

How To Live in Exile

Scriptures

Isa 40:1-11

Ps 85

2 Pet 3:8-18

Mark 1:1-8

Opening

In our family we have an early memory that we call the Judas Maccabaeus moment. A very young, newly married, and well-rested Jack and Emily King entered their first Advent season as Anglicans. We had both grown up in church traditions observing Advent, though our childhood churches only emphasized the expectation and joy of the season. Imagine our shock when we heard the summons to repentance, even fasting, to prepare for the great Day of the Lord's *second* coming. We looked for the Advent we knew, and behold, an outcry. What kind of Advent was this?

One evening in early December we found ourselves in our kitchen, regrouping and trying to understand this new kind of Advent. To make sense of things, I summoned some recent reading from that writer who had a great deal to do with our becoming Anglican in the first place, NT Wright.

So thinking aloud I said something like, "I think Advent with Anglicans means looking closely at the story and experience of exile."

For the next several moments we talked about Israel's exile in our kitchen. On my honor, I assure you Emily desired this discussion. You can ask her later.

So we spoke about how much space the prophets address the experience of Israel's exile in Scripture. Seventy years Israel dwells in Babylon. The temple had been burned to the ground in Jerusalem. Remember that tragic and awful December in 2016 when our beloved Smoky Mountains burned and consumed homes and places we love. That's the nearest image we have in our world, yet Israel's trauma was so much worse.

Israel returned home after those 70 years to their homes and their holy places which lay in ruins. But they were not free at home. They were prisoners in their homeland, their Promised Land, and their captivity at home would last much longer than 70 years. For 400 years Israel was subjected to a revolving door of world empires that called the shots in their homeland: first Babylon, then Persia, then Greece under Alexander the Great, then Egypt, then Syria. Exile in Babylon was long; exile at home was seven times as long.

A brief reprieve came about 150 years before Jesus' birth. Jewish revolutionaries succeeded in a guerilla revolt, winning battles at Emmaus, and then in Jerusalem. The Maccabees fought the Jewish war of independence and brought Israel freedom for about 70 years. Until Rome came on the scene. Then mighty Rome crushed the last vestiges of Jewish opposition in Jerusalem. The Roman emperor Pompey walked into the Holy of Holies 60 years before Jesus' birth. He entered that inner room where only Israel's great High Priest would enter one day a year, fearing for his very life. Rome was here to stay; Israel had returned home but the exile wasn't ended.

Again, I assure you my bride was not just patiently enduring this story. I have since learned the difference between her sincere interest and when her eyes glaze over from boredom. In this moment, she asked, "Why has no one told me this?" To which I replied, "I asked the same question when I learned these things for the first time at age 23."

We paused our discussion for dinner, then a quiet December evening in our living room. My eyes began glazing over around 10pm, four hours after our exile conversation. Either she didn't notice my drowsiness or the question was just too important. Regardless she caught me just before I was fully asleep with this question "So does Judas Maccabeus have

something to do with that 400 years?" In my waking stupor I said, "Yeah he does. I'm going to bed now."

Making Room for Exile in Our Story

When we returned to worship on Sunday, we sang that most Advent of Advent hymns with new understanding:

O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

The story of exile has a deep scriptural connection with Advent that our ancestors knew. The story of the Babylonian exile, the return from Exile, captivity in their homeland—these stories comprise half of the Old Testament. These were *the* defining experiences for our ancestors who waited for Messiah. These are not simply facts or data one must know for passing a Bible test. These are stories that have been cut off from our faith. We are disconnected with the real substance and depth of our ancestors' longing for Messiah. Disconnected from their stories, we don't know to turn our hearts *here* when we are thrown into a time of dislocation. There is wisdom, beauty, truth, and comfort here. But you must know the story first. And that is what Advent means to do.

Trying to understand the coming of Jesus without the story of Israel's exile is like trying to understand my family history without ever mentioning my grandparents' lives. You'd have several elements of my story, yes, but you'd have a story with a gaping hole. You wouldn't know how his youth during the Great Depression shaped his life, our family's life, our family's attitude on gratitude and compassion for the poor.

The story and experience of exile remains with us, long after Isaiah spoke a multitude of oracles on the subject of Israel's exile. We read a selection from 2nd Peter moments ago, yet Peter's opening words to his churches in his first letter invoke the reality of exile for *their* faith, *their* experience.

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...¹

Peter addresses the witnesses and believers of the Lord Jesus' first coming. He addresses them as elect exiles *after* the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus. Because we remain in exile until the Lord Jesus returns in power and glory.

The year of our Lord 2020 has been arguably the most dislocating year of our lifetimes. This will likely be *the* defining experience of our lifetimes and the lives of our children. Time will tell. Yet this is clear, we are enduring a kind of exile in these days. You can hear exile in the words and experiences of this pandemic, such as “social distancing” and “quarantine.”

We entered a time of exile and we were not prepared for trials such as these. Yet all is not lost when we have lost all coordinates of where we are, what's happening, or what's coming. That kind of disorientation—the kind we have known in 2020—is a form of exile.

The real question is this: where can wisdom and goodness be found when we experience a form of exile? Whether that separation arise from a pandemic, estrangement from friends or family, even estrangement from your own soul, we are desperately seeking comfort and hope. Where is hope? What is the quality of Advent comfort?

