

The Plans I Have for You
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
May 22, 2022-AM Service
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Isaiah 2:2-3, 42:5-7, 45:22-24a, 55:3-5, 56:3-5

We come to the last sermon in our exile series. These are Old Testament texts that address Israel's situation when she was in exile in Babylon. In these texts where God speaks into a time when his people are weak and struggling. My hope is that these words will help us as we enter a time of increased weakness and struggle.

To get into the part of exile that I want to think about today, let's go back to Jeremiah 29—the passage we used to start the series. When I preached on that text, I left something out of my sermon. There was a really important and difficult part of that text that I didn't talk about. I shamelessly dodged it. That sermon focused on how God wants us to engage the city. He doesn't want us to assimilate—to simply give in to the values of the world. He doesn't want us to be sectarian—to fearfully separate from everyone who's not like us. Instead he wants us to engage the city, and pray for the city and work for the city, but do it while maintaining our distinct identity as his people. That was the main point of that passage, but just behind it there was something else. Listen to these portions of Jeremiah 29, and as you listen think about this question: who was it who carried the Jews into exile?

“This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down...for I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future...I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” So who was it that carried the people of Jerusalem into exile? Who was it that tore them from their homes and brought them to a strange land? It was God. I carried you, I banished you, says the Lord. This exile is God's idea. It is his plan. That's a hard word. If you are in exile, whether that's exile on a national scale like Israel, or exile on a personal scale where a good and stable life you knew is suddenly uprooted, it's hard to hear that exile might have been part of God's plan for you. It may be hard, but it's a message we see throughout the exile writings. You hear it in Isaiah. In chapter 40, those familiar words that we read and sing during advent carry that sense: “Comfort, comfort my people. Declare to Jerusalem that her hard service (her exile) is over, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” “From the Lord's hand.” I am in this, says the Lord. This is part of my plan.

We need to be careful here. Exile is a terrible thing. The Babylonians did evil and cruel things to the Israelites when they tore down the city. Things that displeased God. God was not the author of these evil things. Nevertheless, when you read the Bible books that talk about exile, it's clear that God had purpose in the exile. God was forming his people through the exile. I want to look at those purposes as they are revealed in scripture, and I want us to do that as a way to be open to the thought that God is also working out his purposes for us on our seasons of weakness and frustration and exile.

As I look at the Old Testament exile writings, there are two main purposes that God works through exile. The first has to do with depth. When you read the prophets of the exile, they make it very clear that the exile is a consequence for Israel's sins. God's people became slack in their obedience. Read through Isaiah and the theme shows up multiple times. The people

of Jerusalem are going through the motions. They're still offering the sacrifices at the appointed times and still doing all the temple stuff, but their hearts aren't in it. They are more interested in money and clothes and decorating and drinking. Read the first 5 chapters of Isaiah and it's pretty clear. "They have turned their back on me! They offer their sacrifices but they don't mean a thing to me because they don't care for the poor and they don't do justice." Everyone in Jerusalem says they are for the Lord. "A child of Abraham? Me? Yeah. Of course. Absolutely. Me and the wife have a big party with the neighbors every year around Passover. I always invite the priest—hey we need someone to open in prayer, right!? Seriously, he's a great guy." God's people have become complacent. There's no depth to their faith. They are half-hearted. So God sends the exile.

So the exile is a punishment, but God's punishments always have a purpose. It's not just a punishment; it's a cure. By allowing his people to go into exile he sends them into a context where you couldn't be half-hearted. Before the exile, Jerusalem was an easy place to be half-hearted about your faith. When you walked through the streets of Jerusalem everyone you knew identified as part of the covenant people, and so of course that you were too. It wasn't so much a matter of commitment as a matter of culture. 'I'm from Jerusalem, there's the temple, of course I'm a child of Abraham, what else would I be?' In Babylon, you were either intentional about your faith or you were absorbed. In Babylon, your faith was either intentional and personal or you were assimilated. In Babylon, you had to practice habits of community and habits of prayer and habits of study or you would lose your identity.

So the exile wasn't just a punishment, it was a school for growth. And it was fruitful. As I mentioned in earlier sermons, new habits of faith sprang up during the exile. The roots of modern day synagogue worship came from the exile. A lot of the stories of Scripture and the writings that now form the Bible became really precious to the people in exile. They gathered around these stories, they gathered around God's laws—through exile God sharpened their sense of identity.

When it comes to the pressures and weakness of the modern church, it's too early for anyone to say what God's purpose is, but I think it may also have something to do with depth. I remember that when I first came to Grand Rapids from Kingston, Ontario, I was shocked by how pervasive Christianity was. I remember talking to friends growing up here who said, I don't know anyone who's not a Christian. Coming from a much more secular place, that seemed impossible to me. 'What?! Everyone you know is a believer, that can't be!' I hardly knew any Christians in my public high school. And when we drove to church on Sunday morning for the 10 am service, the roads were pretty empty. 'Everyone you know is a Christian? How can that be?'

