

**“Living in Exile”**  
**Lenten Sermon Series *Strangers in a Strange Land***  
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**First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC**  
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**(Jer. 25:1-11)**

**Introduction.**

In the fall of 1976, I loaded up my Toyota Celica and headed out from Atlanta and I drove to the north shore of Boston. I went there to enroll at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and begin my studies to become a pastor. I had spent all my life in Atlanta and attended the University of Georgia, and I had never lived for any length of time outside of the South. But I knew I needed to broaden my cultural horizons, and I thought I was up for the adventure of studying in New England.

However, the three years I lived on the North Shore of Boston was a very different experience than I had when I was growing up in Atlanta. The people there were very crusty and colorful, and they spoke in thick accents. (Paaark ya caaaaah in the Haaaavad Yaaaaahd.) The winters were bitterly cold, and they had strange names for things. A milkshake they called a frappe, a sub sandwich they called a grinder, and if something was really good, they called it “wicked!” (That’s a really wicked outfit you’re wearin’!) In addition, the quality of college football in that part of the country was absolutely anemic! There were many times, especially that first semester, when I wondered, “What am I doing here?” I felt so out of place. Have you ever had an experience like that?

In many ways the three years I lived in New England I felt like I was living in exile – a stranger in a strange land. It wasn’t home, and I experienced a sense of unsettledness and dislocation. But I knew this was where God wanted me to be, so I made a concerted effort to discover why the Lord called me there. It ended up being three of the happiest and most fruitful years of my entire life. More about that later.

Many people are saying that *exile* is a very good metaphor for us to use whenever we think about living for Christ today in our ever-changing world. As Christians we often feel out of place, or certainly out of step, with the rest of the world, and increasingly we are becoming strangers in a strange land. How are we to cope in these challenging times? What does faithfulness to Christ look like in a culture where the truths of the Gospel are not universally shared and the values which are important to us are criticized, dismissed, or even ridiculed?

During the season of Lent we’re going to look at this whole idea of Exile, and we’re going to trace the causes of the sense of homeless and disorientation we often experience as Christians. We’ll also study passages of Scripture where we can learn from believers in the past about how they coped with being exiles, and I think there is a great deal we

can learn from what the Bible has to say about all this. So I invite you to join me for a journey together.

Today I want to talk about living in exile, and I want to start our series by asking and answering three questions: Where are we and how did we get here? What does it mean to live in exile? And how do we live faithfully for God as exiles today?

## **I. Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?**

Missiologist Michael Frost has written<sup>1</sup> that “Christendom” is the name given to the religious culture that has dominated Western society since the fourth century AD. Awakened by the Roman emperor Constantine, it was the cultural phenomenon that resulted when Christianity was established as the official imperial religion. And it moved the Christian faith from being a marginalized and often persecuted movement to being the only official religion in the empire. Whereas the followers of Jesus at one time had to meet secretly in homes and in underground catacombs, now they were given some of the greatest cathedrals in the world.

By the middle Ages, church and state had become the pillars of the culture in the West, each supporting the other. But all that began to change about 250 years ago, and Christendom as we have known it has been in steady decline since then, especially in the last 60 years. Many historians say that we are now living in a “post-Christendom” era, and the place of the church in modern culture has increasingly been diminished. This is seen in the debates that have taken place in our lifetimes on such issues as prayer in the schools, abortion, and the removal of nativity scenes from shopping centers and on public property.

New Zealand author Mike Riddell has written that the Christian church is dying in the West, and it’s caused some believers to live in denial. They don’t want to admit just how much ground people of faith have lost in our culture. They think, “Surely God won’t let His church die?” However, the history of the church teaches us that we can’t assume divine intervention to maintain the status of the ecclesiastical institution. It is not only possible for Christianity in the West to falter; it is apparent that the sickness is quite well advanced!<sup>2</sup>

However, as Michael Frost points out, there are other voices that express real hope – not in the reconstitution of Christendom, but in the idea that the end of this era could actually begin a new season of flourishing for the Christian faith. The death of Christendom removes the final props that have artificially supported the culturally respectable, mainstream, suburban version of Christianity, and it has opened new possibilities for a vibrant missional faith in Christ to flourish. It’s happened before in the history of God’s people, and I want us to look at one example.

## **II. What Does It Mean to Live in Exile?**

Many contemporary scholars find a number of parallels between our experience today of living as Christians in North America with the Jewish exiles in Babylon.<sup>3</sup> The Babylonian exile was an event that cast a long and dark shadow all across the history of Israel, and it affected its theology, culture, and religious life. At the time, Israel had split into a northern and southern kingdom, and both had been at the mercy of the marauding Assyrian and Egyptian Empires. The Assyrians had seen their empire begin to decline, and the less powerful Egyptians were ready to pounce on the spoils. In the middle were the powerless nations of Israel and Judah.

However, like a storm that is building in the east, the Babylonian Empire was rising. And eventually it would become so powerful that it swept aside both the Assyrians and the Egyptians, and it captured the Jewish nations in the process. The prophet Jeremiah predicted all this in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book that bears his name which we have read this morning.

The death of Judah's King Josiah in 609 BC occurred right as the Assyrian Empire was breathing its last before the advance of mighty Babylon. The Egyptian forces decided to assist the Assyrians against their greater threat (the Babylonians), and on their way east they took control of Judah for four short years between 609 and 605 BC. However, the Babylonians were expanding too rapidly for Egypt to contain them, and during the reign of King Jehoiakim the tiny nation of Judah totally lost its independence and was soon absorbed into the Babylonian Empire.

