

- I. Advanced organizer
  - A. **The 1990s in the United States could be described as an era of political turbulence.**  
Historian Claire Bond Potter has described it this way: "By the 1990s, politics in the United States are actually kind of falling apart," she says. "We have the culture wars, we have the shift of conservatives into the Republican Party. There is increasing populism in the Republican party and increasing centrism in the Democratic party. In other words, politics are really in flux."
    1. **So how does American culture address these changing forces and try to make meaning of them?** "One response to that" Potter points out, "is to say, 'What is this country about?' And to go back to the biographies of the founding fathers,"
    2. **This in fact is exactly what many folks started doing 20-30 years ago in that time of political change.** The '90s kicked off an era of renewed interest in the lives of the US founders: biographies, documentaries, exhibits in national museums all became popular; telling the stories anew of the personalities and circumstances that led to the establishing of the United States.
    3. **By the 2000s, this genre, now known by historians as "Founders Chic" was in full swing.** It was into this new flurry of interest around the founders that in 2004 historical biographer Ron Chernow released a biography on the first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Chernow's book was widely embraced and shot up to the top of the New York Times Bestseller list, in part because of the unique, gritty, urban spin that Chernow put on his Hamilton depiction. This spin made his story feel especially relatable, **particularly to a young New York playwright of Puerto Rican descent who read Chernow's book on a vacation and was stirred, finding the inspiration for his next theatrical work.**
    4. The result, of course of Lin-Manuel Miranda reading Ron Chernow's biography of Alexander Hamilton, was **the creation of *Hamilton: the Musical*, a cultural phenomenon which would itself make history for all of the norms it upended.** It won 11 Tony awards, it shattered box office records, and it broke through culturally in a way that no other contemporary Broadway musical has done. Of course that's not even to speak of the revolutionary flipped racial casting which centered people of color as the heroes of these founding stories and the stylings of rap, hip-hop, and R and B as their genres. Hamilton has transformed the way US history is being taught in the classroom as well, as a generation of young people is being introduced to the characters in the American Revolution though a soundtrack on iTunes before they meet Washington or Hamilton in any text book.
    5. Through the creation of *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda took the genre of "Founders Chic" to the next level and brought it to Broadway and beyond. **What had begun as an exercise in political and cultural reflection by historians and others in the Clinton and Bush eras, became a phenomenon all its own in the Obama era, with its own bold statement about whose stories will be told and who gets to tell them in our time.**
  - B. Well, today is the second teaching in a series I'm calling "**Faith In the Exile**". **In this series, we're looking to an often overlooked period in our tradition: the Babylonian exile.** Two weeks ago I shared a bit of a history lesson giving context to the whole era, so if you missed it, you might want to go back and listen in later, but the broad strokes version is that the Babylonian exile was a time in the 6th century BC where what was left of Israel, a small state called Judah, was conquered by the neighboring Babylonian empire. The Babylonians destroyed much of their capital Jerusalem, burned down their temple, and carted most of the

inhabitants off to Babylon to live as exiles, essentially refugees in a foreign land. The era ended up lasting about 75 years.

- C. **We're looking at the exile in this season because all of us are in a difficult season.** We're living in the midst of a pandemic with all that has upended and the losses that continue to mount socially, economically, as well as the mounting loss of life, as well as a moment of real reckoning around our nation's history of racial injustice and the social unrest that has brought, plus we have a contentious election season underway, just to name a few of the tensions we feel. I think many of us can resonate with a season of prolonged national crisis, perhaps more than in any other era we've lived through. So as a community I'm inviting us to consider: **perhaps if our faith tradition has wisdom and insight on living through such a season, and being shaped by God in the midst of it, the exile is where we'll find it.**

1. As I mentioned, the exile isn't an era a lot of preachers visit very often in my experience. But despite the lack of attention this era often gets in our spiritual traditions, **the Babylonian Exile played a significant role in the development of the Jewish faith, and by extension the Christian faith, as well.** There was work that was done in that time that impacts all of us still today; even if we are unaware of it. And that work I think also might give us guidance around how we too might spiritually journey through our own seasons of exile, and what some of the work we might have to do in this season might be.

