



STRANGERS

in a strange land

2019 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

STRANGERS ⁱⁿ a STRANGE LAND:

The Church in an Age of Exile

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INTRODUCTION

HOME, AND BACK AGAIN

Think fast! In a few words, how would you summarize the Bible's key motifs? What essential themes or concepts come to mind? We can tick off some obvious ones: God, Jesus, Salvation. But what about these words: People, Place, Presence.

People, Place and Presence are three of the most important threads woven throughout the tapestry of Scripture. The Bible tells of a loving and powerful God who created a People to be His people. He promised to love these People and be faithful to them. They fill the pages of Scripture: Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Moses, Ruth, David, Bathsheba, Mary, Joseph, Peter, Paul ... the list goes on and on, and amazingly, it even includes you and me! Along with the Israelites of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament, we, through Christ by the Spirit's power, are included in God's family. We are God's People!

God didn't only create a People to be His people. He also created a Place for His People to live. This Place was a lush garden called Eden, God's dwelling with His People. But all was not perfect in paradise, for heartbreaking tragedy unfolded in Eden. The People turned away from God, and our first parents were banished from the garden, never to return to the original home God created for them. But God did not abandon the People He loves! Instead He embarked on the grandest, most harrowing rescue mission the world has ever known: to re-establish a People to dwell with God in His Place. After many years, God designated a new home in which His re-established People would live: Canaan, the Promised Land. As the People settled into their new home, the Place of God's dwelling shifted along with them from the garden to the city. In Jerusalem, Canaan's capital, God's presence rested in the temple. The temple in Jerusalem became God's home with His people. But Jerusalem is not only significant historically; it is also a symbol or metaphor for the permanent Place God intends for His People as envisioned in Isaiah, Ezekiel and Revelation. In Revelation, the New Jerusalem (also called the Holy City) is established on earth as the permanent home of God and all

the tribes, people and nations that take up residence there. From the garden of Genesis, to Jerusalem in the Promised Land, and finally to the New Jerusalem described in Revelation, God always intends a Place or a home for His people.

God created a People to be His people, to live in the Place He created for them so that they could dwell in God's Presence. The purpose of the People and the Place is for the sake of Presence: so that God can live in community with those He loves. In the garden, God walked amongst the first people in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8). God was *with* them. In Jerusalem, God's presence rested on the ark of the covenant in the temple, which was considered the home of God (1 Kings 8:1-11). In other words, in the Jerusalem temple, God's Presence was *with* His people. And in the Holy City, God's dwelling place will be among the people, and God Himself will *dwell with them* (Revelation 2:1-5, 22-23).

In all of this we see the aim or the *telos* of creation: to be a home in which God's People dwell in God's Presence. From the very beginning, that has been God's intention and desire. And it continues to be the end, the *telos*, toward which God is working through Christ. Through Christ, God is restoring the world once again to be the Place in which His Presence dwells directly with the People He loves.

In this season of Lent, we will focus particularly on the second of the three concepts, Place. We've traced the basic contours of the Places God designed as a home for His people: the original garden home, Eden; the home in the Promised Land, Jerusalem; and the final home in the restored Holy City. But what happens in between?

Exile is the biblical word that describes God's people's displacement from the home God designs for them. Exile is the theme of our Lenten sermon series. We will follow Israel's journey from home to displacement and back again, and will locate our own experiences within Israel's experience. We will explore together what it means for the American church to exist in an age of exile. Let us invite the Holy Spirit to guide us toward our home in God's Presence, and along the way, refine us as faithful followers of Christ.

Rev. Heather Thomsen Tang
Rev. Amy Carlan

HOSPITALITY

“What a beautiful table you have spread - you must have the gift of hospitality!” Often, we use the word hospitality as a way to describe people who have a knack for entertaining and remembering all the nice details. True hospitality though, doesn’t have much to do with the details of throwing a party (or a party at all for that matter). Rather, hospitality is about inviting people into our lives. It’s about giving people who are outside a seat on the inside. It’s about creating a space at the table so that another may join their voice and heart in our community. We seek to be hospitable because God has been hospitable to us. God has invited us to be in His Presence - to join together in the life God shares as Father, Son, and Spirit. God is inviting us to His Place - His Kingdom of love and justice. In many ways, hospitality can be understood as the opposite of exile: instead of displacement, it is inviting people into a place of love and community.

Each week in Lent, there will be suggested hospitality practices. They are as the name implies, simply suggestions. You may find that one of the practices “sticks.” If so, concentrate on that practice for the season. It may be that the Lord brings to your mind a different way to practice hospitality altogether. If so, wonderful! However you do it, seek to invite others to the table - literally and figuratively - this Lent.

LIVING IN EXILE

WEEK 1

SUNDAY, MARCH 10

JEREMIAH 25:1-11

The word came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. So Jeremiah the prophet said to all the people of Judah and to all those living in Jerusalem: For twenty-three years—from the thirteenth year of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah until this very day—the word of the Lord has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened.

And though the Lord has sent all his servants the prophets to you again and again, you have not listened or paid any attention. They said, “Turn now, each of you, from your evil ways and your evil practices, and you can stay in the land the Lord gave to you and your ancestors for ever and ever. Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them; do not arouse my anger with what your hands have made. Then I will not harm you.”

“But you did not listen to me,” declares the Lord, “and you have aroused my anger with what your hands have made, and you have brought harm to yourselves.”

Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: “Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,” declares the Lord, “and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

WEEK 1

REFLECTION

“How we live is shaped by where we live.”¹

Consider that statement for a minute. Think of the places in which you have lived: the city or towns, the type of communities, the resources available, the people surrounding you, even the weather. How has the *where* shaped the *how* in your experience?

There have been a number of instances in my past when I have learned that where I live influences how I live, not the least of which was moving from the West coast to the South. Leaving family and the familiar behind, I traveled 3000 miles to what felt sometimes like a new land. While I walked into a community ready to welcome me, it was nonetheless disorienting to leave behind those who knew me deeply. Learning new customs and language was also a jolting experience. I remember well when I discovered, first-hand, that the phrase “casual dress” does not mean the same thing in the West as in the South. While I went to the party in cut-off jeans, everyone else was in a dress! The patterns here are different than in the West. As a consequence, I dress differently now than I once did. It’s a small example, but the point is that *where* I live shapes *how* I live.

At various points in history, God’s people found themselves living in exile. Banished from the Garden, the epicenter of God’s Presence, our first ancestors wandered away from the life to which God called them and wandered instead toward greed and corruption. Hundreds of years later, freed from slavery in Egypt, God promised His people the Israelites a land in which they could flourish. But the people balked at dangers that lie outside of captivity, and so God plunged them into exile: 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Centuries later, after settling in the Promised Land, the people found themselves in exile again. More concerned with their comfort than with following God’s ways of justice and mercy, God gave them over to the Babylonians. The Babylonians physically took them from their homes and held them captive in a foreign land. Exile once again.

¹ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship*

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In many ways, exile means *not having a place*. It is to be displaced, forced out of your land and your home to a place you do not want to be. It is to be stripped of the familiar and the comfortable, and for the former patterns and values of life to be questioned by a new set of patterns and values. For God's people, exile proved to be a time of immense difficulty, but also an opportunity to be shaped. Israel was forcibly given the opportunity to consider who they were when everything that had been a marker of their uniqueness and their covenantal identity with God was gone. It is as if the Lord asked them, "Who are you going to trust when all the familiar cornerstones of your hope and your identity have been stripped away? Will you come back to me and live in the way I desire you to live?"

