

I. Intro. On August 14, 1982 Ann Weems went into exile

A. To use her own words, that is the day the stars fell from her sky.

1. On that day her son Todd was killed less than an hour after his 21st birthday ... Aug. 14, 1982: the day her weeping began, with tears that would never completely be dried.
2. In the aftermath of her devastating loss, family, friends and other tender-hearted people were there for her, sent by God
3. One of those was friend and Old Testament professor Walter Brueggeman, who eventually invited her to express her grief by writing psalms of lament, which she did, over several years

B. Through these, later published in a book called Psalms of Lament, she gave new expression to a raw and sometimes angry faith that appears several times in the biblical Psalms.

1. A contemporary psalm of lament, in the mode of Ps. 137, by Ann Weems ("Lament Psalm Six", Psalms of Lament, Ann Weems, ©1995 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 13) ...

II. Much like Ann Weems, Mike Yordy last week put us in touch with the painful experience that some people have with a personal metaphorical form of exile

A. Mike also introduced us to exile as the disastrous ending of the independent kingdom of Judah in the 6th century BC

1. From a salvation history perspective, the fall of Judah was Yahweh's judgment against his own people for their persistent unfaithfulness in following other gods
2. Politically speaking, Judah was a small, weak but strategically located kingdom that was no match for the rising power of Babylonia



- In 597 the Babylonians swooped in and conquered Judah ... they deported to Babylon King Jehoiachin, his family, the priests, prophets, the royal officials & even the skilled craftsmen & artisans!
- They took with them a young priest from the royal court, named Ezekiel, one who also spoke prophetically for God
- At that time, the older prophet Jeremiah was also around but he was unpopular with the royal court
- Not surprisingly the Babylonians respected Jeremiah because he had counseled Judah NOT to resist them ... so they offered to take Jeremiah along to Babylon but he refused and stayed behind with a puppet king under Babylon's control

B. It was during this time that Jeremiah wrote his letter to the exiles in Babylon, which we have in ch. 29

- Jeremiah wasn't the only prophet the kings of Judah could call on ... there were many others telling the king God was on their side against Babylon, or that God would very soon bring those exiles back to Jerusalem
- Only Jeremiah among the prophets persisted with his message of doom, saying that resisting Babylon was against God's will ...

needless to say it did not win him friends in high places & it almost got him killed

C. But what a remarkable message we have in Jer. Ch. 29, even a revolutionary message!

1. He catches King Jehoiachin & his exiled officials offguard right up front because other prophets have been counseling the king to keep up the resistance movement since God will soon restore them back to their palace & have them worshiping in the Temple again.

2. Jeremiah's letter tells them the opposite:

a) "Stop resisting! Settle in & unpack your bags! Make the most of this undesired situation."

b) In fact, he says "Don't just tolerate your captivity. Be good neighbors & become family with the Babylonians ... Shoot, you should even pray for them, because your welfare is tied together with theirs!"

c) My friends, to Jewish ears, those were shocking & heretical words! ... They were no doubt questioning which prophet was really from God.

3. Now to be fair, after years of gloom & doom, Jeremiah also has some good news, not only in ch. 29 but also in 30 & 31: Hope and restoration are coming, to be sure!

a) But in typical Jeremiah fashion, there's a catch: "Your restoration is not going to come as soon as you thought"

b) He says God will fulfill his earlier promises & bring them back home again to Jerusalem, but only after 70 years, so they might as well get comfortable in Babylon!

c) In the ancient world, 70 was often just a symbolic number, so the implication is most of those taken into exile will not live to see Jerusalem

d) In reality, the exile only lasted about 60 years if you start counting from that first deportation in 597

4. @ the time of this letter, Judah was still a nominally independent kingdom, but not for long ...

D. After that first deportation, the king after Jehoiachin cooperated with Babylon at first

1. But later King Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon, & Nebuchadnezzar's revenge was swift and strong

a) He came back 10 years after the 1st deportation, starved out Jerusalem & set fire to the city in 587 BC

b) The Babylonians took most of the remaining Jews to Babylon, leaving only a few powerless peasants

2. Now the bottom had dropped out for God's people.

a) *This was the crisis of all crises!* As you look at the Heilsgeschichte timeline, this is the lowest point.

b) This was the unthinkable ... the end of the world!

3. As a people, they had just lost their 3 most important things: Their land, their king, & their Temple

a) In fact, what it really meant was the loss of their identity ... How could they be God's chosen people if God abandoned them to their enemies?

b) These ... are the defeated despairing people we hear behind Ps. 137

4. Could Judah's faith even survive the exile? Could it possibly be renewed? That would depend on some changes & adaptations to their faith.

