

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **When I first got engaged to Jason, a number of my friends, young women at the time, gushed to me about how lucky I was,** luckier perhaps than I realized. It wasn't because they were all smitten with Jason, (though, who knows, maybe a few of them were). Ultimately, though, it was because they were smitten with his family. I was the first to nab a Martens, and this, amongst the young women in our community was a special prize.
1. To understand this you have to understand that **the Martens were legendary in our church of around 1000 people for being a stand-out family.** Jason's parents were former pastors who, though they weren't on staff at the time, still led in significant ways in our church. They were often sought out for their wisdom, care, and deep faith. The five kids followed their parents modeling, each going above and beyond to contribute their gifts to the community wherever they could. Every year our church gave an award to a volunteer of the year that made special contributions to the life of the community. The only time they ever gave it to a whole family: seven people, was when they gave it to the Martens.
 2. **The Martens were also extremely hospitable,** opening up their home every Monday night for Monday night dinners, which always included not only family, but anyone they knew who'd appreciate a little love and care at the dinner table. An invite to the Martens home for Thanksgiving was always a treat. The five kids seemed extremely close in their connections, like they all really enjoyed one another and cooperated well, and being around them felt fun and full of love and joy.
 3. **So I understood what these young women meant.** I was so fortunate that I was going to be adopted into this family. Particularly, after living my whole adult life to that point thousands of miles from my family of origin, having this welcome into family was such a gift. And for the first few years of our marriage, the gift kept giving. I anticipated it always would.
 4. And then a few years after Jason and I were married, one day all of us Martens adult kids and the couple of spouses in the mix were at church and we were invited by the pastor to join him in a conference room after the Sunday service. There, we found my mother in law. With the support of the pastor, **she told us that she was separating from her husband.** She named serious issues in their marriage and personal lives that we were completely unaware of; issues that that would prove irreconcilable. It was a total shock and the shocks kept coming. Within weeks it became clear that separation would lead to divorce. Divorce very quickly led to my father-in-law's remarriage. The home Jason was raised in, and I had become accustomed to spending every Monday night dinner in was sold. And the solidarity and safety all of us experienced being a part of the Martens family was forever changed. It was an experience that was deeply disruptive for the lives we thought we were living, and it took years to sort through all that was lost and needed to be healed. It's a journey of healing that over thirteen years later, we're still on.
- B. Many of us, if we mapped our life on a timeline we'd see some major standout events. Some of these are really positive: falling in love, landing a great job. Some are really challenging, perhaps even tragic. Whether they are positive or painful, these are often the events that move the trajectory of our lives in one way or another. They become defining moments so to speak.
- C. We are living in an unprecedented time in many ways. None of us have lived through a moment quite like this. Some of us may have other moments that feel resonant, but this moment with its unique intersection of issues is also distinct. It feels like a defining moment.

1. In a moment like this, **everything may feel unstable**. Our faith, our spirituality may not comfort us in the way it has before, Our sacred stories may not speak to us as they have in the past. As I've been considering this season that we've all entered in recent months, and as I've been asking where in this time our tradition might be helpful, I keep finding myself thinking back to a part of the story our Bible tells that honestly I haven't heard preached on very much, if ever. It's a part that I think is regularly skipped over as people are studying the Bible, particularly Christians. Maybe this era of the biblical narrative feels foreign to us much of the time. Maybe it just feels depressing. But today, I find myself drawn to this oft neglected part of the story. Because in our tradition we do have a season of history that was also disorienting in its level of crisis. A season when a community of faith had to deal with catastrophic crisis and come to regard what was to be understood about faith and its practice differently. This comes to us in a part of the Bible many of us may be less familiar with: the latter part of the Hebrew Bible or as some call it, the Old Testament. What event am I referring to? **The Babylonian exile**.

D. **Today I'm starting a new teaching series that we're going to be engaging in the weeks to come. I'm calling it "Faith In the Exile"**. In this series we're going to explore together what an experience of Faith or spirituality in a season of prolonged crisis might look like. We'll consider afresh our ancestors and their experience of exile, as well as how the community in their time and afterward came to make meaning of that experience. We'll see if there are things we can learn about enduring our own places of displacement, disorientation, loss, and also the opportunity for transformation that a season in exile can bring.

