your own block. The Hopeful Neighbor Project (<http://www.hopefulneighborhood.org>) is a national effort that offers a free toolkit online and they'll send it to you. I now have this adorable little "I love my neighborhood" journal which has great ideas. Here is a page where I'm invited to write down the names of my neighbors. There is a page with a QR code that teaches you how to research the history of your neighborhood. And here's a suggestion to take cookies to your local fire department. Jeremiah takes us from the global to the local. From the overwhelming to the doable. From a sense of exile to feeling at home, even now.

Our Jewish siblings transformed exile from a state of abandonment into a period of dedicated resistance, keeping the flame alive. The indwelling God was with them, as it is with us. Follow in the footsteps of our spiritual ancestors and seek the peace of our city. Because in its welfare, we will find our own. And in its peace, we will find our peace.