- II. As an entry into this conversation, I want to consider together a Psalm that many scholars surmise comes to us from the time of the Babylonian exile. While the psalms are particularly challenging to date, it is a reasonable guess that this Psalm is giving voice to the crisis that the exiles living in Babylon have found themselves in. Let's look together at Psalm 44.

A. **Psalm 44**

- 1 We have heard it with our ears, O God;**  
**our ancestors have told us**  
**what you did in their days,**  
**in days long ago.**
- 2 With your hand you drove out the nations**  
**and planted our ancestors;**  
**you crushed the peoples**  
**and made our ancestors flourish.**
- 3 It was not by their sword that they won the land,**  
**nor did their arm bring them victory;**  
**it was your right hand, your arm,**  
**and the light of your face, for you loved them.**
- 4 You are my King and my God,**  
**who decrees victories for Jacob.**
- 5 Through you we push back our enemies;**  
**through your name we trample our foes.**
- 6 I put no trust in my bow,**  
**my sword does not bring me victory;**
- 7 but you give us victory over our enemies,**  
**you put our adversaries to shame.**
- 8 In God we make our boast all day long,**  
**and we will praise your name forever.**
- 9 But now you have rejected and humbled us;**

*you no longer go out with our armies.*  
**10 You made us retreat before the enemy,  
and our adversaries have plundered us.**  
**11 You gave us up to be devoured like sheep  
and have scattered us among the nations....**  
**23 Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?  
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever./**  
**24 Why do you hide your face  
and forget our misery and oppression?**  
**25 We are brought down to the dust;  
our bodies cling to the ground.**  
**26 Rise up and help us;  
rescue us because of your unfailing love.**

B. So I'm bringing our attention to this psalm for a couple of reasons.

1. First, simply to note: **this is a psalm of lament.** You can hear the deep sense of distress our writer is feeling. If there are places we connect with being in a season of exile, we might resonate with the distress of this writer.
  2. But I'm actually primarily interested, for our purposes today, in **the first part of the psalm.** It may not seem remarkable to us, but where the psalm begins illuminates **one of the most important parts of the sacred journey that the exiled people of God experienced** during their time in Babylon. It's demonstrated in the first words the psalmist speaks, setting the tone for the rest of what he or she has to say: "**We have heard it with our ears, O God; our ancestors have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago.**"
    - a) "We have heard it with our ears...our ancestors told us..." Why is this significant? The psalmist is rooting their reflection on their predicament not in the details of their challenging reality. They're going to get there, to be sure, but that's not where they start. **No, the poet here begins by looking backwards, looking to the words of their ancestors.**
- C. This brings us to the first point I want to lift up today: **Seasons of exile ask us to examine the stories that have brought us to where we are. A fundamental work of the exile is the work of remembering.**
1. **The people of Judah had been stripped of their land, they'd been stripped of their king, they'd been stripped of their temple, the centerpiece of worship where they perceived God to dwell with them on earth.** They'd been carried off 1000 miles to Babylon and told to make a life in a foreign land. This was a profound experience of distress and disorientation. Most of what identified these people as the people of Judah, the remaining remnant of the people of Yahweh has been taken from them.
  2. But though much of their communal identity has been stripped away, there was one thing that Judah's captors could not steal from them: **they could not take from them their story.** Retaining this story, holding onto the memories of their people and remembering the history of their community, and that communities connection to God, **this became a primary way that the people of Judah survived as a culture.** And in so doing, the exiles and the generations that followed after them compiled a work of remembrance that has impacted the globe for millenia.

