

The Power of Exile Lamentations 1:1-6 & Psalm 137

The history of God's people in the Hebrew Testament is built upon the framework of two major events - both of which involve their homeland. The first is the Exodus - they are in Egypt and oppressed as slaves. Seeing their suffering God frees the people and they head toward the promised land. The land of milk and honey - a place where their wandering will cease and they will be in God's hands. The second event as devastating as the Exodus is uplifting, is when they are forced off the land - the exile into Babylon, when all the leaders are relocated and the city of Jerusalem is torn down including the Temple built by King Solomon.

We are very familiar with the Exodus story, even Hollywood is familiar with the Exodus story with its themes of liberation from oppression and the joy that it inspires. It is a story that any who have experienced the freeing grace of God can understand. But the Exile is not talked about much at all. Why do we avoid it? Well, first because it is a story of sorrow and pain. And second, because many of us have never really experienced anything like exile, but we will return to that in a bit.

Our scripture shows us the pain experienced by the people as they watch their city and their homes and their Temple torn to the ground. Then after witnessing the destruction they are marched off to live in a strange land where they will be forced laborers building up Babylon for its inhabitants and King. And make no mistake, they are not honored citizens of the new nation, but are treated with contempt and curiosity by their new masters. "Sing us one of your songs," they say, "come on, we love to hear new music." But the people's tongues stick to the roof of their mouths and tears well up in their eyes as they think about the songs of Zion, about the City of the Great King, now lying in ruin miles and miles away. A place where some of the people still dwell, a place that just a little while ago was the framework for their lives and faith and family and now they live in another land with a strange language, and strange customs and foods and religion and it's just not home.

The immensity of the pain of exile leads to hatred and a craving for revenge - "Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Blessed shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" A scripture that expresses the depth of their pain

and reminds we who live in the Judeo-Christian tradition that our Holy Book is full of examples of humanness and even examples that suggest violence as a solution to problems.

So as we try to understand the exile and the feelings it stirs, we must ask ourselves have we every experienced this kind of pain in this nation? Some have - any who were forced here in chains to never see their home or families again. The Jewish community, who ever since the Diaspora of 70 AD when the Temple was destroyed again suffered forced relocations for centuries Over 6 million of whom experienced torture and murder in Germany in WW2. The Jewish People continue to know the pain of Exile. The African-American culture, which started in slavery - a full exile from their homeland and family and was kept in a kind of exile as second class citizens for over a century after slavery ended, understands exile - even exile in your own land of birth. Many of the Irish immigrants to this land who were forced here by the famine understand this, though their 25,000 cousins who were forced to sail to Australia in chains - many for minor criminal offenses, to work in the King's plantations there perhaps would know it more deeply. And that may be where we can draw a line between the pain of exile and that of deep grieving for home.

Many of us can easily trace our lineage to those who immigrated here from Europe. Some of us are those people for our families. But as someone who went and found my Grandfather's birth recorded in a book in a small city in Belgium, I realize that my family did not know exile, because there was choice involved. It may have been a hard choice, but the ability to set out for a place as a new home is very different from being forcibly ripped from your home and denied the means to return.

Why do I make the distinction, because I think it informs our current cultural debates. How many of us here celebrate St. Patrick's Day somehow?. We enjoy festivals of European ancestry even in Churches. We all love to go to the Greek Festival and get Baklava, but there is no Africa celebration embraced by this nation. Isn't that interesting. Those forced out of Africa are still being kept out of the fullness of what it means to be an American in some places in this country. Their exile continues as we consider the percentage of African American men in prison, many for minor offenses and the on-going shooting of African American men in

disproportionate numbers by law enforcement. Is it really surprising there is a movement called Black Lives Matter today?

The Syrian Refugees of our world are also in exile. We see on the news their cities turned to rubble. We see their babies drowned on the beach of Europe, and yet many in our nation view them as opportunist who just want to take things away from us. It is hard for me to imagine anyone who has experienced exile being able to vilify these victims of political and greed driven violence. Refugees suffer unimaginably and our rejection of them makes me wonder if we as a nation are able to keep the Statue of Liberty uncovered? Especially when we consider the poem by Ezra Pound that is at its base:

The New Colossus

***Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"***

The one who sets this table was an exile. Rejected by his own Temple leaders, ignored by the Roman conquerors, he was exiled in his own land. Having come from the heart of God, he finds himself in the realm of humanity, and here, exiled from the place of peace and justice and love, he cries in the wilderness of human ambition and sin - begging for love of God, Neighbor and self. And here at this table he decides the only way to get the message across is to send himself into the self-exile of death itself.

Lamentations 1:1-6

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.

She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with
her, they have become her enemies.

Judah has gone into exile with suffering
and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting-place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.

Her foes have become the masters,
her enemies prosper,
because the Lord has made her suffer
for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.

From daughter Zion has departed
all her majesty.
Her princes have become like stags
that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.

Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon--
there we sat down
and we wept when we remembered Zion.

And so we hung up our harps,
there upon the willows.

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 God'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.

Remember, O God, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down!
Tear it down down to its foundations!"

O city of Babylon,
you devastator!

Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little
ones and dash them against the rock!