In 587 BC Jerusalem was destroyed and leveled to the ground by the invading forces of Babylon's king Nebuchadnezzar. And in a massive repatriation program the leading citizens of the nation were relocated east in Babylonian cities where they were free to build houses, earn a living, and even observe their own customs and religion. But they couldn't return home to their desolated capital. Many became so accustomed to their new life in Babylon that they even refused to return to Jerusalem when much later they had an opportunity to do so. They sunk deep roots in their new home on foreign soil, and they decided to stay.

Just like the Jewish exiles, the church today is grieving its losses, and it is struggling with being marginalized by the culture around it. The ground has slipped out from underneath our feet, and we've lost our footing. Sometimes we experience a resentful sadness about losing what once was, and now is not, and never will be again. Like the Israelites, the fall of Christendom feels like the fall of Jerusalem, and there's no going back. Exiles often feel like a motherless child – abandoned, homeless, vulnerable, and orphaned.

Living as Exiles, Christians can sometimes become trapped in nostalgia longing for the good old days or shrinking back in fear of the future. The result is that the church can become solely focused on trying to hold onto the small plot of ground it currently clutches to instead of reimagining a robust future that God might have in mind for us.

Could it be that God has allowed all that has happened in recent years for a purpose? Is it possible that God has a plan for the demise of the church in the West? Could it be that the Lord wants to do something new in helping the church reflect the kingdom of God in a new way in this changing world?

### **III. How Can We Live Faithfully as Exiles Today?**

Many of the Jews who went into exile were able to flourish in their new surroundings in Babylon. They did this not by going “native” and selling out to the culture around them, but by reclaiming the most important parts of their faith in God. They maintained the disciplines and spiritual practices of their faith which took on new meaning and importance for them and their families. They learned to live in a counter-cultural way for the glory of the Lord right where they were. And the result was these Jews were a blessing to the communities in which they had been transplanted.

Exiles are driven back to their most important memories and the promises God made to them. Exiles know that God’s kingdom is much bigger than any earthly government, and they mock the folly of any empire thinking that it is more powerful than the Lord. Exiles offer a counter-cultural critique and call to account the forces of evil whenever people are exploited or injustice prevails. Exiles express their love for God in their love for others, and their lives are marked by sacrifice and service. And Exiles seek to bloom where they are planted and become a blessing to the people and communities around them.

If you think about it, Jesus was an Exile. He exiled Himself for you and me. He left the comforts of heaven and put on our human flesh to enter the messiness of our world in order to bring about the salvation of our souls and the reconciliation of all things to Himself. During His time on earth, it was clear that Jesus was not of this world. He kept referring to a heavenly kingdom to which He belonged, and He talked about a special relationship He had with His heavenly Father. The values He taught in the Sermon on the Mount were counter-cultural principles for living that went against the grain of both what the world taught and even what the Jewish leaders practiced.

And when Jesus went to the cross, He experienced the ultimate exile. He was separated from His Father in heaven, and He cried out, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,*” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And then His exile was complete. Like the Jews who were carried off to Babylon, Jesus was exiled from the Father’s presence to bear the burden of our sin and die a humiliating death on a Roman cross. Whenever you and I think about living our lives as Exiles today, remember that we’re in good company with Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion.

I began my message by telling you about my journey to Boston and becoming an exile in New England when I was in seminary. That first week of classes, I met several people who had Southern accents, and it wasn't long before we all became fast friends and banded together. We Southerners living in New England felt like the Jews who had been carted off to Babylon. It was wonderful sharing life with people who had similar backgrounds, and it helped me adjust to life so far from home. I especially remember being introduced to ACC basketball by these new friends who had gone to Wake Forest, Carolina, Duke and UVA, and I've loved it ever since!

As I said before, those three years in Boston were some of the happiest and most fruitful years of my life. It was there that I met Lorie, and we fell in love and got married. I grew in my faith like a weed in a greenhouse while studying at the seminary, and I made some life-long friends who have been partners in ministry for almost four decades now. Just last week I was with three of them for our annual covenant group meeting, and these relationships are so life-giving to me.

In Boston I also discovered New England clam "chowdah," fried clams, and best of all Nick's Roast Beef sandwich! I even became a fan of the Red Sox and the Celtics, and there's nothing like a New England fall! I ended up thriving while I was in exile in Boston, and God blessed that time in such amazing ways.

In those moments when you grieve the loss of Christendom and feel out of place in this world as a follower of Christ, let me encourage you to do several things. *First*, remember that God is the Lord of human history, and He is at work in our world even in those times when it feels like the Christian faith is losing ground in our culture. God isn't finished writing the story yet, and He has more moves He can make.

*Second*, remember that the people of God have flourished in their faith and as witnesses for Christ most when they've been a minority voice and a counter-cultural expression of the kingdom of God. And *finally*, seek to bloom where you are planted and try to be a blessing in your neighborhood, at you school, in you place of business, and in our city. That's what the Jewish exiles did, and many of them became a light to the nations.

Michael Frost writes that when the dogs are barking, it's time for the cats to be circumspect, to walk the fences, and trust that this is not the final word on the matter. In the meantime, keep your balance, and hold within you the sure hope that home is found in the presence of our gracious, loving, and forgiving God, wherever that may be, even in Exile. To God be the glory! Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Cathy Kirkpatrick, Mark Pierson, and Mike Riddell, *The Prodigal Project: Journey into the Emerging Church* (London: SPCK, 2000), 3.

<sup>3</sup> An example of this is Walter Bruggemann, *Cadences of Hope: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997).