3. For us living in a society that expects nearly universal literacy, it may be hard for us to remember that the world was not always a literate one. We as humans did not always have written words to read and consider and interpret. We had communication, we had tradition, we had story to be sure, but it was not largely set down in documents: it was oral: spoken and sung and repeated around the fire. **For much of the early age of humanity, written language was a technology that didn't yet exist**, and as is often true of technology even today, when it was first introduced, it was only available to a privileged few.
4. If you grew up in church or perhaps in synagogue, **you may have been taught a tradition that Moses “wrote” the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, books that observant Jewish people call the Torah**. In some circles it is spoken as a genuine article of faith that must be accepted that a historical prophet named Moses sat down and took pen to parchment to compose these foundational texts. While those academics who spend time actually studying these ancient texts and how they came to us in Hebrew quickly identify a number of challenges to that proposition, one of the most basic is this: from the archeological and historical evidence we have, **the era of the exodus, the era where Moses would have led liberated slaves to their promised land likely took place six or seven centuries before literacy was widely available**. There simply wasn't the technology for Moses to write the torah down and for that text to be maintained for centuries.
5. Now it's certainly possible that Moses or others of his generation began an oral tradition that carried forward for centuries before it was eventually written down. But whether that's the case or not, what we do know is that **the written word didn't begin to become a widespread phenomenon until the seventh or eighth century BC, about a century or two before the Babylonian exile**. Most of the earliest texts that make up our Hebrew Bible, or what some Christians call the Old Testament, seem to be from this era. Still, the Hebrew Bible as we know it was not any kind of singular, authoritative entity when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. **Biblical scholars from Judaism and Christianity alike agree that it was in the exile that the Bible as we've come to know it began to come into being**.
6. You see, during the seventy five or so years that the leaders of Judah found themselves in Babylon, as they sought to hold onto their identity as a people, **the religious leaders and scholars of the day took upon themselves the work of compiling all of the myths, poems, histories, wisdom writings and so on that were now circulating amongst their people. The earliest librarians came on the scene and began the process of shaping their culture in a profound way**. They studied these texts, they edited them, they composed portions of them, perhaps updating some of these written words with oral traditions that elders in their community shared, or new insights about the nature of Yahweh that they were gaining as a result of their experience in exile. And as these early researchers, anthologists, librarians, and writers arranged these texts and shared them with their community, as they gathered in the earliest synagogues and some of the first rabbis shared the written words and taught on them, the community was shaped in a new way. **It began to center sacred story, communicated through a written text, in a way that it never had before**.
7. The genuine truth is, **without the Babylonian Exile, we likely would not have had the Bible we have today, this set of ancient texts that for better or for worse has influenced culture for multiple millennia throughout the globe**. This same bible would

evolve, would have more texts added to it by both Jewish writers and Christians in the centuries after the exile, until eventually an established set of texts would be decided on and canonized. This same Bible would eventually be one of the primary drivers of mass literacy, at least throughout the western world, when about a 1000 years after the exile, Guttenberg created a printing press and Martin Luther argued for the right of people to read this Bible in their native tongues. **All of this began because a group of displaced people in a time of national crisis recognized that they needed to remember their story.**