1. Today, a good chunk of our focus will be on **background and context**. I don't assume you all really know a lot about this part of the Biblical narrative. Honestly, **before I went to seminary, I really didn't**. So we're going to have a bit of a Bible History conversation today so we can all be somewhat on the same page about what the exile was. And then we'll take a look at a text that was written for the people of that era and consider a bit together how it might be instructive for us today. So let's start with the background.

II. What exactly is the Exile? What happened there?

A. To understand this we need to do a **quick Biblical Narrative Lesson**. By and large the story of the Hebrew Bible, or what some Christians call the Old Testament, is the story of the Hebrew people and their connection to the God they knew as YHWH, a name that simply means, "I am".

1. The story of these people and their connection to this God is rooted in the story of **Abraham**, who receives direction from God to take his wife Sarah to a new land. This story is at the heart of Genesis. It's an origin story for the Jewish people: God promising countless descendants to Abraham and promises that this God will care for this people that are his descendants in a unique way, and that they will live in a land of their own. This dream starts to finally be fulfilled with the birth of Isaac. Through Isaac's grandson **Joseph, the family is protected from famine in their land, becoming refugees in Egypt**. The descendants prosper there, so much so that the Egyptians become threatened and enslave them, which seems like a significant setback on God's promise to Abraham.
2. But the promise is reaffirmed in a big way as **God intervenes to deliver the descendants of Abraham and Isaac from slavery in Egypt**. God establishes a covenant, another sacred promise, with these liberated slaves, and giving them **the law at Mt. Sinai**. They are now grouped in twelve large tribes named after the twelve sons of Jacob. These tribes together make up the body of people that we call Israel. **God seems to bless them in their conquest of their Promised Land**. There they finally establish the nation state of

Israel and establish a monarchy with God's chosen, King David, on the throne. In their capital city, Jerusalem, they eventually **build a temple under King Solomon** which is the center place for their worship, and where they perceive God to dwell with them on earth.

3. It would seem that **all is now well**, the promise has been fulfilled, but things get challenging in this long season of monarchy. Politics get messy and not every king has a heart like David. Eventually this leads to the first major crisis in Israel's history as a nation. **Around 930 BC there's a major political schism in the nation of Israel.** The result is the nation itself divides, it becomes a divided kingdom.
 - a) The land of 10 tribes in the North become their own nation state. Imagine if some of our own political divisions in the United States resulted in all the states West of the Mississippi leaving the Union and becoming their own set of United States. This is essentially what happens.
 - b) The people of Israel break into two Kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom, made up of 10 tribes is known as "Israel" now. In the south, the final two tribes become their own state, the kingdom of Judah. There are two monarchs. Israel has more land but Judah retains the capital city Jerusalem and its precious temple. Still, though there are divisions and different political realities, as a people, they are all still kin. They still worship the same God, they still share the same origin story. They still believe in the same promise that God blesses them and will sustain them in this land. They are still all the people of YHWH.
4. And then after about 2 centuries of this, **the next big crisis hits. Assyrians attack the Northern kingdom in 722**, and the northern Kingdom eventually falls. It's a brutal conquering. Thousands are horrifically massacred. Those who aren't killed are stripped of their land and relocated to various places within the Assyrian empire where they are assimilated. Their culture is erased. The northern Kingdom becomes known as the lost 10 Tribes because as a people, and a society, they vanish.
5. All that remains of God's promised people, the people who had once been called Israel, in the promised land is now the small kingdom of Judah. And though that kingdom holds on for another couple of centuries, eventually another conquering power comes in to take over. Under King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians take Judah apart. **First they relocate some of Judah's best and brightest: they take their king, King Jeconiah and his court.** They seize Judah's young leaders of promise, their religious priests, their most skilled artisans and they forcibly relocate them to Babylon. Daniel and his friends are part of this contingent. This goes on for about a decade, and then eventually, around 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar's army destroys Jerusalem altogether. They burn their temple to the ground. The rest of those who are still living in Judah, most of them are brought to Babylon too.
6. When this happens, **Israel, as a people, has already come a long way since the glory days when David sat on a throne in glory and Solomon built a magnificent temple.** They've endured a number of significant blows to the living out of the promise they held sacred from Yahweh since that era. They've been weakened and destabilized by each one. After everything they've already suffered, this final blow - the exile of Judah - is a devastating calamity. Israel as a people had already lost so much. They have lost political and social unity. They have seen a huge part of their people and their land stripped away. And now, what they were clinging to was also taken from them. They have no land. They have no king. They have no temple.
7. **In the greater story of the Jewish and Christian faiths, the Babylonian exile is a defining moment.** It's a moment that would forever change this community of faith.

