

Exile: Extinction and survival

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My church goes off-lectionary frequently. Part of me is sympathetic: I, too, grow weary of the cycle at times, and I long for something different to ponder. Part of me mourns the fact that we're not in sync with the larger Christian world; when we're on-lectionary, I love knowing that Christians of all sorts throughout the world are reading the same texts.

On Sunday my church heard about the Babylonian exile. We had already explored the Assyrian exile.

How interesting to read these stories in light of all the migration, forced and voluntary, happening through the world today. We live in a time when more humans are on the move across the globe than any time since the end of World War II. Our various cultures will be shaped and changed by this movement.

Our thinking about exile is both similar to and different from how the ancient Israelites saw exile. We see evidence of that thinking in the texts that tell the story of exile (2 Kings 17:5-20 and 2 Chronicles 36:5-21), with the emphasis on the sins of the leaders and the people and the displeasure of God, who needs to punish everyone for going astray.

Historians might explain it otherwise, explaining how the Israelites lived in a bad location, between various warring countries, which meant that armies were always crossing the land of Israel. Historians would say that Israel and Judah were the weaker countries in a region of heavily armed, fierce fighting cultures. Historians would tell us that these smaller, weaker countries were living on borrowed time and that it should have come as no surprise that they were conquered.

But generations after the forced exile saw it as God's punishment, and some of them saw it as their task to figure out how to get back to God's favor. They would have centuries to wrestle with this question, as generation after generation was subsumed by whatever empire ruled the world at the time.

If we read the Gospels deeply and then do some research, we might see the Pharisees in a more favorable light. They did not insist on purity laws because they wanted to make Christ's ministry difficult. They thought that if they could get the Jews to perfect their observation of all the laws that God gave them in the early days, then God would look favorably upon them, and all that was lost would be restored.

Humans are prone to this thinking, and especially humans who have lost so much—or who come from families and cultures who have focused on the loss.

Some theologians might remind us that from these great losses come great growth. We might argue that if cultures don't go out into different parts of the world, they will become more and more insular and eventually die. Historians might tell us that exile inoculates a culture against extinction. If a group stays in the same geographical spot, it is easier to destroy. If parts of the group have migrated, they can regroup, even if genocide has occurred elsewhere. We see this dynamic with both centuries of Jewish culture and Christian culture.

I realize this idea is small comfort when one has lost one's homeland and everything that matters. One does not sit in the ashes and say, "From this event will come great art and then a stronger culture." And yet, it is usually true.

I'm interested in the various communities that are formed by exiles. Often they are more vibrant than the ones left behind. Exile can teach us what is important, what we value. We see this trajectory in the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles of the ancient Israelites.

We live in a time of exile of all sorts. Some of it is geographical, as people become ever more mobile and countries more unstable. Some of it has to do with psychology, as we are required to make adjustments in the face of what we thought we knew having to change. Some of us must leave our families and some will have our families leave us. Some must shed identities.

In a time of exile, it is good to remember the value of creating community in the place where one has washed up. It is good to remember that although we may feel abandoned, God is there with us.

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