

I. Advanced Organizer

A. A little while back, I told a story about an event, early in Jason and I's marriage, that played a significant role in shaping our family. I talked about the **sudden breaking apart of the marriage of Jason's parents**. It took us by surprise and became a defining moment in our young lives. Jason's family had been remarkably close, with all five young adult children living near each other and everyone returning to his parents home every week for a family dinner. When his mom announced their separation, very quickly, everything changed. That safe family intimacy we'd taken for granted was gone. There was a before and there was an after. This morning I want to share a little bit about what the aftermath looked like.

1. Beyond the grief of a loss of family, the years right after the separation were most challenging as Jason and I struggled to know **where to go with faith in the face of that ordeal**. For Jason, especially, the wounds of that season called into question all that he was raised to believe was true. He grew up a pastor's kid. His parents planted a church an hour north of Chicago, and his whole young life and the life of his family revolved around their church. His father served as a primary spiritual authority not only for Jason, but for his entire faith community. It was bad enough when the church ended abruptly when Jason was a young teenager, without much explanation. To find out years later that it was his father's lack of integrity that was the cause, and that his father had led a double-life for years: that was totally devastating.
2. Meanwhile, all of this was playing out while I myself was going through a spiritually significant season. **I had recently come to embrace a call to full-time ministry, to church-planting, no less**. As the vocation for my life, and Jason was fully supportive. But as the drama with his family unfolded and became increasingly painful, questions inevitably surfaced. Where was God through all of this? How could people who were so deeply connected in church community be so profoundly messed up? How could the church not have saved their marriage? What about all the things that the Martens had taught us about faith and living it out? Was any of it true? They had given their lives to church planting and it had ended horribly. Were we destined to repeat their story ourselves?
3. **The questions that surfaced at that time were not easy**. Many of them didn't have answers, at least not simple ones. And as they came to the forefront, I had to watch my husband struggle in a real way with the deeper question of "is God even real and present in our life?", as well as "does any of this that we are doing here with church actually make a difference?".
4. In the midst of all of this wrestling, **I sensed God speaking to me through one of the women who was a regular prayer partner in my life at the time**. She shared a picture she believed Jesus had given her for me. In the picture, I was on the shore of a lake, and Jason was on the end of a pier that extended into the middle of the lake. Suddenly the pier he was standing on collapsed, with the exception of the few planks beneath his feet. Effectively, it was cutting him off from shore, leaving him stranded on an island in the middle of the water. As I rushed into a row boat, intent on rowing out and rescuing my husband, Jesus stopped me. "Don't get in that boat, Leah," he said. "You have to let me do this. I have to rebuild that pier."
5. This word cut me to the heart, as it described perfectly the predicament I found myself in. **I longed to rescue Jason**. I longed to bring him back to the safe shores of confidence in God. I longed to instigate his healing. I longed to give him theology to understand his predicament. But I was helpless to save him. In fact, it would be inappropriate for me to do so. The truth was, **Jason needed a new pier, one that I couldn't build him**. He did

need what had fallen apart to be fixed, he needed the construction of something better for where life had taken him. And that was something above my pay grade.

6. In the months and years that followed I felt like I saw a new pier built for Jason by the Divine, one that both of us could navigate. The path of faith he walked after things collapsed was very different than what he had walked before, **but it was the one he needed to move forward.**

B. This summer we've been having a conversation that's been **exploring the exile**: the season in the Biblical narrative where the nation of Judah has been conquered, their royal city and temple destroyed, and most of the surviving residents carted off to Babylon. This was a period in the 6th century BC that lasted somewhere around 50 - 70 years

1. Throughout this series called "Faith In the Exile", we've been considering **how those who were in exile continued to connect with one another and with God** in the midst of such profound disruption and disorientation.
2. Throughout July we focused on **lament** as an important component in the spirituality of the exile; being able to give voice to the disruption and disorientation that exile brings.
3. Before that, we looked at the role that **remembrance played** for the exiles' spirituality, as people separated from their homeland retold, revised, and wrote down their stories, their songs, their prophetic words in the era of the exile, which helped them to preserve their culture and also make meaning of their circumstances.
4. In the final three teachings of the series, I want to look at how we see some of these things together: as people come to terms with crisis they are in through lament, as they examine their stories anew through remembrance, **what new insights are gained? In what ways did the spirituality of the exiles from Judah shift and evolve in the wake of the trauma they lamented?** How did the exiles' experiences of upheaval and suffering impact how they understood the world and God? What was the "new pier" that was being built for them? And importantly for us today, how might those new insights open us up in this season to new insights of our own?