Nothing could ever be the same as it had been. There would be a before. There would be an after. That is how disruptive this event was in the life of the people of God known as Israel.

- a) If we're honest, **I think many of us can identify that we are also living through a series of events that feels historically significant.** The level of disruption, chaos, and disorientation that we've experienced in the last few months is really impossible to quantify. We've already experienced the loss of the things we took for granted as part of our sacred tradition: we haven't worshipped together in months. Our temple may not have been burned to the ground, but shelter in place orders have physically distanced us from one another, and taken away the opportunity to share connection in a shared physical sacred space. This has come at a real cost. And that's not even to speak of the untold losses of human life, the economic devastation of recent months, and more.
- b) On top of the disruption and tragedy of a global pandemic, in the last couple of weeks, **our nation has erupted in protest to racial injustice**, spurred by the tragic and unjust killing of George Floyd by police. Even in the midst of a pandemic, when gathering is a dangerous activity, **people have been taking to the streets** around the country crying out with a deep voice that what has been cannot continue to be. And the state, as it faces these outcries for justice with protesting bodies filling the streets, has often responded through becoming more violent, escalating the anger and raising the level of danger our collective community feels.
- c) **All of these latest stressors have come in a larger season in which our democracy has been deeply undermined in recent years.** With a presidential election just months away, that in theory has the capacity to unseat the leader who has been working to undermine this democracy, there is significant trepidation. This leader and those closest to him have been making it clear for some time that he will hold on to power at all costs. All of this coming together feels to me, more than any time in my life, **like a collective defining moment.**
- d) Of course no two events in history are the same. But when I consider the distressing era we are living in, and I look to our sacred tradition and the stories it tells, I find myself drawn personally to this part of our tradition's story in this season. **If there is wisdom in our tradition to be had for how we endure a difficult season that will no doubt in some way be a defining moment in our collective stories, I believe that wisdom could be here.** If there are insights on how spirituality can be maintained through a season of prolonged crisis and disruption, **I believe the exile is where those insights might be found.** This is what we'll be exploring in the weeks to come together through this series.

III. For today, I want to take the rest of our time to pivot from the history lesson, to looking at **one of these texts from the Exile that I think might be instructive in framing our exploration of this part of the Bible's story.** As we seek to understand what entering our own experience of Exile means, perhaps it might be useful to **look at a message that was written at the beginning of the Babylonian exile** to those who found their world turned upside down as they were uprooted and sent to Babylon.

A. The message comes from the **prophet Jeremiah.** Jeremiah is one of the important voices we'll be hearing from in this series. He prophesied before the exile, throughout the ten years that Babylon was assaulting Judah and taking its young leaders to Babylon, through the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple, as well as through the aftermath of all of it. This word that we'll take a look at today comes near the beginning of the exile. The king

of Judah, Jeconiah, his courtiers, and many of the leaders of Judah have been displaced to Babylon, but Jerusalem itself has not been destroyed. Jeremiah is one that is left behind in the crippled Jerusalem during that first decade of strife with Babylon, and from there, he feels called to write to those first exiles who are now trapped there. We'll start with the setup and then hear Jeremiah's message.

- B. *The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles Nebuchadnezzar had carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon. It was addressed to the elders who were left among the exiles, to the priests, to the prophets, and to all the other people who were exiled in Babylon. He sent it after King Jeconiah, the queen mother, the palace officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had been exiled from Jerusalem. 3 He sent it with Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah. King Zedekiah of Judah had sent these men to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The letter said:*

4 "The Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all those he sent into exile to Babylon from Jerusalem, 5 'Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters. Find wives for your sons and allow your daughters to get married so that they too can have sons and daughters. Grow in number; do not dwindle away. 7 Work to see that the city where I sent you as exiles enjoys peace and prosperity. Pray to the Lord for it. For as it prospers you will prosper.' 8 "For the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says, 'Do not let the prophets among you or those who claim to be able to predict the future by divination deceive you. And do not pay any attention to the dreams that you are encouraging them to dream. 9 They are prophesying lies to you and claiming my authority to do so. But I did not send them. I, the Lord, affirm it!'

