

WORSHIP

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Spiritual Geography: Exile

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Lamentations 1

Isaiah 55:1-7

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.
Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,



and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

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Today we continue in our sermon series called Spiritual Geography, where we are taking a closer look at some of the themes in Scripture that can be used to describe our spiritual journey – our lives of faith.

Last week we explored the theme of Exodus – a spiritual journey of being called out of one place, and toward another, that always entails some wandering in the wilderness to get there.

Today the theme is one of Exile which is the spiritual challenge of being separated or dislocated from our true home.

In the first Scripture that Katherine read, we hear the poet who wrote Lamentations describe the pain of God's people who have been exiled from the Promised Land.

A little context here – in the year 587 BCE, the Babylonian empire invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the temple (which was thought to be the place where God made a dwelling). Many of the people of Israel and Judah (especially the people of influence) were deported to live



and raise their families in a place far from home. Much of the latter half of the Old Testament – especially the prophets like Isaiah – was written to try to understand and interpret the experience of exile.

In our second Scripture, Isaiah writes to those who find themselves living in exile – writing to people who lived in Babylon – away from home. In today’s reading, Isaiah issues an invitation. Listen with me as we hear the word of God.

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The movie *Lion*, which is based on the non-fiction book *A Long Way Home*, by Saroo Brierley, chronicles the journey of a boy from Khandwa, India who spends most of his life separated from his hometown.

Growing up in a poor village in Khandwa, one day the 5-year-old Saroo follows his older brother to a train station where he falls asleep on an empty train car that departs before he wakes up and whisks him faraway to Calcutta. Unable to communicate and navigate the big city, Saroo eventually finds himself in an orphanage and is then adopted by couple who live in Australia where he grows up an ocean away.

In his mid-twenties, grown and still living in Australia, Saroo literally gets a taste of home. He and his girlfriend are at a dinner party where the host makes a traditional Indian dessert that Saroo remembers from his childhood. This memory launches Saroo on a painstaking search for his hometown where he attempts to pair his memories as a 5-year-old with images from Google-earth to try to locate the small village of his youth whose name Saroo cannot recall.

For years, Saroo studies maps and land-masses trying to find the familiar terrain of home. During that time, the search becomes his primary purpose; his heart’s desire.

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The challenge for the prophet Isaiah is that he is writing to a people who aren’t sure they want to come home.

Isaiah writes to God’s people who have been exiled to Babylon – people who have been separated from their land, their customs, their practices of worship, their identity.

But in the process of all that, God’s people in exile have grown comfortable.

They’ve compromised some of their principals.

They’ve gotten used to a different lifestyle.

Back home they were clear about who they were and what was important.

They were people made in God’s image.



Their life centered around community.

Their work around sustaining community – seeking the well-being of all.

They lived in gratitude – and in joy – aware that their home was a reflection of God’s promise; that their lives were not of their own making, but of God’s provision; that they were God’s gift.

In exile, things were less clear.

Instead of life being a gift, life became something to be earned.

Instead of being centered around community, other people become competition.

Instead of working to sustain community, work became what people did to get ahead.

Instead of trusting in God’s promise, the people spent time worrying that unless they kept up, they would be left behind.

And as crazy as it sounds, when you’ve been living in exile long enough it kind of grows on you.

Sometimes, you can forget that there is another way to live.

If you spend so much of your time trying to keep up – stay ahead – make sure you still have a competitive advantage – live up to increasingly demanding expectations – ensure that your kids are as good as everybody else’s kids – avoid anything that smacks of failure – if you do that long enough, sure, it may leave you exhausted, but it can also fool you into thinking that running that race is what life is all about.

Isaiah wrote today’s Scripture to a people who were living in that space – to people who were caught up in the expectations, and the fears, and the pressures of their life in Exile. And to those people, Isaiah asks this question – that, every time I hear it, cuts me to the heart: “why do you spend your money for that which is not bread? And your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

Does that question make you uncomfortable?

It does me.

How often have you asked it?

Lying awake in the middle of the night. After a week where you have put in more hours than you should. After a big purchase that you thought would make you happy.