What if God's people still lived in exile? In many ways, the metaphor of living in exile applies to the church today. On one level, we see it in the cultural changes around us. In our not-so-distant past, Christianity "fit" into our culture with ease. The church enjoyed cultural prominence and held a position of influence. That landscape has changed dramatically. No longer are we viewed as influencers, but as those to whom a deaf ear should be turned. Many of the cultural patterns and values of our country, and even our region in the Southeast, are different than the Kingdom's patterns and values. We are feeling the displacement of that widening gap. Here's the question, though: could this be an opportunity, as it was for the Israelites, to be shaped by the Lord? Could this be a time in which the Lord is asking us: "Have you loved your influence more than you have loved Me? Who are you going to trust when all the cornerstones of your hope and your identity have been stripped away? Will you come back to me and live in the way I desire you to live?"

Perhaps exile is a gift to help us lift our eyes above our cultural moment and to realize that God's people are always in exile, and never fully at home in the present. To be a part of God's Kingdom - His holy nation, His people set apart - is to always be displaced in our current world. As we live not by cultural patterns but instead by God's values and patterns, we anticipate the day His Kingdom is fulfilled, when the earth is recreated to be a Place in which we - God's People - live once again in God's Presence.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *How has **where** you live, shaped **how** you live?*
- *Have you ever been, or felt, displaced and unsettled, as if you were wandering to find home?*
- *What do you think about the idea of using exile as a metaphor for the church today? In what ways is the American church, or even First Pres, experiencing exile? Are there ways we can embrace that experience as an opportunity from the Lord?*
- *What are your desires for this Lenten season of preparation and examination?*

PRACTICE HOSPITALITY

Despite our growing exile, many of us still have influence in various areas of our lives because of our vocations, our positions, our socio-economic level, or our connections. But there are multitudes of people in our community who are not given a place at the table; who live in exile because they do not have the same positions or influence. Take time this week to reflect:

- *What influences do I have because of my gender, my degree, my family, my job, my ethnicity, or other factor(s)?*
- *In what ways have others been denied this influence due to those same factors, or lack thereof?*
- *In what ways can I use my influence and privileges to give people who are not currently at the table a place at the table, even if it requires sacrifice?*

The Lectio Visio for Week 1 is at the end of the readings for this week.

WEEK 1

MONDAY, MARCH 11

PART I: Selections from GENESIS 2, 3:8

Eden was the home God designed for His people to dwell freely with Him. Eden was God's dwelling place. Consider some of the qualities of this original home God designed for His people. What was unique about the relationship between God and the first people in the beginning? What was unique about the place itself?

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed to work it and take care of it. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the Lord God commanded the man,

“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” And the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day ...

PART II: GENESIS 3:21-24

Humanity's first exile was from Eden, the dwelling place of God's Presence. When Adam and Eve were banished from the garden, they were driven away from the Presence of their God, their Creator, their Sovereign. From that point forward, God's people have lived in exile from God's Place and God's Presence. From the moment we were evicted from Eden, humanity has longed to return home to the Place of intimate dwelling in God's Presence.

The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the Lord God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the Lord God banished them from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which they had been taken. After he drove them out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

WEEK 1

TUESDAY, MARCH 12

GENESIS 12:1-4

Today's text reveals one of God's first interactions after the exile from Eden to re-establish both a People and a Place. He calls Abram and Sarai to be the parents of many descendants (the People) who will claim YHWH as their God. And He directs the nomadic family to settle in Canaan, which will later be described as the Promised Land (the Place).

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;

I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13

These passages summarize the beginning and ending of Israel's enslavement in Egypt. The 40 year wilderness wandering that followed their rescue from Egypt is the second experience of exile for God's people.

PART I: EXODUS 1:1-11

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join

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our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor.

PART II: EXODUS 13:17-18

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea.

REFLECTION

Exodus 13:17 is one of those lines I’d be tempted to read over and not think about. But if you pause on it, it’s revealing. God knew that the Israelites would be tempted to go back to Egypt. They’d been slaves in Egypt, oppressed and downtrodden ... and yet, they would have wanted to go back. Later in the narrative, they actually voice that desire. Why? Because it was what they knew. How often do we long to stay in the familiar even if it’s not God’s best for us? This is one reason exile can be God’s gift of transformation, so that we can be weaned from a life of being enslaved to what is not of God. Are there “Egypty” in your life to which you cling? Something that’s familiar but not God’s best for you? Open yourself to the Lord’s leading to show you a different path toward transformation.

THURSDAY, MARCH 14

PART I: DEUTERONOMY 11:8-12

This passage is one of many that describes the home God gives His people in the land of Canaan. The condition the Lord provides for Israel to thrive in this new home is similar to the Eden edict: to honor God’s commands by believing that God alone is God, and honoring Him as such.

Observe, therefore, all the commands I am giving you today, so that you may have the strength to go in and take over the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, and so that you may live long in the land the Lord swore to your ancestors

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to give to them and their descendants, a land flowing with milk and honey. The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.

PART II: JEREMIAH 2:4-7

How quickly God's people forget His goodness and become discontent with the abundance God provides! The prophet Jeremiah recalls that soon after settling in the Promised Land, the people turned away from God and embraced the cheap allures of Canaan's deities. The resulting destruction of Jerusalem and 70-year captivity in Babylon, God's punishment upon His people and means of cleansing the land of Israel's defilement, created the third experience of exile.

*Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob,
and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the Lord:*

"What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

"They did not say, 'Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?'

"I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination."

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FRIDAY, MARCH 15

Selections from **EZEKIEL 36**

Into the Babylonian exile, which resulted from Israel's defilement of the home God gave them and from hardening their hearts against God, the prophet Ezekiel speaks this word of hope for restoration to God's Place and God's Presence.

Again the word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols. I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries.

"Therefore say to the Israelites, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it."

They will say, "This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited."

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SATURDAY, MARCH 16

REVELATION 21:1-3, 22:1-5

Revelation envisions the permanent Place God intends for His People to dwell in His Presence. This place is the New Jerusalem, the Holy City of God's restored creation. The Holy City is marked by a brightly flowing river and the abundantly-fruitful tree of life. Sound familiar? The New Jerusalem sounds remarkably similar to the garden in Genesis. Like Eden, our first home, the thing that distinguishes the Holy City as God's Place is not what's inside its walls, but rather the fullness of God's Presence dwelling there. It is the Presence of God that makes the Place "home." God's first intention for creation is also His final intention for creation: to live forever in unity with the People God loves.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among the people. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them."

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

WEEK 1

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *Why does John the Revelator mention that there is no temple in the New Jerusalem? For the Israelites, what was so critically important about the temple? What did it represent? (see Exodus 25:22, 1 Kings 8:1-11) What does the absence of the temple in God's restored creation mean?*
- *Why might the garden of Eden in Genesis and the Holy City in Revelation be marked by the same things: flowing rivers and the fruitful tree of life?*
- *What does it mean for God to be our home? What did this mean for the people of Israel, when you consider their history of displacement? What does this mean for you?*
- *Heaven simply refers to the home of God. The narrative of Scripture makes very clear that heaven is not some ethereal place floating in the clouds; instead, it is God's home. And from the beginning of the Bible to its very end, we see that God has always intended to dwell amongst His people in the home He created for them: earth! God's promise in Revelation to make all things new doesn't just apply to our souls. It applies to every aspect of His creation, including the physical earth!
*How does this understanding of heaven (as God's home amongst His people, on earth!) change the way you think about heaven? What implications might it have for the way you live on earth?**

WEEK 1

LIVING IN EXILE | LECTIO VISIO

The Garden of Exile is located outside of the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Forty-nine concrete towers are laid out in a 7 by 7 square on slanting ground. Olive bushes grow out of the top of each. The slanting ground of the Garden of Exile gives visitors a dizzying feeling of disorientation. Imagine what it might be like to walk through these tall structures, unsure of your footing, without level ground on which to stand. So it feels to live in exile. And yet, always in sight is the Garden, reminding us both to seek God's shalom in the place in which we are planted and to look forward to God's restoration of the Garden that lies in the middle of New Jerusalem.