III. So w/ thanks to Marion Bontrager & Hesston College, **I want to quickly review a few important ways that Jewish life changed because of the exile in Babylon** (These changes will help us understand better the Jewish world that Jesus came into)

A. How did exile change Jewish religious thinking? I'll name just three

How did Babylonian exile affect Jewish theology?

- **Suffering can be redemptive**
 - God's judgment is meant to bring renewal & restoration
 - Highlighted in "Servant Songs" in Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 52-53

1. Suffering can be redemptive

a) Prophets showed that Yahweh's judgment is never simply punishment,

but it intends to bring renewal & repentance, to restore the people to God

b) Remember the opposite of love is not hate, it's abandonment ...

c) In Christianity, we put a lot of emphasis on the “Servant Songs” found between chapters 42 and 53 of Isaiah, with language such as “a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench

In our Christian tradition, we see this Suffering Servant coming to us in Jesus himself

This is the kind of biblical Messiah that Jesus chose to be, following in the Suffering Servant pattern, which was very different from the military Messiah that others expected.

These servant songs with redemptive suffering in them date from the time of the exile

2. A new kind of covenant

How did Babylonian exile affect Jewish theology?

- **A new kind of covenant**
 - God seeks an inward more personal covenant
 - “I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts ...”
(Jeremiah 31:33)

Jeremiah & Ezekiel saw Yahweh creating a new kind of covenant with the people, a more personal and inward one, not so focused on written laws

a) In Jeremiah 31, there is this famous prophecy: “*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts ...*” (Jer. 31:31 & 33)

b) And as we heard today, Ezekiel echoes the same theme, sounding almost like words that Jesus would say: “*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.*” (Ezek. 36:26)

3. Worldview of cosmic dualism

How did Babylonian exile affect Jewish theology?

- **Worldview of cosmic dualism**
 - Good comes from Yahweh, evil comes from Satan
 - Who incited David to sin?
Yahweh (2 Samuel 24) or Satan (1 Chronicles 21)?

a) This is about the sources of good & evil ... in this view, the world is the battle ground between Yahweh & the evil forces referred to as Satan

Some of you may take this view for granted but the concept of a "Satan" was a new development during the exile

Before the exile, the worldview was that Yahweh causes everything, even what we would call "bad things"

In the OT before the exile, if something bad happens it's usually described as God's judgment against sin ... remember the plagues against the Egyptians where it says "God hardened Pharaoh's heart"?

b) Let's take 2 examples of the same story: King David's sin of counting the people for a census.

In 2 Samuel 24 it says God incites David to sin & number the people. However, in 1 Chronicles 21, it is Satan who incites David to do this sin ... In this view, God allows Satan limited power.

We don't have to look at one of these stories as right and one wrong. The 2 versions of the same event reveal how they were written down at different times in history, when Jewish understandings of the source of evil had changed.

c) Cosmic dualism is still with us today, & it set the stage for the apocalyptic worldviews about end times that we see in books of Daniel and Revelation.

B. Jewish people had to adapt to a changing world ... and so do we, even when not facing a catastrophe like Judah faced

IV. So how does a devastating exile experience from 2500 years ago relate to us today? I don't have a simple answer for that .. there are various ways of applying the exile experience for us today ...

A. Mike did a great job last week of helping us make **personal connections , much like Ann Weems did**

1. I agree with Mike that it's hard to keep a "balcony perspective" when it feels like our head's about to sink under the waves
2. He's right on to say that sometimes the faith community has to carry that balcony perspective and believe for us in that hopeful future, when we can't believe it ourselves
3. But I also maintain that the lessons from the Babylonian exile are not just lessons for individual people
 - a) If God's chosen people, as a whole, experienced exile, what can God's people today learn corporately from that?
 - b) So much depends on the specific life context of the people of God

B. (Literal experiences of corporate exile)

1. Here's a challenge for you: Try taking the 29th chapter of Jeremiah & going to the people of Comunidad Cristiana Adulam here in Goshen, or the Mara Christian Church, in Indianapolis
 - a) Both congregations have a lot of recent immigrants to the US
 - b) Try asking those church people what Jer. 29 means to them, & you will get very different answers there than from people in a church like ours with 8th generation European descendants living in the U.S.
2. Jer. 29 is a powerful text indeed for immigrant & refugee groups today ... Generations of Mennonites & Laotians & Palestinians & Sudanese have found themselves surprisingly seeking the welfare of their new city, when originally they thought they would soon be returning to their homeland
3. There are still Xian communities today experiencing literal exile

V. But most of us are not literally exiled far from our homeland ... **Can't exile be a metaphorical experience for God's people? Certainly ...**

A. Racism, even in Mennonite churches, can be a form of corporate exile for our brothers & sisters from non-European heritages

1. When Spanish-speaking Latino groups are genuinely invited to Mennonite conventions or conferences but no thought or effort is made for signage or instructions in Spanish, that is institutional racism

- a) If you want to know how institutional racism feels for a whole group of people w/in the Mennonite church, there are people who can tell you stories of exile ... people like John Powell, Regina Shands Stoltzfus, our own Gilberto Perez, Jr, or Native American matriarchs like Louise Fisher.
- b) This morning I'm only hinting at this kind of corporate exile because our racial & ethnic brothers & sisters are better suited to tell these stories than I am.