8. Last week we took some time to share the story of the last six years of Haven's existence, since Jason and I moved to Berkeley. **I don't know about you, but in the midst of our own time of communal exile, I found it so helpful to take a moment to step outside of this moment and reflect on the bigger story we're each a part of.** We remembered together the things that we sensed God speaking to us from the beginning, and the invitations we were receiving years ago, before many of you even knew Haven existed. We heard reflections from some of the folks who were a part of those early years, as they named the ways that they were shaped by being a part of this unfolding Haven history. **We remembered challenges, significant challenges that we have endured as a community before, and the ways that God continued to shape our story and give us pieces to hold on to that got us through those treacherous times.** And all of this for me was restorative as it gave me hope that **this same Divine spirit that has been at work in me for decades and the community for the last six years, is with us still and will carry us through this exile, too.** Like the psalmist in Babylon we remember. "**We have heard it with our ears, O God...what you did in days long ago.... In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever.**"
- D. The work of anthologizing stories and sharing them in community helped the displaced people of Judah remember who they were. It was an important work of the exile. **But this work wasn't just about preserving their culture.** The care devoted to the stories of the past also served another important function, and this is the second thing I want us to consider this morning: **We need to take in the stories from our past in order to make meaning of our present.**
  1. Now though the work of creating the Bible as we know it began in earnest during the exile, **there are not very many voices in the Hebrew Bible that speak original content from the period.** There were only a couple of prophets who prophesied throughout the era. One of them was Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet through this period, and he begins his book with a dramatic story of his calling to prophesy in Babylon. Now his prophetic visions are filled with lots of fantastical imagery. You read Ezekiel, and you'll pretty quickly see a lot of bizarre things going on. I just want to highlight one part of Ezekiel's calling story, because I think it affirms this second purpose of this core work of study and remembrance in the exile that we've been discussing. This comes right after God has called Ezekiel to go and prophecy to his people exiled in Babylon:

**9 Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, 10 which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.**

**And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and**

***speak to the people of Israel.” 2 So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.***

***3 Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.***

***4 He then said to me: “Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them.”***

- a) I don't know about you, but in the context of everything we've been considering, I find this imagery of the prophet sent to the exile **being fed a scroll** to be a powerful one.
  - b) Students of this passage often get caught up in questions of whether or not a historical man named Ezekial literally ate a scroll of parchment or not, but to me this is missing the point. For me, this text is relevant because it communicates the heart of what a leader called to lead in a season of exile was to understand; that in order to speak Divine truth in the exile, we must be shaped by the words that have brought us to where we are, even when the words are difficult and painful, words of whoa. **In the image, the communication of God is found through taking in written words. We must be fed by the work of remembering.**
  - c) Perhaps the Ezekial story with its evocative imagery of eating a scroll and tasting its sweetness reminds us that **a casual relationship with the stories that are meant to shape us is not enough.** It's not enough simply to hear a story, to skim it, to acknowledge it and move on. If the stories of our past are going to do a work of transformation and renewal in us, **if they are going to shape our identities in important ways and speak meaning into the times were living though in the midst of our exile seasons, then we have to digest these stories.** We need to take them in, we need to fill ourselves with them in deeper ways so they shift our thinking; they transform our way of seeing the world.
2. **We are in a moment where we have a national conversation around the stories that have shaped us, and how, culturally we need to listen to other stories that have too long been silenced in order to better make meaning in our present.** Just this week, many non-black Americans became aware of Juneteenth for the first time, as the broader conversation around racial justice in our nation is causing white America, as well as non-black people of color to consider more deeply the stories that shape the African-American experience. **While black communities have long celebrated the 19th of June as the day when slavery truly ended once the word reached the last slaves to be liberated in Texas in 1865,** this year many white and non-black communities of color learned of and participated in Juneteenth events in their neighborhoods, through their workplaces, on social media, and so on. This happened as we named anew that we need to go beyond the stories of folks like the Founding Fathers; **we need to take in a broader set of stories into our collective consciences if we are to make new meaning and truly confront injustices in our time.**
  3. Yesterday a group of us from Haven joined with many thousands around the country to participate in the Poor People's Campaign Digital Moral March on Washington. **Over 50 years ago, Dr. King began a movement called the Poor People's Campaign that sought to bring people together across racial and religious lines to center the needs of those most effected by public policies that oppress the poor.** In recent years, this

moral fusion movement has been revived in our time by organizers like Reverend Dr. William Barber, III and Reverend Liz Theoharis. Yesterday, in their virtual March on Washington, much of the event was spent listening to **stories of those who are most impacted by poverty**. The organizers of the event understood that a large part of the problems that ail our country right now, the reason that we have an unjust society, is because we're not listening to the voices of the poor. We're not being shaped by those who are being harmed by public policy that strips people of health care and education and a living wage and clean air and water among so many other fundamental parts of human life. **Until we listen to these stories, until they become part of us, we cannot be transformed in our exile into the people God would have us be.**