FLOURISHING IN EXILE

WEEK 2

SUNDAY, MARCH 17

JEREMIAH 29:1, 4-14

This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. It said: This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.

This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

WEEK 2

REFLECTION

Flight or fight....the two reactions to perceived danger and stress. If you had been a citizen of Jerusalem, forcibly dragged to Babylon, which would have been your reaction? Wishing desperately for escape or putting on boxing gloves for a match are both “natural” reactions when we live separated from God’s presence. And yet, God tells the Israelites in Babylon to choose a third way. Instead of escape, God asks them to engage and fully live: marry, have babies, plant gardens! Instead of putting on the boxing gloves to fight against their captors, God tells them to seek the peace and prosperity of the city and its people. Remember, the Babylonians sacked their country, killed their friends and family, and forcibly brought them to a place they didn’t want to be. But instead of flight or fight, God says bless your enemies!

How often do we react to our culture through the flight or fight filter? Some believers just want to escape. They desperately want things to be the way they used to be, and since our world seems to have changed irreversibly, they bury their heads in the sand. These people wait for the “someday” of God’s fulfilled Kingdom and so fail to live fully in the present as a blessing. Other believers put on the boxing gloves, and fight for the influence and power they once believed they had. These people tie the center of their hope to cultural influence or power instead of the Lord. They use the world’s standards of engagement, and therefore justify slander, maligning, and grasping for power. In so doing they undermine the very ways Jesus calls us to live, the ways of self-giving and love. Can we hear God speaking something different to us? Instead of escape, God calls us to embrace where we are and engage our culture. Instead of battling, God calls us to view exile as a gift and seek to bless our community and its people.

In what ways might the Lord be calling you to seek the peace - the wellbeing and wholeness - of the communities of which you are a part? Your school, your workplace, your neighborhood, greater Winston Salem? What is aching and broken in your community that longs for God’s mercy and wholeness?

WEEK 2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *What does God say He will do through the exile? What promises are made to those in exile?*
- *Verse 11 is often taken out of context and applied to individuals. While it may be true that God has plans for our individual lives, how does the context change, or give weight, to this well-known verse? How can someone in an oppressive context interpret God’s promise of a “future with hope”?*
- *God is asking the Israelites to bless people who did harm to them, and whose values are vastly different than theirs. How does this affect your understanding of what it means to seek the peace and prosperity of the city? For you, what positive investment might this mean in your own community?*
- *In what ways does our community long for wholeness? How can we be a part of this good work?*

LECTIO VISIO

What about this painting evokes “flourishing” for you? Perhaps the lush greenery, the light glinting on the meadows, the contented workers laboring in fruitful surroundings, or the sparkling rainbow that symbolizes hope. Does this painting capture or represent any glimmers or aspects of flourishing in your own life?



Rainbow Landscape by Peter Paul Rubens

WEEK 2

PRACTICE HOSPITALITY

When we invite people into our homes, we often make sure that the temperature is comfortable, that we have food and drink to offer, and that we share a warm and enthusiastic welcome. Jeremiah 29 encourages us to extend these basic needs of hospitable care to the people in our city who lack it. One way we have been doing this as a congregation these last months is through hosting an overflow homeless shelter and the central check-in site for all the overflow shelters. If you haven't been involved already, consider jumping in these last weeks of the shelter. If you already have, is God tugging you to sign up another time? Regardless of whether or not you are able to volunteer, consider this: do the men and women, despite any difficulty they may bring with them, feel welcomed in this place? As you see them, either in the parking lot as you walk by or in the Fellowship Hall as you volunteer, do you share a warm welcome? Take a moment to pray for our guests, and for the Lord's peace to flourish in them, in us, and in our city.

MONDAY, MARCH 18

PSALM 137

Psalm 137 is a lament, alerting us to injustice and depth of emotion that the Israelites felt at the hand of the Babylonians. This is the context into which God says, "seek the peace and prosperity of the city."

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

There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell.

"Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!"

Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you

WEEK 2

according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

REFLECTION

Professor and scholar Terry McGonigal makes an interesting connection between Jeremiah 29 and Psalm 137. He notes that Psalm 137 is how the people want to seek justice - through vengeance. God, however, in words recorded in Jeremiah 29, asks them to seek His justice. In McGonigal's summary, God says: "I want you to plant... I want you to seek the shalom of Babylon and pray to me, your God, for Babylon. Why? Because in Babylon's shalom you will find your shalom, God tells His people. You will start to live a different way in Babylon." ² Terry McGonigal notes that 600 years after this, when the Romans came in and destroyed Jerusalem, most of the Jews fled to Babylon because there was a thriving Jewish community there. Seeking shalom in Babylon in the exile had a ripple effect 600 years later.

TUESDAY, MARCH 19

GENESIS 1:26-30

Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth."

So God created humanity in God's own image,

in the divine image God created them,

male and female God created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and steward it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground." Then God said, "I now give to you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds and all the trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it.

These will be your food. To all wildlife, to all the birds in the sky, and to everything crawling on the ground—to everything that breathes—I give all the green grasses for food." And that's what happened.

² A Vision of Biblical Justice, vimeo.com/293749950

WEEK 2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The creation account provides the first biblical blueprint for human flourishing. The vocation God gives our ancestors is two-fold: 1) to fruitfully fill the earth, not just with people but with the stuff of human culture, and 2) to care for the earth as its stewards. *According to this vocational blueprint, how would you describe human flourishing?*
- *Does their vocation become irrelevant when Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden? How does the Bible's earliest stories flesh out the first humans' fulfillment of their vocation, even outside the garden?*
- *In what ways are you flourishing? How are you contributing to the flourishing of your society, even if that society - like Babylon - seems unfamiliar or foreign, or you feel uncomfortable in it?*

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20

MATTHEW 5:38-48

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

WEEK 2

PRAYER

O Lord, I confess that my fallen state distorts and damages me at each level. And yet I long to participate in a flourishing world that is marked by Your shalom -- by Your peace, justice and wholeness. Make Your home in me and let me find my home in You, so that I may freely seek the flourishing of the community where you have sent me to live. Amen.

Bobby Gross

THURSDAY, MARCH 21

ISAIAH 32:14-20

Keeping in mind what you have learned about Israel's experience of exile, and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, what might the context of this passage be? What type of message might Isaiah have intended God's people to hear, given their circumstances? Why did he use this particular imagery? Open yourself to receive what God may be speaking to you or to our church community through Isaiah's vision of flourishing.

The fortress will be abandoned, the noisy city deserted; citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland forever, the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks, till the Spirit is poured on us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest.

The Lord's justice will dwell in the desert, his righteousness will live in the fertile field. The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever.

My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest.

Though hail flattens the forest and the city is leveled completely, how blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream, and letting your cattle and donkeys range free.

WEEK 2

PRAYER

Lord God, Alpha and Omega, let Your kingdom -- Your shalom, Your pattern for flourishing -- come on earth as it already is in Your home, heaven. Let Your kingdom come as it will in the New Jerusalem of Your restored creation, when You will make Your home among us. Let Your kingdom come. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 22

JOHN 10:7-11

Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *What does Jesus mean in saying that He came to give fullness of life to His "sheep" (i.e. His people)? How does the contrast between the thief and the shepherd illumine what is meant by fullness of life?*
- *How does one receive this abundant life?*
- *How are you currently living into, or perhaps not living into, the fullness of life Jesus offers?*

WEEK 2

SATURDAY, MARCH 23

PSALM 1:1-3 (The Message)

*How well God must like you—
you don't hang out at Sin Saloon,
you don't slink along Dead-End Road,
you don't go to Smart-Mouth College.
Instead you thrill to God's Word,
you chew on Scripture day and night.
You're a tree replanted in Eden,
bearing fresh fruit every month,
Never dropping a leaf,
always in blossom.*



White Clematis, 1887, Claude Monet

Monet's painting is a vision of flourishing, almost too vast for the artist's encompassing. The dazzling white flowers, with the gleam of lemon yellow at the heart, spill out beyond the artist's canvas. Not even the largest canvas, it seems, could capture the abundance of color and beauty Monet experienced in these flowers.