10 "For the Lord says, 'Only when the seventy years of Babylonian rule are over will I again take up consideration for you. Then I will fulfill my gracious promise to you and restore you to your homeland. 11 For I know what I have planned for you,' says the Lord. 'I have plans to prosper you, not to harm you. I have plans to give you a future filled with hope. 12 When you call out to me and come to me in prayer, I will hear your prayers. 13 When you seek me in prayer and worship, you will find me available to you. If you seek me with all your heart and soul, 14 I will make myself available to you,' says the Lord. 'Then I will reverse your plight and will regather you from all the nations and all the places where I have exiled you,' says the Lord. 'I will bring you back to the place from which I exiled you.' (Jer. 29: 1- 14)

- C. So this is a word to those who've recently found themselves exiled. And as we look at it today, I just want to quickly draw our attention to a few things I notice that might be helpful for the places we resonate with entering our own season of exile.
- D. The first thing I think Jeremiah is saying that resonates it essentially this: **Settle in, you're going to be here awhile.**
1. This is likely not the news anyone wanted to hear.
 2. Remember when Jeremiah write these words, **Jerusalem was still somewhat present**, even if it had been significantly damaged. The city hadn't been totally sacked yet. The temple hadn't been completely destroyed. There was a new king in Judah who had taken

over. All of that may have had some of these leaders thinking that maybe things could quickly turn around and we could basically go back to where we were.

3. **Jeremiah names this and draws the people's attention to religious leaders that were present**, giving these exiles false comfort. "Do not let the prophets among you or those who claim to be able to predict the future by divination deceive you." What was the deceit Jeremiah was concerned with?
 - a) Later in the chapter, Jeremiah makes it more clear. **These leaders aren't naming the injustices the people in power have been enabling and enacting.** They haven't been standing up to the powerful and confronting them for their idolatry, for the ways they have oppressed others for their own safety and security. They haven't been speaking to the ways the people of Israel have been dishonoring their part of the covenant they made with Yahweh. **Instead they have been telling them what these leaders wanted to hear. God's on their side, all will be well, they'll be back in Jerusalem soon.**
 - b) As much as the people hoped life could get back to normal quickly, Jeremiah is here to say: **that's not possible. Actually, you've got 70 years in Babylon**, which most likely means you who I'm speaking to will likely not see the return. Settle in. We're going to be here awhile.
4. **When life gets unstable, I think all of us can resonate with the desire for things to return to a more stable state in some way.** When things were first shutting down in early March, most of the orders were only for a few weeks. Many of us couldn't have imagined at that point that we'd still be sheltering-in-place in June. As this reality became more clear, we've all had to receive our own version of this message: settle in, we're going to be here awhile.
5. There's another place **this rings resonant to me this week.** As I mentioned, in the last couple of weeks, many folks of privilege, particularly those who are white, but also many people of color who are not black, **have been waking up in new ways to the systemic oppression the black community has been facing for centuries**, since before our nation's founding, and how the sins of that history are still active with us today. As that waking up has been happening, there can be a rush of activity to fix the problem, to make things better, to restore our sense of stability.
 - a) **So people have taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers and *White Fragility and How to Be an Antiracist* have flown off the shelves.** These are encouraging signs, and because of the action in the streets, meaningful things have happened this week that likely would not have happened otherwise. Charges have been brought. Contracts with the police have been severed. We should indeed celebrate these victories.
 - b) But ultimately buying a book on antiracism doesn't make you an antiracist. Don't get me wrong: **I'm a fan of *White Fragility and How to Be an Antiracist*.** Both of those books have been extremely helpful to me in my own journey of understanding my complicity to whiteness. **But they've also shown me that buying a book doesn't make you antiracist.** You still have to read the book, and when you read it, you have to do the hard internal work of discerning where white supremacy and racism have been a part of your own identity and story. That's not quick work. Its lifetime work. As Ibram Kendi himself says, **"The journey from racist to anti-racist is always ongoing."** We need to temper our desire to rush the process and return to some sense

of stability, for perhaps, though we may have been unaware, our stability was actually an unjust stability, built on the oppression of others.

c) **This project of dismantling white supremacy is a long project that requires sustained commitment.** This moment may be a real turning point moment in that dismantling; I genuinely pray that it is. But it will only bear the fruit we really desire if, as a collective, we commit to a season of discomfort and disorientation, a season where those of us who have had the privilege not to engage, or to consider the impact of racism in our collective lives, are willing to stay humble, and teachable. That means each of us who is not black must be willing to do the work we need to do to own our complicity in whiteness and come behind our black brothers and sisters as they lead the fight for their God given right to live freely and safely, knowing that their lives matter.

d) So welcome to the exile. Settle in, you're going to be here awhile.