C. Today we're gonna look at an **exile passage that many scholars and theologians believe is a place where the understanding of the exiles was changing in real time.** We can see a new understanding beginning to be realized in just a chapter of text, an understanding that would ripple outward in ways that would have significant impact. The text comes to us from the words of **one of our exile prophets, Ezekiel.** You'll remember him perhaps as the one who ate the scroll among other prophetic acts that we'd probably consider a bit bizarre.

1. But before we address the Ezekiel text and can look at where there might be new insight coming in it, **we have to address the presumption that this text is built upon.** It's a presumption that sooner or later we need to speak of in regards to the exile because it underlays much of how the Hebrew Bible speaks of the Babylonian exile, and yet is likely uncomfortable for many of us to really consider. I'm speaking of **the understanding in the Biblical story that the exile was ultimately an experience of divine punishment.**
2. Now truthfully, we do not have very many texts that **speak to us about the exile directly.**
 - a) We have a couple of accounts that are the Hebrew Bible's version of history, that name the events leading up to the exile to Babylon, as well as the eventual return from Babylon, but none of those documents tasked with giving history actually tell us about **what life was like in the exile.**
 - b) We also have **laments** like we were looking to last month, some in the Psalms, and of course the book of Lamentations.

- c) And then we have the voices of a few prophets who were sent both to warn those in Judah about what was to come if they didn't change the way they were living, and to speak to the exiles about where they were and what might come next. But **all of these seem to operate from this understanding that the exile was God's way of punishing the people of Judah for disobedience.**
3. This narrative - that the people went into exile because God was punishing them - brings up **all kinds of complicated questions for us** about how the world works, why is there suffering, and if this is true, what does it say about the character of God? We may even wonder if we're experiencing an "exile" of our own, if that too means God is punishing us communally for doing something wrong. These questions are beyond what we can really cover today, but I do want to **make a few remarks in regards to them** as a way to give context to our conversation and help us focus on where we see development along these lines for the community of God in the season of exile.
- II. A few things to keep in mind when looking at texts like Ezekiel:
- A. **These texts are coming to us from a world that is very different than our own, with a whole different way of understanding reality.** In the ancient world that the exiles from Judah inhabited, it was extremely common to connect major happenings, whether political or cosmological, with the activity of various gods. Each nation had their gods. Yahweh was the god of the nations of Israel and Judah but Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, all of their neighbors had their own gods, and from the records we have we can tell that this way of interpreting world events is not just true for the people who followed Yahweh, it was true of all of Judah's neighbors too. It was definitely true of the Babylonians whom the exiles were living with and presumably reading and being influenced by when they were writing and reflecting on their exile experience. So it's important to keep this in mind, that major events being connected to divine blessing or punishment was how the world was understood to work in the time these texts were composed.
- B. **The Hebrew Bible is comfortable with holding multiple points of view, even when these points of view seem contradictory to us.**
1. So though we have some texts, like the voices of prophets, that seem to point to calamity coming from God's judgment, there are other texts, like Ecclesiastes and Job, that seem to make the opposite argument, concluding that Yahweh is more mysterious and that calamity befalls the righteous and the unrighteous alike. Most interestingly, remember that in the book of Job, Job's friends are in the wrong for attributing his suffering to punishment from the divine. We need to make space for these texts to stand in tension with others.
- C. **Don't forget about Jesus.** In Jesus-centered faith, Jesus is the lens through which we most clearly understand the way of the Divine, and he seemed much more invested in renewal, repair, and bringing all of creation into connection and life, than retribution and punishment.
- III. With those things in mind, let's go ahead and turn to the words of the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 18.
- A. ***The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel:
"The parents eat sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge?"
3 "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. 4 For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die."***