WORSHIP IN EXILE

WEEK 3

SUNDAY, MARCH 24

JEREMIAH 2:1-7

The word of the Lord came to me: “Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: “This is what the Lord says:

“I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown.

Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them,” declares the Lord.

Hear the word of the Lord, you descendants of Jacob, all you families of Israel.

This is what the Lord says:

“What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.”

REFLECTION

Can you think of a time when your zeal for God ebbed away? Perhaps this dry season caused you to feel far from God, or spiritually empty. Or, perhaps it even caused you to turn away from God toward the charms of lesser loves. If you've been swept into the metaphorical arms of something or someone undeserving of the fullness of your adoration, you are not alone.

In Jeremiah 2, the prophet recalls Israel's history in Canaan. After only a short season of dwelling in the abundant land of promise, Israel's love for God turned cold. She wrapped her arms around the false gods of Canaan. *Remember those days, God asks His people, when your love for me was pure and your commitment steady?* In referring to Israel's devotion, love, and holiness, Jeremiah is talking about Israel's worship. But her days of faithful worship are long gone, Jeremiah and other prophets say. As James K.A. Smith writes, love and worship are inextricably intertwined, for we worship what we love.³ Thus, Israel's adulterous

³ James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*
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love affair with the Canaanite gods caused her to become unfaithful in her love and worship of the one true God.

Jeremiah identifies not only the season of Israel's infidelity, but also the season of her faithfulness. "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown." It was early in the 40 years of wilderness exile that Israel was identified and claimed by God, like an infant at birth named by her parents. The wilderness is considered the "youth" of Israel's life, for there she was fresh and young in her identity as the royal priesthood and holy people of God.

Jeremiah's statement is intriguing because it was in a season of exile that Israel's worship was most faithful. How unexpected! When the people were unsettled, displaced, when they had no permanent sanctuary, no familiar cornerstones by which to mark themselves, no permanent means of practicing rituals and making offerings, it was then Israel's love for God was most pure and most devoted. In contrast, it was when they were settled, marked by cultural prominence and abundant blessings, that they became discontent and self-indulging. Why might that be? A "settled" spirituality, Jeremiah seems to say, is a dangerous spirituality.

If Israel became unfaithful in her worship, we need to ask, what is faithful worship, according to the biblical worldview? To love and worship God faithfully means living in a way that focuses on the things that matter to God. We worship God (i.e. reflect the worthiness of God) "in how we love and serve whoever and whatever God considers to be of worth."⁴ Both Old and New Testaments make abundantly clear that one of the most critical things God considers "of worth" is not moral purity; it's not a heart on fire for God; it's not even abiding by the Ten Commandments. It is love of neighbor -- especially the neighbor who is poor and unable to care for herself, the neighbor who suffers. (*Sound foreign? I encourage you to read through Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Matthew, Luke, and Acts and note the number of references to caring for the poor, and how critical this action is to the identity and worship of God's people.*) Israel, swept up in her own desires, lost

⁴ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship*

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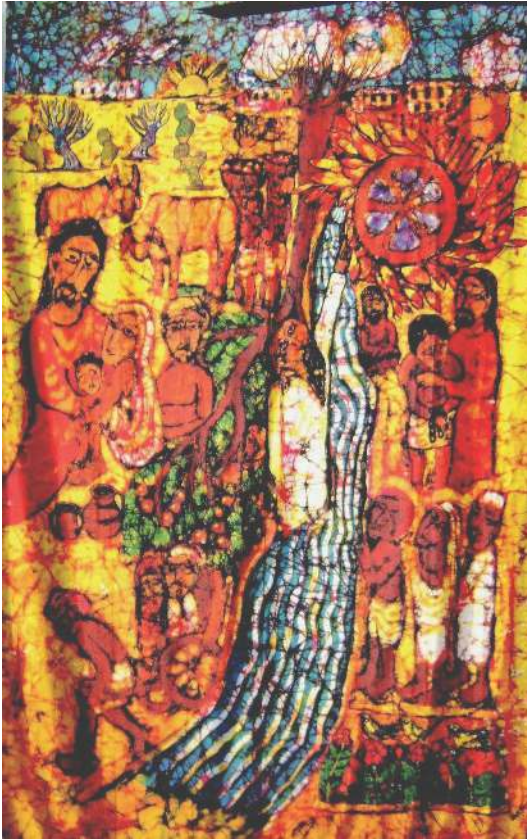
sight of God; but she also lost sight of neighbor. God's people's inattentiveness to orphan, widow and stranger in their midst is the second reason judgment falls upon them (see Isaiah 58 and Amos 5:21-27). And their love of neighbor is intimately connected to their love of God. In other words, it's connected to their faithful worship.

If the American church broadly, and our local congregation here in Winston Salem, is indeed living in an age of exile, let us embrace the opportunity for our worship to become more faithful, as Israel's was in the wilderness. Let us embrace this unfamiliar, uncomfortable territory as a means for our devotion to be reoriented. May Jeremiah's words be an invitation for God to refine our love for Him and for others, that we may worship in the way God has called us to worship: focused first on loving Him, and also on loving others.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Examine the seasons of your own life (physically, emotionally or spiritually) that have felt like a wilderness, or have been uncomfortable or unfamiliar. *How would you describe your love for God and others in those seasons?*
- *Answer honestly: how do you define and understand worship? Does it align with the biblical vision presented by the prophets, and later by Jesus? Who is your worship for? Who is it about? What is its focus?*
- *What invitation to refinement might the Spirit be offering you in your practice of worship and your love of God and neighbor?*

LECTIO VISIO



Thirst for Justice, 2001, P. Solomon Raj

Reflection by Jojanneke Dekker:

The main colours in this batik are yellow and orange. The contrast between the blue of the river in the middle and the dry and needy ground around it underscores the dryness of the land. In dry desert areas water is desperately needed. The thirst for water in these barren places is equivalent to the cry for justice of people in desperate situations...At the top of the batik we see factories, smoke and dying trees. Scenes particular to the situation in India are on the left:

WEEK 3

cattle and two women carrying loads, Jesus taking care of a refugee family and a man pulling a rickshaw. On the right Jesus is taking care of a prisoner whom he frees from his chains. At the bottom people are looking up, expectant and praying for the kingdom of God to come. Below their feet some flowers and birds imply that creation is also awaiting God's kingdom. At the top on the right the hand of God is coming out of a cloud, pointing to a fiery wheel which symbolizes that God's justice is coming. In the middle of the picture a river runs from the top to the bottom. This is the water of life, a life-giving stream. In the water we see a man pointing to the fiery wheel. This is a prophet who draws people's attention to God's judgment. In the middle we see a reversed tree symbolizing that truth is like an upside down tree, with its roots in heaven and its fruit on the earth. For the artist, this stands for the life of a Christian which is rooted in God and bears fruit in the world.

PRACTICE HOSPITALITY

Spontaneously invite someone to a meal at your home. Maybe it's inviting someone or a family that you meet at church over to your house for lunch after worship. Maybe it's asking your neighbors over when you see them out in the yard or on a walk. The point is that it's not overly planned. When we don't have too much time to plan our focus remains on the person, and not how clean our house is, how elaborate the food is, or how we are perceived by the other. The spontaneous nature reminds us that hospitality, like worship, is not about us, but is focused on the Lord and our neighbor.

MONDAY, MARCH 25

MARK 12:29-31

"The most important commandment," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."

