

THE RHYTHM OF JOY

Psalm 126

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The word “exile” is unfamiliar. We don’t use it often. It sounds strange to our ears. It looks odd when we see it. Most of the time when we’re confronted with the word “exile”, it’s when we’re studying the Bible.

The WORD “exile” is unfamiliar but the FEELING of being in exile is not. It’s the feeling of being out of place, of not belonging. Specifically the feeling that you no longer belong, when once you did. It happens, on a national level, to people all over the political spectrum. Something shifts in our culture, and you wake up one morning, and you think, “I don’t recognize this as my country anymore.” Exile is how to describe the huge group of people who felt disenfranchised when their jobs in the coal mines and other blue-collar jobs went away, and they were left feeling hopeless, like strangers in a strange land. Once you felt you had a future, and the next minute you don’t. That’s an experience of exile. The ground beneath has shifted. Your foundation is gone. You have no place to stand.

I’ll never forget the day I received a call from a parishioner. He was crying so hard I could barely understand him. He was calling from his car, from the parking lot of his workplace. As of that hour, it was his FORMER workplace. Finally he got the words out: “I’ve been let go. They just told me to pack my desk and leave.” He came to my office, still sobbing. I’d never seen this man cry before. “How could this happen?” he said to me, incredulous. “I thought I’d work for the company my whole life.”

When your family configuration changes, it can feel like exile. Or when you’re in a group of people but feel alone. Recently a college freshman I know said to his parents, “I’m surround-

ed by people, everywhere, all the time, but I have no one, absolutely no one can talk to.” That kind of loneliness is an experience of exile.

The exile referred to in our scripture for this morning is one particular event in history. The short version of the story is this. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon attacked Jerusalem and destroyed most of the city, eventually deporting many of its citizens. The people of Israel were forced to live in Babylon for 70 years.

We’ve discussed the exile in Bible Study many times, trying to understand what it was like. What would it be like to be forced out of your country? I use this analogy. It’s not perfect, but it may help us identify with the experience. Imagine that we are at war with Canada. And one day, large ships appear on the shore here on Lake Erie. We are told that we have one hour to evacuate our homes, that we’re being taken away on these ships. Under threat of death, we pile on and we’re taken across the water to Canada. “Well, the war will be over soon,” we think. We don’t even unpack. We just wait by the harbor. But days turn into weeks and pretty soon we’re put to work. We set up camp. Weeks turn into years and we find places to live. We plant gardens. Some children are born. They grow up and make friends with the Canadians. Before we know it, they’re marrying each other, and some of the people who first came over on the ships have died. We even stop thinking about home so often. 70 years is a lifetime, after all. Generations are born and die in exile.

And then, one day we learn that we’re allowed to come home! But some of us don’t want to. Canada is home now. It’s where the children and grandchildren are. Those of us who do come back realize home isn’t what it used to be. Other people have been living here for all those decades. Nothing looks the same. Our churches were destroyed in the war. We have to rebuild, but where do we find our identity now? We’re home, but it still feels like exile.

That’s what our Jewish ancestors faced. Exile and then exile. They were strangers in a strange land, and then they returned home, and that land felt strange, too.

But one thing remained. They continued to remember the faithfulness of God. “Remember,” they would say to each other, “God’s promises to Abraham?” “Remember how God brought us through the forty years in the wilderness?” “God will not forget us. God remembers, just like we remember. God will get us out of here. The time will come when we will go home again.” “And when that happens, we’ll be so happy. It will be like a dream come true.” That’s what Psalm 126 says. When we return home, after the exile, it will be like a dream come true. It will be so wonderful, like joy we can taste and feel. **“Then our mouths will be filled with laughter, and our tongues with shouts of joy.”** That’s how the psalmist puts it. Joy you can taste. Joy you can speak and sing.

They sang this psalm when they were waiting to go home, and then they went home and they sang it again. “God, you brought us back here, and we’re glad, but it’s hard to be back. We have to start all over again. So help us rebuild.” Here’s how hard it was. Here’s the image the psalm gives us. It was like planting a garden while crying. Picture this. You’re finally home. Back in Avon, Westlake, Sheffield Lake, North Ridgeville. Back after having spent decades in Canada. You have to rebuild. But you’re so tired, you’re so discouraged. You go out to the backyard and you put your hoe to the ground, and the tears come.

How can we plant and cry at the same time? Planting is an act of hope. To plant means that you have faith in the future. You’re planning for the future, even looking forward to seeing what you will be able to produce.

Crying is an expression of sadness, or grief, or loss.

How can you plant and cry at the same time? How can you plan for the future while you’re grieving, proclaim hope while you’re in mourning?