1. So we're going to stop here for a bit because already we're seeing how culturally distant we are from Ezekiel and his audience and we need to make sense of that distance.
2. Ezekiel imagines God speaking to him about a proverb. It seems to be a very popular saying in the day, because we see Jeremiah mention the same proverb. So this has become a bit of a meme in the Exile. **"The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth become numb."** But what does it mean?
 - a) The text is talking about **actions and consequences**; and in this case the prophet is examining a particular understanding that is common in the Ancient world: that the actions of one generation impacts consequences that befall subsequent generations. It's the idea that **there are intergenerational curses as well as blessings**.
 - (1) The exact imagery in the proverb is that eating sour grape can rot your teeth, but in this case, it's the kids of those who eat the grapes who end up with rotten teeth.
 - b) We see this understanding of intergenerational consequences in Israel in the way that they talk about the law being given to Moses in Exodus. As Exodus relates the 2nd of the 10 commandments, Yahweh says this, ***"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:4 - 6)***
 - c) Again, this reflects a common ancient worldview; it's not exclusive to Israel. Many ancient peoples believed that the wrongdoing of one generation could mean punishment for another. Connected to this is also the idea of the political leaders of a nation, the Kings and Queens, having special capacity to incur consequences from the gods on people of the generations to come. So in the history of Judah described in 2 Kings 21, the author describes the behavior of **King Manasseh**, a king of Judah who led a few generations before the exile and was known for extreme idolatry and bloodshed. And **the historian seems to link his behavior to judgement from Yahweh that was delivered about fifty years later when the Babylonians came to town.**
 - d) I say all of this to explain why this proverb was so popular in Ezekiel's time. Clearly many of the exiles are understanding their own circumstances this way. "Manasseh and the rest of our ancestors messed up. They made God mad, and because of them, we're stuck in Babylon." My parents ate sour grapes and now, through no fault of my own, I'm stuck with rotten teeth
3. But Ezekiel claims God is trying to speak something new to his listeners. So what is the Divine trying to say?
4. **Every life matters.**
 - a) Inherent in this widespread ancient belief is the idea that **some lives are more worthy of consideration than others**. The life and behavior of the King matters more than the life of the average person living in Judah. So by their worldview, the King can do some terrible things and ultimately some poor Judahite fifty years later is the one who will pay the penalty. Their life is disposable to make some sort of cosmic point about right and wrong.
 - b) To this view **God is communicating something different**. Yahweh says, "Everyone belongs to me." Every parent and child. Every rich King and every poor farmer. **Each**

life matters to me and is valued by me. We also should remember that in Hebrew literature there is a bigger sense of corporate solidarity, so I think **this word does not speak to individuals but to the generations they represent: the generation of the parents and the generation of the kids.** All of them matter to the divine. No individual or group is more valuable or more disposable than any others.

- c) When Black activists and others who stand with them proclaim “**Black Lives Matter**” they are tapping into this same spirit of divine concern that Ezekiel was naming to his audience. Black folks are proclaiming “**our lives are not disposable**”. Our deaths do not carry less importance in the cosmic order than the deaths of our white brothers and sisters. **And God agrees.** God says all lives are mine and I value them all, and particularly to those who have too often been told that their lives are disposable, I say no. Your life is mine. I hold you as my own.
- d) While we may not characterize our current reality as God punishing people for worshipping idols, I would suggest that in a sense, there is some resonance. **In our world, we may not bow down before statues, but our culture, our government, our social systems do have the gods they’ve constructed and now worship, gods of greed and power that have often taken us in the opposite direction of where many spiritual traditions, including our own, would have us go.** And so tragically we’re seeing the consequences of this kind of investment in the false gods of things like Capitalism and White Supremacy coming to pass. Most tragically, it seems that the lives most at risk are those with the least amount of power. They are the very lives that those most vehemently worshipping these false gods deem disposable. **In our time, Yahweh’s words through Ezekiel seem to be speaking: “This is not my way. This is not Divine Justice”.** I do not punish the vulnerable for the sins of the powerful. I hold the powerful to account.

B. Ezekiel goes on throughout chapter 18 to explain how **the Divine wants to upend this fatalistic understanding that the exiles had about how God works and why they’re suffering.** We won’t look at the whole chapter but just some key excerpts here:

1. ***“The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them.***

21 “But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die. 22 None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them. Because of the righteous things they have done, they will live. 23 Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”

24 “But if a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked person does, will they live? None of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness they are guilty of and because of the sins they have committed, they will die...”

30 “Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways,

declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. 31 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? 32 For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!

C. So throughout the chapter, Ezekiel seem to be delivering the message for Yahweh.

Intergenerational consequences are not to be how you understand me and my activity in the world. Despite how other Ancient gods may work, Yahweh does not want to punish you for the sins of your ancestors. Yahweh holds you to account for your own choices. I believe this shift communicated a couple more really important insights to the exiles in Babylon, insights that might be helpful for us to remember too:

1. You have a role to play.

a) The thing about fatalism is that it leaves you powerless to change your circumstances. This point of view also in a sense lets you off the hook. The exiles might be stuck with a horrible situation but at least they don't have to take the blame.

(1) This is my parents fault. They're the ones who ate the sour groups. I couldn't change this if I wanted to. My own choices are irrelevant at this point.