WEEK 3

PRAYER

The Confessions, X.38

*Late have I loved you,
beauty so old and so new,
late have I loved you.*

*And see, you were within,
and I was in the external world and sought you there,
and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely things
which you made.*

You were with me, and I was not with you.

*The lovely things kept me far from you,
though if they did not have their existence in you
they had no existence at all.*

You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness.

You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness.

You were fragrant,

and I drew my breath and now pant after you.

I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you.

You touched me,

and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.

by Augustine of Hippo, translated by Henry Chadwick

TUESDAY, MARCH 26

AMOS 5:21-27

"I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.

Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

The Amos 5 scripture reading is continued on page 31

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Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?

You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god— which you made for yourselves.

Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,” says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty.

REFLECTION

The people of God think their worship is of critical importance, and for good reason! God laid out incredibly detailed, and incredibly abundant, instructions for how Israel was to worship. A good chunk of Exodus and most of Leviticus detail these instructions. Our primary text this week from Jeremiah is about Israel’s worship. Yet here in Amos, God says He hates their religious practices and offerings -- things God Himself asked His people to do! Why? “Amos reminds Israel that at the beginning of their story as YHWH’s people, when they were still on their way to a settled life, they had no permanent sanctuary where the priests could make offerings and sing praise morning and evening. The relationship between YHWH and the people can survive the absence of singing and offerings.”⁵ What it cannot survive is the absence of love of neighbor and the lifestyle of justice to which Israel was called as an enactment of their love for God.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27

1 JOHN 4:20-21

Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

⁵ John Goldingay, *Amos: Daniel and the 12 Prophets, For Everyone*

WEEK 3

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Hate and love are strong words. *Is there anyone in your life you actually hate? Hate can be abstract, and even removed or sanitized from our self-awareness. But what might the writer of 1 John be getting in saying anyone who hates a brother or sister lies if they claim to love God?*
- *What do you think it means to love brother and sister? How does the big story of Scripture articulate what this sort of love looks like? Does your understanding align with the biblical worldview?*
- *Do you sense the Lord tugging at your heart or mind to more deeply embrace His pattern of love toward another person? What practical steps can you take toward that?*

THURSDAY, MARCH 28

ISAIAH 40:21-23, 28

Isaiah longs for God's people's understanding of God to expand to who God really is. Isaiah wants to help recalibrate Israel's life in light of the God they worship and serve. Is your own worship about this God and for this God? Or is your vision of God small, rather than stretched to the heights and magnificence that God deserves?

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

WEEK 3

PRAYER

You, O Lord, are a great God, a great King above all gods. In Your hands are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are Yours; the sea is Yours, for You made it, and the dry land, which Your hands have formed. Today I bow down and worship You. I kneel before You and You alone, for You are my maker. You are my God and I am one of Your people. My true home is with You. Have mercy on me, Lord. How easy it is to disregard Your deep affection for me, and the ways You call to me live. Have mercy. Amen.

Bobby Gross

FRIDAY, MARCH 29

JOHN 21:15-17

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter,

“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?”

He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

WEEK 3

THE RETURNS OF LOVE - AFTER GEORGE HERBERT

Luci Shaw

*There is such generosity in love it will not fit
Within a modest box with corners and a key.
But what if I offer more than I receive? If
My love's largesse, though open, unencumbered, free,
And furnished without stint to all my friends and foes,
Vanishes in the void, is spent, and lost to me?*

*Then I remember--love, not cramped in where it goes,
May be reversed, enlarged by love's complicity,
Its give and take. The sumptuous fragrance of a rose
Accepts no close confinement or captivity.
The tide that outward ebbs, turns then and inward flows,
And what I offer you, you'll multiply to me.*

SATURDAY, MARCH 30

ISAIAH 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has

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touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

PRAYER

Holy One, earth and heaven reverberate with Your glory. Humans and angels alike sing Your praises. And though our lips are not clean and our hearts are not pure, You call us. Forgive our anemic love, our self-centered worship, our negligence of neighbor. Forgive us when our lives do not reflect Your glory and the purposes You intend. Help us to comprehend who You are calling us to be in the world, in this time, in this place. O God, we worship You! Amen.

THE POSTURES OF EXILE

WEEK 4

SUNDAY, MARCH 31

ACTS 1:1-11

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to

restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.

“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

REFLECTION

It's such a curious question the disciples ask: “Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” They'd spent day after day with Jesus, saw Him resurrected even, and still His purpose eluded them. They thought Jesus' mission was about bringing glory, power and influence to Israel. Jesus' response is telling. He doesn't

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berate them, but refocuses them on what is important: “it’s not for you to know timing. Your task is not to worry about your glory, power, or influence but instead to be my witnesses to *everyone*.”

On second thought, maybe the disciples question isn’t such a curious one. I think the church today often asks this same question, though perhaps couched in different words. In the face of our exile, we ask “how can the church have influence again? How can we regain our former cultural glory?” At times, we don’t ask this with our words, but in our actions, posturing ourselves as if we are fighting the cultural tide for influence. But influence, power, and glory are not what the Lord has asked us to seek. The Lord has given us a task: to be witnesses to everyone. And the way in which we witness is not to fight, but to love, to serve, and to make disciples who will then make disciples.

Jesus has given us an immense task, but He hasn’t asked us to do it on our own, or in our own power: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” God is the One who, through the presence of the Spirit, gives us the will and ability to be His witnesses as we serve, love and share the Good News. Our posture in exile, then, should not be one of striving or fighting, but of radical humility, relying on the Spirit to guide us, fill us, and work through us. Will we trust the Lord enough, in exile, to posture our lives on His real presence? To rely solely on His work in us and through us?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *In what ways have you seen Christians take on a defensive posture with culture, or are preoccupied with the question of who has influence, power, and glory? What are the results of such a posture?*
- *In what ways did Jesus engage with His culture? (e.g. Philippians 2:5-11)*
- *In what ways have you seen Christians take on a posture of humility and dependence on the Spirit? What are the results of such a posture?*
- *What are practical ways we can rely on the Spirit, as individuals? As a congregation?*

LECTIO VISIO



Liturgies of Labor and Vocation, Ned Bustard

Notice who is washing the floor. It's a modern-day expression of Jesus washing the disciples feet. In what ways can we emulate the Savior's posture: not grasping for influence, but bent over in humility to serve?

PRACTICE HOSPITALITY

I've seen this happen time and again, including in my own life: we pretend to have everything under control. We imagine, hope, or act like we don't really need help. There are many reasons why we do this, but I wonder if one of the reasons

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is that our human bent is to seek control, influence, and glory. When we admit our weakness and need, we fear that we will lose control, respect, or status. And so, we often shut people out and don't invite them into our real lives, as true hospitality does. But the Lord is asking us, in our exile, to be dependent on the Spirit, to be humble and open. As a way to practice openness and humility, consider letting someone into your life. To whom can you admit that you need help, and then accept that help if offered? To whom can you share more of your fears or desires? As an act of hospitality, be vulnerable and let your real self be more fully known.

MONDAY, APRIL 1

MARK 1:35-38

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed:

"Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *What emotional, mental and spiritual posture(s) does Jesus model in this passage?*
- *Check out the verses leading up Mark 1:35. What's going in the bigger story? Why does Jesus feel the need to pull away and pray? How do the disciples react to this?*
- *Put yourself into the position of a character in this story. How would you have reacted to Jesus' disappearance? What does Jesus' time away in prayer teach or show you?*

WEEK 4

TUESDAY, APRIL 2

MATTHEW 28:16-20

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

REFLECTION

We are disciples called to make disciples. This passage, called the Great Commission, reveals what is essential to this calling. First, notice where authority rests - in Jesus. This tells us that our posture is one of dependence, and not of striving. Instead of making disciples in our own power, we participate in what the Lord is already doing. We rely on His power, presence, and work. This point is reinforced by Jesus' last phrase: "I am with you always." Second, notice the second word in verse 19 - "go!" As Jesus came to us, and pursued us, so we go to others. We don't sit back in the pews waiting for people to join us. Instead, we share Jesus with the people around us each and every day, and we even seek to go to new places to meet people who don't yet know the love and care of the Lord. Third, notice that making disciples includes teaching people all that Jesus said and did. We often divide evangelism and discipleship as if they were two different acts, when in reality, they are united. The good news is not only that God forgives us through Jesus, but that we become Jesus' disciples who live in God's Kingdom. How is the Lord calling you, as a disciple, to participate in His work of making disciples?