When you hit a goal – but realize there is still someone ahead of you to catch. Those are times I’ve considered the question.

How about you?

The prophet Isaiah isn’t just talking to God’s people who were living in a physical location away from the Promised Land. He is also addressing the spiritual condition of God’s people who were living apart from their heart’s true home.

And if you have ever been haunted by the question that Isaiah asks those in exile:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?

And your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Why do you use your energy to try to run a race that cannot be won?

Why do you pursue a lifestyle that will not leave you happy?

If those questions penetrate you, like they do me, the good news is that you can still feel the difference between exile and home. And that is what Isaiah is after.

Isaiah writes to give us a taste of home.

You who are thirsty, come to the water!

You who are hungry, eat what is good! Delight yourselves in rich food!

Listen – so that you may live!

Seek – where he may be found – call – while he is near.

God will have mercy.

God will abundantly pardon.

Isaiah writes with an invitation to return home – to the place...physical – spiritual...that stands outside the race we so relentlessly run and confuse with life.

It is a home defined by God’s intention, where, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, we can reside “as creatures of well-being, citizens of gracefulness, members of the possible, children all beloved, safe, whole, free.”

That was the invitation to people in Isaiah’s time.

It is an invitation to people in our time, too.

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You may know someone who has taken dramatic steps to leave the race behind – to walk away from the pressures of life in exile – and fully live according to God’s promises of home. I know a few people who have made that choice – who have quit their jobs, moved their families, made a clean break from the life they used to live.

But that’s not most people.

To be sure, an invitation to return home from exile requires departure.

Not just to recognize the distance between where we are and where God wants us to be – but to move toward that place – to search for it – yearn for it.

For most of us whose lives and livelihoods are tied into this world – who are caught up in this race we run – our response to Isaiah’s invitation isn’t so much physical as it is emotional and psychological. Deciding to accept Isaiah’s invitation to come home asks us to reimagine our identity and our vocation outside of the grip of the impossible expectations that we allow to define our lives. It is, as the Apostle Paul famously said, to know that we are in the world but to choose not to be of the world.

That’s harder than it sounds. But one person who I have seen do it well is a man from a former congregation named Joe. I often think about Joe on Father’s Day because I watched him raise his two boys right about the time I was figuring out how to raise my kids, and I thought he did it very, very well.

By the measure of the world, Joe’s life was a success. He had an important job. Commanded a comfortable salary. Enjoyed a position of influence in his organization and the community. Nice house. Good marriage. Two smart and well-behaved kids.

The more I got to know him, though, the more I came to realize that in some ways Joe was different. It was more than simply being humble. Joe just didn’t seem to care that much about the fact that he had found success. He didn’t feel the need to compare his life or his kids’ lives with other people in his social circle. What gave Joe joy wasn’t a promotion, or a deal – he liked his work – felt called to it – fulfilled by it. But what really brought Joe joy was his Sunday school class. Joe was the primary teacher, emailer, and chef.

Almost every Saturday, Joe would spend the afternoon in his kitchen, preparing something for the class – scones, muffins, frittatas.

Sunday mornings Joe would arrive with food in hand to feed an eager class of fellow church members, where the community gathered and shared their life and then explored what faith looked like when it was lived.

Over time, I came to view Joe’s cooking as a ministry that provided people a taste of home. That class served as weekly reorientation – it helped remind people of what was most true – of their God-given identity – of the fact that their worth was not dependent on how



well they lived up to the expectations of the world that demanded so much of them. But that they were worthy because they had been claimed by Christ.

And each week, the people in Joe's class would go out with joy.

And then they would be led back in peace.

Focused on what was home – and not on the world around them.

I find it important and comforting to remember that even those who walked with Jesus got confused. Even the disciples – who left everything and followed in Jesus' footsteps – even they got caught up in trying to live by the expectations of the world – even they needed to be reminded to set their sights on their heart's true home.

So Jesus gathered them close – and he issued them an invitation, much like the one Isaiah had given to God's people in exile all those years ago:

Come to me, you who weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

For my yoke is easy.

And my burden is light.

Come to me, Jesus said.

Come home.