Margaret Feinberg is an author and speaker, who decided to write a book about joy. So she spent a year researching joy - what the Bible has to say about joy, why so many Christians look and act as if they are not joyful, what practices lead to more joyful lives. She was just

about ready to turn her book manuscript over to her publisher when she was diagnosed with cancer. In her 30's. All of a sudden, the book she was writing about how to have more joy in daily life turned into a book about how to experience joy in the midst of the worst parts of life. She discovered a strong connection between grief and joy. She puts it this way: "When you learn to grieve well, you expand your bandwidth for joy." The more you feel, in other words, the difficult emotions, the more you feel the positive emotions. Your whole life grows in depth. Your joy becomes more, not less, profound.

There is a saying about grief that goes like this: "You cannot get around grief; you have to go through it." It may be a trite saying, but it carries truth.

Sometimes it seems that our culture discourages people from fully experiencing grief, and anger, and sadness, loss and loneliness. We're encouraged, instead, to remember the power of positive thinking, to put on a happy face. Men, especially, are not given permission to express their grief. It's interesting that our so-called advanced society has lost the wisdom that our ancient brothers and sisters knew. In the Psalms, we read of people expressing, no-holds-barred, their anger at the injustices of the world. They even express it to God. And the language is not always polite. "Where are you, God?" "Why are you allowing all of these bad things to happen?" "I feel like you're ignoring me; I don't know where you are." Even Jesus quoted a psalm on the cross when he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

And here's what happens in every one of those psalms. After the lament, after the honest outpouring of sadness, comes a realization that God is still present. God's faithfulness is remembered, even if it isn't felt in that moment.

The joy that comes in the morning is the joy that comes after a long night of grieving.

The tears that flow fertilize the garden and produce the bountiful harvest of joy.

It seems that the writer of our psalm had an instinctual understanding of human psychology. Bottling up our emotions leads to a drought of the spirit.

But expressing ourselves, living fully in the present moment, paying attention to what is around us and responding to it — all of that leads to more productive and joyful lives.

And our world needs a harvest. We need a harvest of justice. We need to go out to the fields and find bushels full of compassion. We need to help create a world where people are no longer sleep-walking but wide awake to the hurts of our brothers and sisters and motivated to do something about them.

Lenore Marken spent her career as a high school English teacher; she last taught at Lorain Admiral King. She taught in classrooms where several students were wearing probation ankle bracelets. She loved each student fiercely and wanted to help transform their lives through the power of literature and by showing them that someone cared about them and saw their potential. She knew that reading and writing was a key to a better life with richer possibility for each of them. She saw that some of her students were living in the exile of poverty and she wanted to show them a way out. She would drive students in her own car to Playhouse Square to watch Shakespeare. She cared deeply about the next generation, about the future. She was also one of our very best confirmation mentors, one who stayed in touch with the students she mentored. She took a keen interest in each of them, emailing, texting, asking what they were reading in college.

I don't want to become too partisan here, but I want to share this anecdote from Lenore's last weeks, because I think it illustrates her passion for leaving this world better than she found it. The first time Cheryl and I visited Lenore after her diagnosis, one of the first things she said to us is, "Darn it; I don't think I'm going to live to vote in November, and I really really wanted to. We've got to change some things."

Then, this week, with her very much on my mind, I saw the news that voter registration among 18-25 year olds is way up this year. I have to think that some of the seeds that Lenore planted are yielding a harvest.

Shane Claiborne lives in inner-city Philadelphia. He is one of the few people I would call a full-time Christian. He doesn't live his faith on Sundays, or sometime, or even most of the time - he truly seems to eat, sleep, and breathe Christian discipleship. I'm sure he's not perfect, but from what I can tell, every decision he makes is based on an intentional desire to be faithful. He was the second speaker in our new westside speaker series - some of you remember that our church hosted Walter Brueggemann a year and a half ago. Then our consortium of four churches hosted Shane Claiborne at Pilgrim church last year.

Shane lives in a community called The Simple Way. It is a cluster of homes and families and individuals in north Philadelphia where people live in community, sharing their possessions and meals, looking out for one another, worshiping, and making decisions based on Christian principles.

One of their community projects is done in conjunction with their Mennonite neighbors who are blacksmiths. These two gentlemen, Mike and Fred, spend their time receiving donations of weapons from the neighborhood and throwing them into the fire, literally turning those weapons into farming implements. From one Ak-47 semi-automatic they can make a garden trowel and shovel. The Simple Way community operates a garden plot and uses these re-purposed tools for their work in the garden.

From instruments that are used for death come instruments that are used for life...from planting in tears to harvesting joy - that is the kind of transformation that is possible.

It may not seem like good news to you if I tell you that this is the rhythm of life : we experience exile - an absence of God, and then homecoming - the awareness of God's constant presence. We remember that God was there all along, even though we didn't notice. And then

it will happen all over again. You may wish that life were different, that those times of exile weren't so inevitable. But the more aware we are, the more we feel the constancy of God's love for us, the more joy we will embody. We will plant seeds of mercy and justice, even if sometimes through tears...and bring about a harvest for the world. This is good news. This is a way of life, for life, forever.