WEEK 4

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3

PSALM 20:6-9

Now this I know: The Lord gives victory to his anointed.

He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.

Lord, give victory to the king! Answer us when we call!

PRAYER

God, may our trust be in You, no matter the circumstances. Sometimes it feels like we are surrounded by mighty, powerful people or organizations against whom we have no voice or no power. But victory, power and strength are in You, O God! Help us to bend the knee not to influences of power that surround us, but only to You. May our trust be in You, no matter the circumstances. Amen.

THURSDAY, APRIL 4

2 TIMOTHY 1:6-12

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.

WEEK 4

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *What could cause a person, or even yourself, to be ashamed? What causes a person, or even yourself, to suffer?*
- *According to this passage, but is meant by “suffering for the Gospel”? In an age of exile, when the American church seems to have lost its cultural prominence, how might suffering for the Gospel take on a different meaning?*
- *What does it look like for you to represent the good news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection in a way that is unashamed, and full of the Spirit’s power?*

FRIDAY, APRIL 5

PART I : *Selections from DANIEL 1*

King Nebuchadnezzar ordered Ashpenaz, his chief of staff, to bring to the palace some of the young men of Judah’s royal family and other noble families, who had been brought to Babylon as captives.

“Select only strong, healthy, and good-looking young men,” he said. “Make sure they are well versed in every branch of learning, are gifted with knowledge and good judgment, and are suited to serve in the royal palace. Train these young men in the language and literature of Babylon.”

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were four of the young men chosen, all from the tribe of Judah. The chief of staff renamed them with these Babylonian names: Daniel was called Belteshazzar. Hananiah was called Shadrach. Mishael was called Meshach. Azariah was called Abednego. They were to be trained for three years, and then they would enter the royal service.

God gave these four young men an unusual aptitude for understanding every aspect of literature and wisdom. And God gave Daniel the special ability to interpret the meanings of visions and dreams.

WEEK 4

REFLECTION

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were raised as devout Jews. Even their names speak volumes about their devotion to Israel's God. The Hebrew name Daniel means God is my judge; Mishael, a Hebrew form for the English name Michael, means Who is like God? Yet here, in the context of exile, they are given distinctly Babylonian names and a vocation within the Babylonian royal palace. All of this, especially their new names, would smack of association with pagan gods -- the very gods they would have been warned against growing up as Jewish boys. (Daniel's new name, Belteshazzar, refers to a Babylonian god, Bel, and means Bel protect the king.) Yet Daniel and his friends do not resist their vocational training in Nebuchadnezzar's court, nor their new Babylonian names. This chapter depicts them immersed in the secular culture of Babylon, learning its wisdom, language and literature.

What posture did these young men adopt toward the dominant culture in their experience of exile? What does this speak to you as you consider what it means for the American church, and yourself as apart of it, to be living in an age of exile?

SATURDAY, APRIL 6

PART II: *Selections from* **DANIEL 1**

(During his training in the King's court) Daniel was determined not to defile himself by eating the food and wine given to them by the king. He asked the chief of staff for permission not to eat these unacceptable foods.

"Please test us for ten days on a diet of vegetables and water," Daniel said. "At the end of the ten days, see how we look compared to the other young men who are eating the king's food. Then make your decision in light of what you see." The attendant agreed to Daniel's suggestion and tested them for ten days.

At the end of the ten days, Daniel and his three friends looked healthier and better nourished than the young men who had been eating the food assigned by the king.

WEEK 4

So after that, the attendant fed them only vegetables instead of the food and wine provided for the others.

When the training period ordered by the king was completed, the chief of staff brought all the young men to King Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and no one impressed him as much as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they entered the royal service. Whenever the king consulted them in any matter requiring wisdom and balanced judgment, he found them ten times more capable than any of the magicians and enchanters in his entire kingdom.

REFLECTION

In the heart of a chapter that portrays Daniel and his friends' engagement with the dominant culture of Babylon (see previous day's reading), we find an example of the young men's resistance against that culture. Daniel and his friends resisted eating the king's food in order to maintain a ritualistically pure diet, according to Jewish tradition. Why? Because the Jewish food laws are one of three absolutely critical things that set them apart as the people of God. Jews were marked as belonging to God by eating a certain kind of diet; by the practice of circumcision; and by the way they worshipped in the temple. Thus, the Jewish food laws were critical to maintaining their identity as God's people. In refusing to eat the king's food, Daniel and his friends refused to compromise the values most essential to their identity as people of God. Daniel and his friends were obedient to most of the things Nebuchadnezzar asked them to do, but their ultimate obedience was to God and the way He called them to live.

What emotional, spiritual or mental postures does this chapter encourage you to adopt as you consider your engagement with the dominant culture around you? What warning does this chapter provide for God's people living in an age of exile? What aspects of your identity as a child of God are most critical to faithful worship of God? (*See readings from WEEK 3*) Do you feel pressure from the world around you to compromise those things?

THE DANGERS OF EXILE

WEEK 5

SUNDAY, APRIL 7

Selections from **GALATIANS 2 & 3**

Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain ...

As for those who were held in high esteem—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favoritism—they added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they recognized that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised. For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Cephas (Peter) and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”

WEEK 5

"We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified..."

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

REFLECTION

Think back to your middle and high school days. What kinds of groups were there? In my day it was the nerds, the band kids, the jocks, the popular kids, the rich kids, the poor kids, the Hispanic kids, the skaters, the smokers. The main ways in which the groups differentiated was by highlighting their differences. The groups in your high school might have had different labels, but I bet there were groups nonetheless. It's human nature to be tribal - to circle up with people like us and divide based on our differences.

While it might be human nature to belong to a tribe, it's God's intention that we be unified. The last paragraph in the passage above, Galatians 3:26-29, is a wonderful summary of God's intention for our unity. God's plan is that we be a unified people, even while we remain diverse, as we recognize our profound commonality: that our identity comes from our life in Christ. This doesn't mean that we cease to be male or female, or that our ethnicity, or other diverse markers fall away. Rather, it means that our primary identity comes not from externals, status, or any other label the world would put on us, but from Christ. And if we are all in Christ, then we are one family that welcomes all.

Tribalism seeks to tear at the threads of our unity in Christ, even within the church. The first part of the passage is Paul recounting how he stood against

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tribalism that had snuck its way back into the early church community. In Acts 11, we read how Peter (called Cephas in this passage) received a revelation from God that salvation was for the Gentiles, as well as the Jews. In Acts 15, the early church had a great debate: was it important for Gentiles to be circumcised (an external sign) like the Jews in order to be saved? Peter spoke up and said, “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they (the Gentiles) are.” And yet, many years later, Paul sees that tribalism had crept back into Peter’s heart. He was no longer eating with Gentiles. Peter was lured by those who wanted to create community based on externals, and not on identity in Christ.

Tribalism was present in the early church and it is just as present today. In fact, tribalism in the church might be more prevalent today! The beat of tribalism rings loud in our culture: we become more and more divided and it’s all too easy to mimic that cultural pattern in the church. That pressure is magnified when we feel the tension of living in exile. In exile our tendency is to find safety by circling up with others just like us and excluding others. But giving into tribalism in or outside of the church is not God’s best for us. When we live in tribes, we find our identity and value in what differentiates us from others, and not from Christ. When we live in tribes, we fail to reach out to all people and invite them into God’s wide and deep family. When we live in tribes, we cut ourselves off from one of our schools of sanctification - learning to live and worship with people different than us, and letting God use those differences to shape us more into the image of Christ.

