

Why Is This Happening?

Psalm 137:1-6 (NRSV)

By the rivers of Babylon—
 there we sat down and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
 we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
 asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
 “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord's song
 in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
 let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
 if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
 above my highest joy.

Despite what the God is Dead movie franchise tries to suggest, Christians in the United States do not really face religious persecution.

And when we do talk about persecution it usually is in movies like God is Dead that create a ridiculous straw man to try and suggest how terrible it is for Christians today in the United States.

But for the Jewish people, their lives were filled with persecution, destruction, deportation, and even death. And those experiences have had a profound effect on the stories that have been passed down and are now a part of our Biblical tradition.

Israel has faced numerous periods of persecution and captivity.

The great narrative of the Hebrew Bible speaks to the most urgent needs all people have:

- including the need to be connected and grounded,
- to be protected and to belong,
- to know who you are and where you fit in.

The Hebrew Bible contains the stories of the people of God when they seemingly lost all of that.

People torn away from their land,
 torn up as a people,

and torn down by humiliating loss.

And it didn't happen just once or twice --- Israel's history is the history of a people who lived under oppression --- even in modern history.

I don't know how well you know your geography --- but in this case it is very important.

Israel is a tiny land bridge between Africa and Asia.

If you wanted to go to Egypt --- the only way by land was through the tiny country of Israel

If you wanted to go to Asia or Europe --- Israel was the path way.

Thus Israel played a significant geo-political role throughout its history --- even if only as a pawn.

Controlling this land bridge was essential for defense (and for aggression)

The bible is filled with stories of the back and forth --- the tug and pull to control this tiny strip of land.

Our first encounter is when Abraham leaves the security of the rivers of Mesopotamia and settles in and around modern day Hebron before finding his way to Egypt.

While in Egypt, the ancient Israelites become slaves to Pharaoh and eventually fled to the land of the Canaanites and settled in what is now the modern state of Israel.

That took place somewhere around the year 1250 BCE

David becomes king of Israel in 1000 BCE but the country is never at peace.

There is always a tug from Egypt or a pull from Babylon

Following David's death, Solomon his son becomes king, and after Solomon's death the country is in turmoil

The 10 northern tribes split from the Davidic Dynasty and become the Northern kingdom of Israel centered at Dan.

In 721/722 BCE the Northern kingdom is overrun by the Assyrians

The Assyrian practice was to scatter the people whom they overran and move other conquered people in.

Thus the 10 tribes were scattered and lost to history as they were dispersed throughout the Assyrian empire.

125 years later the unimaginable happens --- the southern kingdom of Judah, which was centered in Jerusalem, is over-run by the Babylonians.

Jerusalem is destroyed, the temple is torn down and ransacked and the people --- the elite --- were gathered up and taken into captivity to Babylon.

It was during this time that the Psalmist wrote:

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I cannot even imagine what it must have been like for the people of Judah --- forced to live in a foreign land --- pining for Jerusalem and home.

The stories of their captivity and eventual return fill the books of the prophets and have influenced Judaism ever since.

In 538 BCE, Cyrus (the only non-Jew to be called God's Messiah in the Hebrew Bible) let the Jews return home and rebuild their temple and city.

But the conquest of the Jewish people was not over.

In 333 BCE Alexander the Great conquered the known world and Israel was under Greek occupation until the revolt by the Maccabees in 167 BCE.

The Jewish Hasmonean's dynasty ruled until about 63 BCE when Rome conquered Jerusalem. And once again became a puppet state to a foreign country

This is the world that Jesus was born into.

A world that had been torn asunder from the dream that God had instilled in Abraham and David.

Before the Babylonian exile, Jewish religious life revolved around the Temple in Jerusalem.

When the Babylonians expelled the Jews from Judea, they destroyed the Temple completely.

Jewish law stipulated that certain important aspects of Jewish religious life -- most notably animal sacrifice -- could only be performed at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Since the Jews now lacked both a temple and the ability to go to Jerusalem, changes were needed to retain their cultural and religious identity.

The result was the rise of the synagogue among the Jews dispersed throughout the Babylonian Empire.

The focus shifted from animal sacrifices, to the study and teaching of the Torah -- the Jewish Bible -- which became the focal point of worship in the synagogues.

The results of Exile were predictable.

If you go and read the stories found in Ezra and Nehemiah you read of

- fears of immigrants
- a need for racial purity
- xenophobia
- an inward focus and a desire to return to some idealized past

But Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah and many of the other prophets called for Israel not to turn inward, but instead to become a light to the nations

To welcome the stranger that was in their midst

Jesus is born into this world in turmoil

A people trying to find their identity while being captives

A nation trying to seek God

And Jesus was certainly influenced by the communal experience of exile.

And instead of turning inward --- Jesus saw in the exile experience --- humility.

Instead of protecting himself --- Jesus made himself vulnerable to those who were still living in exile even among their own people.

For his entire life, Jesus reached out and welcomed the least, the lost and the last.

Whether it was the woman with a hemorrhage, or the woman at the well --- Jesus is reaching out to those who were still experiencing exile.

Unwelcome in their own land

Unwelcome in the community

He is constantly accused of eating with "sinners", inviting everyone that he meets to God's table fellowship.

Ultimately, Jesus pays the ultimate price for his unconventional attitude toward those still in exile

One of the things that I love about being a United Methodist is that we have an open table.

Everyone is welcome to come.

You don't earn it

You don't have to believe in it

You just have to come to it

We are a church that is open to all of God's children

At the table we embody our logo

Open Hearts

Open Minds

Open Doors

We are one of the few traditions that have a table that is open to all!

I have never been evicted from my land

My church has never been torn down

And to be honest, I cannot imagine what exile feels like

Yet in our midst

In our church

In our neighborhoods

At our work places and schools

Throughout our city, nation and world

There are many, many people who have been pushed into exile

Told they don't belong

Shunned because they don't believe the right things

Or live on the right side of the tracks

Or the color of their skin is wrong

Or their sexual orientation is different

Who is living in exile in your midst?

And if you can't think of anyone --- I would suggest you are not looking very hard

Who needs to know that they are loved? --- that they are a child of God.

As you get ready to make your way up to God's table

An invitation that is given to you not because of anything you have done -- but because of what God has done

Who do you need to welcome?

Take some time and ask God to help you to welcome those who still live in exile.