2. But look around ... even that kind of corporate exile is not well-understood here, as white as most of us are ...

B. So is exile a metaphor for some other kind of experience we can relate to? Well, here's a riskier application on the corporate level: Is Mennonite Church USA going into exile these days around issues of homosexuality?

1. I did consider that this week ... It's tempting to look at our current tensions in the larger church as an example of exile, but *I actually refuse to do so* because this exile metaphor would be too easily manipulated by people at both extremes of the homosexuality debate:

- a) The "conservatives" might quickly claim these divisions as God's judgment on the Mennonite Church for tolerating sin & disobeying God's word
- b) But the so-called progressives could also claim this is the natural result of years of unChristlike exclusion & oppression of LGBTQ persons of faith
- c) At the risk of preaching off the topic of exile, I think we should look at a different time period on the Heilsgeschichte timeline to more accurately depict where we are:

2. Could we be in a time of wilderness wandering, like the Israelites before they entered the land of Canaan?

- a) In North American Mennonite churches we've been struggling to find our way with same-sex relationships for at least 30 years now, ... & it may be some more decades until we arrive at some "Promised Land" where we've all found our separate groups, or at least we all agree to disagree
- b) This past week in a spiritual direction session, I named a feeling of unsettledness in several areas of my life

Office staffing ... maternity coverage ... a possible sabbatical next

summer ... future of conference/denomination

In the direction session, I came to consider the value of living w/in the unsettledness & letting God work there, rather than needing to manage & control it


c) So now I wonder if this might also be true for the larger church:

Rather than insisting on knowing the outcome for our church structures ASAP ... Rather than posturing for position statements & fixed boundaries of who's in & who's out ...

Can we hold our diversity w/in God's church loosely? Can we in MCUSA also live in the unsettledness of our current disagreements and let God be present to speak somehow thru this time, rather than needing to manage & control the outcome?

d) So I said I don't think exile is a good metaphor for us in MCUSA facing tough questions on homosexuality ...

3. But I think nonetheless we should take heed to the words of both Jeremiah & Ezekiel to their exiled brothers & sisters ... so here are some exilic questions for us, which might even help keep us from ending up in exile:



Exilic Questions for MCUSA (before we get to a place of exile)

a) Remember Jeremiah said they were to seek the welfare of the strange city where they found themselves ... which makes me wonder:

When these disagreements might feel like exile to some, can we seek the welfare of ALL our brothers & sisters in the church,

including the ones we disagree with?

Exilic Questions for MCUSA (before we get to a place of exile)

- Can we seek the welfare of ALL our brothers and sisters, including ones we disagree with?
(Jeremiah 29:7)

b) Let's also recall God's promise thru Ezekiel to sprinkle his people clean and to replace their stony hearts with hearts of flesh ... At times as tensions have flared in our churches, I believe God weeps to see hearts of stone on both sides of this divide today

So I wonder ... Are all of us willing to be sprinkled clean by God & receive a new spirit within us, a spirit of humility & dedication to God's purposes above our own?

Exilic Questions for MCUSA (before we get to a place of exile)

- Are we willing to be sprinkled clean and receive a new spirit from God? (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

c) The prophet Ezekiel further said that God would bring his people back because of the holiness of God's name, and not because the people deserved it ... so I also wonder:

When we finally arrive at some more "settled" structures & affiliations for Mennonite churches, will we remember it's not because we deserve it that God brings us to a good place where we can thrive?

Exilic Questions for MCUSA (before we get to a place of exile)

- Will we remember that God brings us to better places for God's own sake and not because we deserve it? (Ezekiel 36:22)

When God gathers us up in our churches & brings us to a new place, it will be for **God's own sake**, to reveal God's goodness & holiness **thru us** to others.

C. I pray that our congregation, conference, & denomination never truly arrive at a place of exile over any issue ... As we continue to seek God's voice in the midst of our unsettledness, let's remember this foundational truth from God's salvation history:

VI. (Conclusion):

A. Whatever blessings God gives us, they are not given for our benefit alone, but for the benefit of a larger world that God also loves.

B. Like Abraham & Sarah, we are blessed to be a blessing, in the kingdom of God!