Are there ways that we, as the church, are giving into tribalism? Some ways are obvious, like our multiplicity of denominations and our homogeneous congregations. Others are not so obvious, like the ways we hang out with people of the same age, life stage, socio-economic level, or political leanings. Unity is something that will only happen through the power of the Spirit. Ask the Spirit to reveal the ways in which you, and we, might be circled up in tribes. Ask the Lord for the wisdom to find your identity in Him and open wide your arms to others.

WEEK 5

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *Have you ever felt left out by a clique, group, or tribe? Describe the feeling.*
- *Fifteen to twenty years after Peter encouraged the church to welcome Gentiles, he found himself excluding uncircumcised Gentiles. Ponder that. What implications does it have for our discipleship?*
- *In what ways is tribalism expressed in our culture? In the church?*
- *What is the tension between tribalism and having spiritual friends with whom you share life?*
- *How do we find our identity in Christ, while still celebrating our God-given diversity?*
- *Is there a way God is calling you to expand your welcome, and include others?*

LECTIO VISIO



The Sneetches, Dr. Seuss

WEEK 5

PRACTICE HOSPITALITY

Remember a time when you have been genuinely welcomed and enfolded by another. What were the circumstances? As you picture the scene again, and recall the emotions of being welcomed, imagine Jesus in the scene as well, smiling over your reception.

Now consider: how might the Lord be calling you to extend this same genuine welcome and embrace to someone else? If you are part of a group - of friends, a book club, a small group - can you invite another person to join you for an event? If you sit in the same place at church, can you invite another to sit with you, or go sit with someone else who might not know many people? Can you invite someone you don't know well over to dinner?

MONDAY, APRIL 8

EPHESIANS 2:11-19

So remember that once you were Gentiles by physical descent, who were called “uncircumcised” by Jews who are physically circumcised. At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God’s promise. In this world you had no hope and no God. But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of

hatred that divided us. He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God.

When he came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were far away from God and to those who were near. We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit. So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God’s people, and you belong to God’s household.

WEEK 5

PRAYER

Put the mind of Christ within us, O God, that our lives take the reconciling form of the cross. Use us to break down the walls of hostility within the church, among the nations, and around the world. May the hearing of Your Word break down the dividing walls between us, for Jesus Christ, Your living Word, is our peace. Amen.

from *Feasting On The Word*

TUESDAY, APRIL 9

JAMES 1:9-10

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation.

REFLECTION

Tim Keller reminds us that this verse gives us caution about finding our identity in our status or group. In each situation - high or low position - our identity is in Christ and not a particular tribe or circle.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 10

JAMES 2:1-9

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

The James 2 scripture reading is continued on page 51

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Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

PRAYER

Creator and Father of all, You love every person You have made; forgive any prejudice that leads me to love some neighbors more than others. Give me opportunity this week to show mercy to someone in need. Amen.

Bobby Gross

THURSDAY, APRIL 11

JOHN 4:3-15

Jesus left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

Now he had to go through Samaria.

So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone

into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman.

How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living

WEEK 5

water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

REFLECTION

In this chapter, Jesus chooses to travel through the territory of the mixed-race Samaritans, a people much despised by most Jews because their religious practices and ethnic lines were considered impure. Study Jesus’ encounter with the woman. He confounds her expectations of prejudice and spiritually entices her. The disciples, however, who didn’t come into town with Jesus, seem to have missed a harvest because of their prejudice. Are there people you find hard to reach out to because they are different from you in ethnicity or religion or social standing?

Bobby Gross

FRIDAY, APRIL 12

LUKE 10:25-37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away,

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leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *How much like the lawyer are you? Where are you tempted to justify yourself to explain how your current way of living is reasonable, all things considered?*
- *What distinguishes the Samaritan as different from the other characters in Jesus' parable?*
- *Who are the people or groups of people to whom the Lord is calling you to show mercy?*

WEEK 5

SATURDAY, APRIL 13

1 CORINTHIANS 10:14-17

So then, my dear friends, run away from the worship of false gods! I'm talking to you like you are sensible people. Think about what I'm saying. Isn't the cup of blessing that we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Isn't the loaf of bread that we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one loaf of bread, we who are many are one body, because we all share the one loaf of bread.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *What are some of the “false gods” that create division and separation?*
- *What does it look like for a church made up of diverse people and perspectives to consider itself “one body”?*
- *The church, as Christ's body, must learn to see one another as brothers and sisters—members of the one, eternal family of God—instead of political or ideological opponents. How can you live and interact against the cultural currents of tribalism?*
- *Consider engaging in a grace-filled discourse with someone with whom you disagree about politics, theology, or another important topic. How can you demonstrate compassion and good listening skills toward that person? How can you value that person even in her differences?*

POWER IN AN AGE OF EXILE

HOLY WEEK | WEEK 6

PALM SUNDAY, APRIL 14

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

REFLECTION

A recent study ⁶ of Christian CEOs of major companies and figureheads of

⁶ Academic study designed by the Fuller Theological Seminary De Pree Center

HOLY WEEK | WEEK 6

influential institutions revealed a surprising result. When asked, How much do you think about and use your power, almost every respondent said, “I really don’t have much power, so I don’t know how to answer your question.” Some of the more powerful Christians in the western world didn’t believe they had robust influence in their roles!

Perhaps you feel that same way. And yet, if you’re reading this devotional, you almost certainly have a measure of power. “If you are a supervisor or a teacher, or if your colleagues look to you for guidance, if you are an elder or deacon at church, if you are a parent, or a public servant, if you work in the marketplace, then you have at least some power.”⁷

As Andy Crouch writes in the article, *It’s Time to Talk About Power*, “Naming and owning power is the first step toward being accountable for power.” If we don’t acknowledge our power, or we’re unwilling to recognize it, it’s likely that we won’t use it wisely. So why are Christians so reticent to talk about power? Perhaps it’s because of the cultural currents that shape us toward a desire to grasp onto power. We live in a society in which power is currency. We are lured by voices that whisper: your career advancement is dead in the water without it; your voice is meaningless without it. Even while Christ empties himself of power, our secular age sets us up to grasp for it. Perhaps this is one reason we struggle to talk about power.

Another reason we find power a difficult subject is because the American church is increasingly experiencing a power struggle. A primary experience for those in exile is that of a power struggle: exiles have little or no power, because the dominant culture has all of it. Consider black people trying to buy homes in post-World War II America. White people, the cultural majority, had all the power in late-40s America, and therefore had the necessary means and influence to create legislation and federal housing policies that crippled a black person’s ability to take out a mortgage on a home.⁸

⁷ *Stewarding Power* by Mark D. Roberts

⁸ For a detailed explanation, see the NPR article *A ‘Forgotten History’ of How the U.S. Government Segregated America*

HOLY WEEK | WEEK 6

White Christians have not previously experienced a deficit of power in this country. And yet increasingly, this seems to be the experience in the American church. Christians no longer experience the cultural influence and prominence we seemed to once have. So, in a culture that trains us to grasp for power in order to protect, legitimize and advance ourselves, what do we do with this power struggle?