4. It wasn't just Ezekial that came to understand that you had to take the text in and embody it, if you were to make meaning in the exile. The communities that were beginning to center the written word understood that they needed digest the words of God for them to speak meaning to them, too.
  - a) One of the places this is most clear is found **in a passage in Deuteronomy that has held central significance in informing Jewish life since the era of the exile and long beyond**. In this passage, readers are brought back in the story to the era of Moses. As the story of the law being given is related, they hear Moses' authoritative voice speak to them about the importance of centering the written words that bring the messages of God, and doing that through daily embodied practice. The setup is that Moses has just communicated the ten commandments, the heart of the law that God give's the people at Mount Sinai, and then Moses speaks these words that are some of the most sacred in Jewish tradition to this day:

**(1) "4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."** (Deut. 6:4 - 9)
  - b) This passage in the emerging Bible of the exile communicates an understanding that has evolved from the time of Moses. The communication of God is sacred and it is to be a part of your daily life. **Our traditions, our sacred stories, our histories, our communities prayers must be internalized: they must be written on our hearts.** And this happens as we embody learning, developing a depth of relationship with our texts, writing them on the door frames of our homes, even binding them to our faces if needed so we cannot turn away from them.
  - c) As these texts were compiled, edited, revised, taken in, and considered in deep ways, new understandings of who God was and how God related to God's people **came into focus in the exile**.
  - d) **Like Ezekial, being fed by the scroll of their stories opened them up to receive Divine insight that could speak into their time.** And so with their new understandings, they told their stories differently. Like Lin-Manuel Miranda reimagining our nations founders with dark skin, debating in rap battles and celebrating immigrants, the editors and writers contributing to Deuteronomy reimagined Moses encouraging folks to take in the written word in an embodied way. Our Bible is actually **full of this creative reimagining work because human communities have long understood**

**that making meaning of our present means taking in the stories of our past and allowing them to ring in new ways and be spoken afresh with new understandings.** We have long understood that this is a sacred work, that God's voice is in the midst of the unfolding dialogue, and I believe the Divine blesses and empowers us to take our place in the collective that considers together, as Hamilton says, "who tells your story".

- III. So as we conclude, I want to invite us to ponder **what of this exile work I've been describing, God might have for us to enter into in this season of exile we find ourselves in.**
- A. Where might the Divine be asking us to revisit **the stories of us as a nation, asking collectively, how did we get here?** What forces shaped us? What stories have been silenced and need to take their place in our forming?
  - B. Where might God invite us to consider our stories as a faith tradition...what are the traditions we are informed by, for better and for worse? How do we need to consider the ways we've been marked by our traditions? Where do we need to grow in the voices we listen to and are shaped by?
  - C. And what work might each of us benefit from in revisiting our individual stories...how do they shape who we are? How have they prepared us for this moment? How might sharing them with one another help us as a Haven community to understand more deeply who God is inviting us communally to be? Throughout this summer Jeanne and I are going to explore new ways we can bring more of these stories in our community to one another, so in our time together, we can be shaped by each other and become more aware of who God is inviting us to be
  - D. Remembering the past, making meaning in the present and retelling our stories in new ways as we look with hope to the future: this is all sacred work. May we grow in it for however long we are in exile, and may the work transform the future we inhabit, when from exile we emerge. Amen.

#### **Questions for Reflection and Conversation**

1. What, if anything, surprised you about this teaching and the origins of our Bible?
2. How have seasons of study, or learning other stories you had not been previously aware of, shaped your understanding in the past?
3. What kinds of stories do you feel called to examine in this season of exile?
- 4.