(2) But Yahweh is pushing back against that idea here. God is saying, "**You have agency**". Your choices do matter. Yes, you may have been dealt a certain lot that you inherited, but you can impact your reality, for better or worse. Remember the term "repentance" means to reorient, to turn. It's a directional term. Here God is saying, if you don't like your reality, you have the capacity to turn and go a different direction. You do not have to just shrug and say there's nothing you can do. **You have a role to play.**

b) In our time, I think it can be easy for us to look at the big systemic issues that have gotten us to where we are, and in a similar way fatalistically shrug and say "**what can we do**"? We didn't choose capitalism when this nation was founded. We didn't choose slavery or white supremacy. We didn't create a police system designed to control black and brown bodies through violence. We didn't vote for our current president or dismantle pandemic preparedness or politicize mask wearing. And that might be true in a sense. **But what the Divine seems to be communicating here is that we are not helpless. And we are also not without responsibility for our own actions.** We have a role to play in the ways that we support the systems we've inherited, or the ways we try to dismantle them and build better ones. We have a role to play in whether we allow democracy to be gutted on our watch or whether we fight for its survival and growth. We have a role to play in how we care for our neighbors, particularly those who are most vulnerable, by taking necessary precautions to reduce the spread of the virus, rather than attending to our own personal preferences.

(1) I was talking to our friend from Haven, Alisa this week. As I think many of you know, **Alisa is a nurse who specializes in infection control for Stanford.** In her work, she is on the front lines of this whole pandemic reality, helping analyze information and make complicated decisions regularly that are a matter of life and death. And she's also seen up close how much the response to this public health crisis has been botched by our national political leadership. As we were talking earlier this week, Alisa told me about a **moment of clarity** she had recently and the responses that arose in her as a result.

(2) The moment of clarity struck in a place where she was acutely aware of how our current administration has handled covid-19. "**No one's coming to save us**" was

the phrase that rang through her head. The starkness of that reality brought a wave of grief and discouragement as she felt the cost of the actions of those who have the most power presently. But then came the next response: **we are the ones who have to step up**. Alisa has a role to play. Her team of infectious disease nurses has a role to play. All of us following the guidance of our public health officials have a role to play. No one's gonna come in and save us; that ship has sailed. This is on all of us now.

c) This brings me to my final point that I think God was speaking to the exile community: **There is hope for change.**

(1) While we can hear the call to repentance through the filter of shame and moral judgment that many of us have experienced in religious spaces, for the community in exile, this call to turn and live in a new way is profoundly hopeful. **It says “your destiny isn't fixed.” Your situation isn't simply doomed. Something new and different is possible. There is hope for change.**

(2) *“Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. 31 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit...”* the Divine says.

(3) When faith crumbled for Jason, and his pier collapsed, it wasn't over. That experience was an opportunity for **a new kind of faith to be forged**. One that had a lot more space for questions, for doubts, for challenges. It was a faith that was liberated from his parents approval and gave Jason the opportunity to navigate his own journey toward the Divine that was right for him. Looking back, I don't think we together could have lived into this Haven dream coming to pass without the reorientation that experience brought both of us.

(4) For each of us today, I believe this word of hope for change is an important reminder and an invitation. **In a season where it's tempting to feel helpless or fatalistic, change for the better is possible.** It is available for each of us and for our communities. The exiles were invited to look ahead to a new season, one where they could experience life and deeper connection to the Divine as they turned from the patterns that brought separation from one another and from God, to ways of being that brought more life and communion with the Divine, and with each other. **This season of exile is an opportunity for all of us to do the deep work that repentance requires, to shift individually and collectively in the ways we must shift, to receive a new heart and new spirit, and to walk hopefully towards that place of renewal and restoration.**

D. In the exile in Babylon, the Divine spoke words of concern that moved forward the exiles understanding of who God is and how God cares for them. **They came to hear that each life matters, that they have a role to play in their own destiny, and that there is hope for change.** These were powerful words to hear in a reality that felt chaotic and out of control. The words were so transformative, that they stayed with the people once called Israel generations after the exile and they shaped the way these people told their story. They also laid the groundwork for an understanding that centuries later **Jesus of Nazareth would build upon** as he preached his own message of hope for change.

1. As we endure this season of exile, **may we allow the Spirit's voice to speak into our own wrestling** around how we got to this place and what our way forward is. May we also find freedom and empowerment as the Spirit reminds each of us that **God is with us, and**

that God cares for us. And may our Divine Parent invite each of us **to turn and live** and partner with God's own self in the renewing of our world. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. How do you tend to think about the connection between circumstances in your life and God's punishment or blessing?
2. How do you think you would have responded to Ezekiel's words if you were one of the exiles in Babylon?
3. What role might God be inviting you to play now? What turning might be needed to play it?