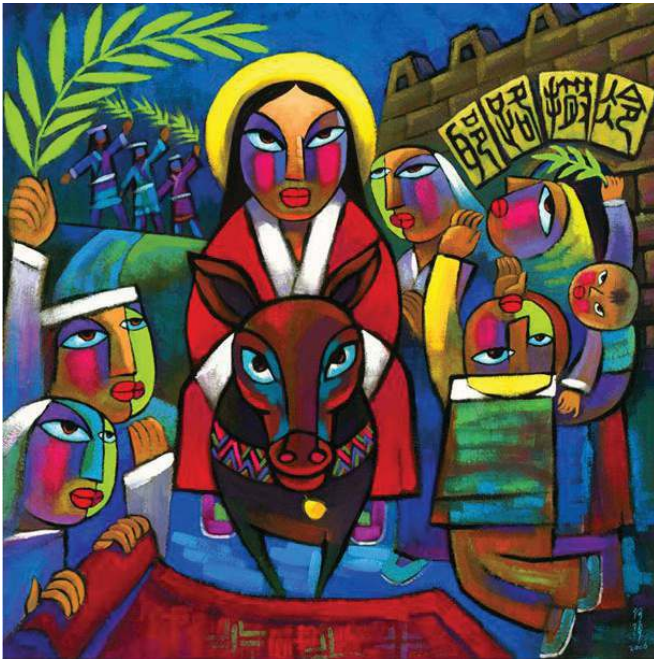
It is a great irony in the currents of American power-mongering that the power of the Gospel is revealed most in Jesus' humility and death. So let us recall the example of Christ, who allowed himself to be led by the culturally-powerful to His own death. Let us be swept up in the narrative Christ, who did not fight for power, but rather emptied Himself of it for the sake of us all.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *Identify the power and privilege you have. Are you surprised by it?*
- *For those of us in positions of power, what should we do with it? How can we act responsibly and in a Christ-like way with the power we've been given?*
- *How do you feel when you read Paul's statement that "the message of the cross is foolishness"? Why do you think he uses the words "wisdom" and "foolishness"?*
- *It's easy to interpret this passage in 1 Corinthians through an anti-intellectual lens: as if Paul is saying that rational, intellectual pursuit doesn't lead to an understanding the Gospel. *We don't need to think logically and critically to understand what happens on the cross. Instead, we just need to believe.* But remember, in his previous life Paul was a Pharisee. He was a religious expert who spent his entire life studying Scripture. *Do you think someone who had devoted his entire life to theological study would dismiss it so easily? If not, how else can we interpret what Paul is getting at? Summarize in your own words what he might be saying.**

LECTIO VISIO

Horses are magnificent creatures. Even if you've never ridden one and haven't been around them much, it's hard to deny their nobility. Perhaps this is why kings and conquerors rode horses. King Jesus, however, chose to enter Jerusalem on a donkey, a less-than-regal creature. What was Jesus communicating, and what does this tell us about power?



Triumphant Entry Into Jerusalem, by HE QI

PRACTICE HOSPITALITY

This week, consider one of these practices:

1. Go back to week one, and once again or for the first time, think of ways in which you can give away or use your privilege and status for others, especially those whom culture deems as undeserving.

HOLY WEEK | WEEK 6

- Practice making room for others by letting others make decisions that you might normally make, as you are able: what to eat for dinner, what time to leave, where to go, what to do. As you give up power in these relatively small ways, consider how power is defined by Jesus' self-sacrifice and service.

MONDAY, APRIL 15

EXODUS 9:13-17

The Egyptian Pharaoh was the most powerful person in the known world during the time of Exodus. In these verses, the "all-powerful" Pharaoh is confronted by the all-powerful God of Israel. Consider what is meant when the Lord says to Pharaoh: I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." What does this say about God's power and its purpose, in contrast to Pharaoh's power?

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, "This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me, or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Yet, still you set yourself against my people and will not let them go.

PRAYER

O God, when Your people were few in number and of little account, wandering as strangers from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another, You allowed no one to oppress them. You rebuked kings on their account, saying, "Do not touch my anointed ones or do my people any harm." For You are greater than any earthly power, O Lord. You are King forever. I am seeking Your presence today, O Mighty King, and asking for Your strength to speak for the voiceless, and to tell Your deeds to those around me. Amen.

TUESDAY, APRIL 16

MICAH 3:1-4,8

The prophet Micah indicts Israel's leaders for using their power to pursue self-interest, rather than justice for the people.

But I said:

"Hear, leaders of Jacob, rulers of the house of Israel!

Isn't it your job to know justice?— you who hate good and love evil, who tear the skin off them, and the flesh off their bones, who devour the flesh of my people, tear off their skin, break their bones in pieces, and spread them out as if in a pot, like meat in a kettle."

Then they will cry out to the Lord, but he won't answer them.

He will hide his face from them at that time, because of their evil deeds.

But me! I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his wrongdoing and to Israel his sin!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *According to the prophet, what is the task of Israel's leaders? What is their job to do? Do you see church leaders, cultural leaders and government leaders working toward this same task? If not, what do you think motivates the leaders around you today? What motivates you?*
- *What does Micah have in mind when he asks Israel's leaders about their practice of justice? What is Micah's, and the rest of the Old Testament's, view of justice?*

(Here's a hint: the prophet Isaiah defines it right off the bat in 1:17:

"Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." Jesus also defines justice when he said in Luke's Gospel, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." See also Jeremiah 5:28, Ezekiel 34:16)

HOLY WEEK | WEEK 6

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17

PHILIPPIANS 2: 5-11

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

PRAYER

Strengthen my heart, O Lord, to empty myself of power as You did in the incarnation. Accomplish justice for the vulnerable and the suffering as You did on the cross. Rise up, O Lord! O Great and Mighty One, defender of the oppressed, show me how to pursue the power of Your kingdom - the power of One willingly led like a Lamb to the slaughter, who will be raised to reign forever with the strength of a Lion.

MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 18

LUKE 22:14-27

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.”

After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But woe to that man who betrays him!” They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

LECTIO VISIO

When I look at this carving, I'm struck by the shadows. We can't see all of the disciples. Some are turned away from Jesus. Some aren't paying attention. Some look doubtful. Others are hiding. And yet, Jesus still offers them all the bread and the wine, His body and blood - even to the one who betrayed Him. Jesus uses His power to recklessly serve all of us, despite ourselves.



Take and Eat, Ned Bustard

GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 19

JOHN 19:5-12

When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!”

As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!”

But Pilate answered, “You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.”

The Jewish leaders insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. “Where do you come from?” he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. “Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”

Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”

REFLECTION

Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea, a military figure charged to keep the order and peace of the region. Pilate’s presence as an ultimate authority in this scene is underscored by the Jews who bring Jesus to Pilate with the request of a death sentence. This is because the Jews, according to John’s Gospel, did not

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actually have the power of capital punishment. So they bring Jesus to Pilate, the “enemy” leader, wanting powerful Pilate to do their dirty work for them. Pilate plays on this when he flaunts his power before Jesus. “Don’t you realize that your life hangs on my word?” he says. “I have the power to free or to crucify you.” Standing before the One through whom all the worlds were created, Pilate claims power over life and death. And yet Jesus turns Pilate’s power on its head. “You have no power, except what is given to you from above,” Jesus replies. In spite of his position, his influence, his reputation and his vocation within the Roman governing system, Pilate’s power only comes from God. The same is true for you and me. Whatever power we may wield in our circles only comes from God. This begs the question: are we responsible with our power? In the interactions that result from our privilege, status or position, do we honor the God who grants authority? Do we bend the knee before the God who calls those in power to practice justice in their dealings with all people?

HOLY SATURDAY, APRIL 20

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9-10, 13:3-4

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me: He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him.

LECTIO VISIO



Crucifixion, Marc Chagall

EASTER SUNDAY

APRIL 21

1 PETER 1:3-9

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

PRAYER

Crucified Savior, Risen Lord! You are alive, and in Your life we find life. We find our home not in the acceptance of others, our ability to influence or change our culture, or any semblance of power we hold. We find our home in the truth that our lives are hidden in Christ - in You. As we wait for You to bring Your resurrection work to completion in the restored creation, help us to view any suffering as a gift to transform us more fully into Your people. Our love overflows for you, the One who has made us Your People, given us Your presence, and in whom we find our Home. Amen.



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