After a few months here I understood that this was entirely possible. And some of that was wonderful. There is enormous comfort in being surrounded by people who are like you. You go to Russ' and you see the Bible verse on the menu and you think, 'these are my people!' But it also makes it easy to think that faith is just in the water. You look at your children and you say, of course they will become believers! What else could they become in this city!?

But that's not how it is anymore. I doubt many of you would still say, 'Everyone I know is a Christian.' In this new context, no one will become a believer through osmosis. In this context being people of faith and raising our children to be people of faith will take intention. It will take disciplined habits of community, and prayer, and worship and learning. It will take conversations around the dinner table. It will take personal stories of faith shared through

generations. And though these exile conditions might be adverse, it's entirely possible that God is using these conditions to help us grow deeper roots and a stronger sense of identity.

So God used the exile to make his people deeper, God used the exile to make them wider. Most of the nations in those days thought of their gods as local gods. Gods were regional. They had power in one place, but not another. So, for example, the god of Babylon was Marduk. He was the patron god of the city, and Marduk was a god who had power that worked better in specific places. So in their minds, Marduk was really powerful around the Babylonian rivers, but maybe not so powerful in the mountains. So if you were fighting by the Tigris and Euphrates—Marduk was your man. But, if you wanted help in the mountains you should probably pray to a different god. Gods were regional.

If that sounds weird to you, I direct your attention to 1 Kings 20:23 where the Arameans plotted to fight against Israel on the plains because, they said, “their god is a god of the hills, but he is not a god of the valleys.” Maybe they knew that one of God's names, El Shaddai, means “God of the Mountains” so they reasoned, ‘Their god is really tough in the mountains, but down in the valleys I think we can take him.’ Another example of that sense of gods tied to a place. Remember what the Syrian general Naaman did after he was healed by Elisha? He resolved to worship the Lord, which was great, but he asks for 2 mule loads of dirt to carry back to Syria, because he thinks he needs some Israelite dirt to worship Israel's God.

You can imagine the psychology that this sort of view of the gods would create. Regional gods would give you a regional mindset. You would keep to yourself and your land. You would be very fearful and suspicious of outsiders. You would think that God only cared about you and your people, and cared nothing for others.

When the people of Jerusalem saw their temple destroyed, when they saw their city burned, there were many among them who thought, “That's it. God has gone. His temple is destroyed and when we are away from our land, we will be in a godforsaken place.” But when they got to Babylon they found out that God was there too. Not only was he there, he was the Lord of that place. He sent dreams to kings and brought them to their knees. In the lion's den, in the fiery furnace, he worked wonders that made emperors praise his name. More than that, they found that God seemed to care what happened to cities like Babylon and Nineveh. He cared about those people too.

Through exile God helped Israel remember their call to be priests to the world. To show God to the nations so that they too might glorify him. That brings us to those 5 texts I read before the sermon. What was the common theme there? That God was not just the God of Israel; he was the God of all nations. That God's purposes for Israel were not contained within her borders, that the glory of God was meant to fill the earth. “Nations will come to your light! Kings to the brightness of your dawn!” “I will keep you and make you a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.”

God's people had been sitting around Jerusalem and not only had their faith been too shallow, it was too narrow. Their prayers and hopes weren't wide enough. They'd been praying only for protection for their city, for their families. They'd spent all their energy on making the city wall thick and making sure the temple courtyards were well maintained and making sure their homes were safe and cozy. Their concerns never spilled beyond the walls of the city. Exile changed all that. Exile expanded their horizons. Exile made them ask questions they'd never asked before. Exile forced them to look for God working in places where they'd never looked before. Through Exile God reminded them that he was Lord of this whole earth. Through the exile he showed them that their nice safe hearth and home faith was too small. Through the exile

God showed them he had bigger things in mind for the world, and bigger things in mind for them.

It reminds me of a story of someone I know. I'm not going to say who it is because some of you know him. For most of his life he was an ordinary hardworking guy. He worked in a white collar job and did well. He was successful and people praised him for his success and he spent most of his time focused on building his own success. But then as he got closer to retirement, he became restless. God was nudging him, pushing him. Through a sequence of events ended up volunteering in Heartside. The head of Guiding Light mission challenged him to get down into the pit and walk alongside some of the neighbors who were struggling. And so this man went into exile. A voluntary exile, but exile. He went down into the exile of those men. And in that exile place, God changed him. He thought he would go into that place and transform those guys, but he was transformed as much as they were. He realized that he wasn't that different from those men. They were as smart and sensitive as he was. It was just some mental illness or some family abuse had put them on the wrong side of success. As he mentored those guys and did Bible studies in their place of exile, God broadened him, enlarged his heart. He's not thinking so much about personal success anymore. Now its humility, gratitude and giving.

There are lots of you going through perplexing stuff right now – stuff that feels exile, stuff that causes lament. I can't tell you exactly what he's doing in the middle of your exile, but I assure you, the Potter has not forgotten about you. He's always at work shaping you. Sometimes he does it gently and personally on his wheel. Sometimes her forms you in the heat of his kiln. Sometimes in the comfort of hearth and home, and sometimes in exile. But he's always working. Because he has a plan for you. "Plans to prosper you, and not to harm you. Plans to give you a hope and a future."

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