E. The second thing I want to draw our attention to though is an important word to hold alongside the first: **There is life for you to live here.**

1. Yes, Jeremiah is saying you're gonna be here awhile. This is a long game, and I know that's not what you want to hear. But he's also saying, **even in the exile, God wants you to find life.** There is life to be lived here.
2. Have kids, get married. Plant gardens. Tell stories. Be community to one another. There is life to be lived in the exile. There is love to be had. There are children to be born. There is art to be made. There are things to celebrate, even though those celebrations may look nothing like they had before.
3. With this call to not just surrender and try to survive, but to *live* in the exile, Jeremiah is **asking the community to imagine life differently. It's a creative exercise.** He's asking them to think of new ways of marrying, of having kids, of practicing faith. He's asking them to **mix with people they hadn't before**, fusing with folks they never would have considered connecting with. Letting their kids marry Babylonians, which they never would have imagined. Finding ways to build alliances and learn from their neighbors, even as they found ways to hold on to their own traditions and culture in the land of Babylon. He's telling them that **their own blessing will come as they bless those they are in contact with and build new diverse coalitions together.**
4. Ultimately, I hear Jeremiah reminding them to **still pursue that which brings joy to life.** The pursuit of joy is an affirmation of life.
5. When Jason's parents divorced, it unravelled many things for us, particularly for Jason. Because his parents had been pastors and much of his life to that point, family and church had been wrapped up together, when the family life fell apart, it presented a crisis of faith as well. It was his entry deep dive entry point into deconstruction. There was a season where I wasn't sure this dream of someday starting a community of faith would ever come to pass, because we were sorting through real significant questions about the heart of faith and spiritual community, But in that place of exile and angst, we also found new experiences, new voices, new places of wisdom, new ways to navigate the journey of faith that weren't built on certainty but possibility; weren't about dogma but about mystery. Truthfully, we wouldn't be who we are and Haven wouldn't be what it is if we hadn't learned to imagine the journey of faith and spiritual community differently.
6. In this season, **we, too, have begun imagining differently.** Imagining what weddings and graduations and birthday parties and church services look like. This week, there has been more imagining around what whole communities could look like; communities that don't respond to crisis with violent law enforcement but social support and mutual aid. To us I

believe that Jeremiah is calling us to commit to this life affirming reimagining. That it is part of the turning point we seek. If the exile is to serve any purpose, perhaps this is the purpose. Like a caterpillar entering a chrysalis, the period in exile transforms us, so that when we emerge we are different in important ways.

- F. And that brings me to the final word to the exiles that I believe is important for us to keep in mind too: **This too shall pass.**
1. Jeremiah made it clear that **there would be an end to the exile.** It may not be one that any of his audience would live to see, it may have been for their children or grandchildren, but it would come. Eventually we will not be in Babylon, he is saying. This is not forever. God has a plan for us as a collective; not for harm but for good. There is hope in the future.
 2. May we in the midst of our own exiles here that word too. We may be here awhile, perhaps much longer than any of us would choose, but we as a human community, we will emerge. This moment may pass. And I pray that when it does, whenever we find ourselves clearly in the “after”, we will be changed in ways that more clearly embody the just world we all long for and need. May it be, o God. Amen.

Questions For Reflection & Conversation:

1. Where have the “defining moments” been in your life? How did they change your trajectory?
2. Where does the crisis of exile feel connected to your experience these days?
3. Where do you think God might be inviting you to imagine life differently?

Whenever we gather as a community - in our Sunday services, in zoom chat, breakout groups, weekly small groups, prayer groups, leadership teams- we will uphold these intentions.

- **All are welcome who support the belonging of others.** As we name in our opening prayer, we seek an inclusive, accessible space and want to build that with others who share that goal.
- **In discussion, take a couple of beats.** Not everyone feels comfortable responding at the same pace. Let’s leave room for folks to process and share when they are ready..
- **Remember we are all learning.** We expect that all of us are on a journey of growth.
- **Share courageously and responsibly.** - Share what you are comfortable sharing remembering moments of discomfort are when we often grow the most. And share responsibly allowing space for all to be heard and in consideration of others.
- **Offer grace freely** - We will make mistakes along the way so extend grace and love generously to one another.
- **Stay curious and listen well.** We listen not to fix or advise, but to bear witness.
- **Confidentiality provides safety** - Remember each person’s story is theirs to tell, not ours to share.