Those are the questions I carry on the second Sunday of Advent. They are questions much greater than a single Sunday, to be sure. I only wish to offer a few thoughts on that question with these remarks. Though we may not have had these words, we are all wondering: how do we live well in exile?

Repentance in Exile

This is why God sends his prophets. This is why the church devotes her Advent Sundays to readings from prophets such as Isaiah and John the Baptist. You cannot live well in exile

¹ Peter 1.1, ESV

without God's messengers. You seek and listen more closely to the prophets during a time of exile.

In the land of exile, in the wilderness, the prophet cries out: "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." The prophet's call meant repentance, even in exile. *Especially* in exile.

I remember my great surprise as a new Anglican, reading the services for the sick and dying in the Book of Common Prayer. I was surprised to see focus on sin and temptation. You see the same themes in our prayers during a time of plague. *When you've had **enough** of isolation, illness, exile, you become more vulnerable to temptation.* Satan didn't tempt Jesus after day 4 in the wilderness, but after 40 days of fasting in the wilderness. When you feel that you have suffered long enough; that this exile should be over; *that* is the most vulnerable time to face temptation. Because you're so desperate for comfort, you look for places and people who can bring instant relief. And what do you know? Our three ancient nemeses are surprisingly near in those moments: the world, the flesh, the devil.

To live well in exile means that our eyes are turned straight towards Christ Jesus. Make his paths *straight*. No more detours, no more delays, no more excuses. Before exile is ended, turn your heart to find help and comfort in Christ alone. "Blessed are those whose strength is in you," the psalmist proclaimed, "*in whose heart are the highways to Zion.*" (Psalm 84:5, ESV)

Advent is a good time to create highways in our thoughts and our habits to the presence of Christ. ***You and I can emerge from this pandemic stronger in Christ than when this began. But not without a renewal of repentance.*** To live well in exile means turning toward Christ alone, straightening the paths of heart and mind to his Word.

Hope and Comfort in Exile

"The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God will stand forever." This brings us to a second attribute of living well in exile: placing your hope on eternal things. The

Word of God is eternal. Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God. The Kingdom of God is eternal.

Days of exile are days to recalibrate our hope. The Lord revealed the end of exile well over a hundred years before it began. Through Isaiah he said:

Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended.

The Lord himself promised the end of exile, *before* their captivity begins. Staggering. “Say to the cities of Judah, ‘Your God comes!’” It sure seemed like God had come when Judas Maccabeus overthrew the Greeks in 160 B.C. It seemed like the exile ended during those 40 years. But then Rome occupied the Holy City and the holy places of God. Their eyes were fixed, their hope was set on the throne of Jerusalem more than the throne in heaven.

How much does *the end of the pandemic* define your hope? The end of masks? The end of quarantines? Don’t get me wrong, those are good hopes. But let it not be my *greatest* hope. “Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, *if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!*” (Psalm 137:6, ESV). Don’t waste this exile at home. It’s a time to calibrate your hope to the second coming of our Lord Jesus.

Luminaries in Exile

I’ve had to check myself in recent weeks. When I complain about the difficulties of life in this pandemic, I’ve had to remember Israel’s exile. Their exile lasted 70 years. That’s three generations that lived and died in captivity. We’ve suffered a pandemic for 10 months. It’s no small trial, but we have not yet suffered like our ancestors. I have had to remember that stock market crashed when my grandfather was a 5 year old boy. Half of his childhood was an experience of want and struggle. He was nearly 10 years old when the Great Depression ended.

We’re learning long-suffering, yet our longer-suffering ancestors have something to teach us about how to live in exile. It’s staggering to hear their *confidence* in their exile. St

Athanasius, the great church father who shaped and defended the Nicene Creed, was exiled on five different occasions. St John Chrysostom fell out of favor with the emperor, in large measure because he defended the poor in the halls of power. He suffered terrible health and died in exile. Yet he wrote letters to his faithful deaconess, Olympia, to take courage. She grieved separation from her spiritual father. Seven months in his exile he wrote her, “Do not be cast down, I beseech you. For there is only one thing, Olympia, to fear, only one real temptation, and that is sin...even if a myriad of fears, a myriad of tumults, assail you, and conflagrations, and whatever else are laid before your eyes, let none of them trouble you.”²

Chrysostom continued to comfort her with a real lasting hope in the midst of her sadness:

Do you see how great is the struggle to bear meekly a separation from someone you love? And how grievous and bitter this is? **And how exalted and vigorous a soul it demands? This is the contest that you are now finishing. However great the contest is, the greater the rewards, the more brilliant the crown.** ³

I tell you, my brothers and sisters, it is not only possible to live well in exile; it is not only possible to be stronger *after* a time of distress ends; it is possible to encounter the beauty of God more clearly in exile than in freedom. A candle glows more brightly in the darkness than in daylight.

I have begun reading about a man who lived this very life. Paul Evdokimov has been described as ‘a theologian of the beauty of God.’ He lived a kind of Advent life. Evdokimov was born in St Petersburg, Russia in 1901. His family fled the Communist Red Army after his father was assassinated. Evdokimov grew up as a Russian exile in Paris.

²Saint John Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, ed. John Behr, Popular Patristics Series. (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016), 56.

³Saint John Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*, ed. John Behr, trans. David C. Ford, vol. 56, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016), 79–80.

He studied theology during the day in Paris, then worked the night shift at Citroen automobile plant. His wife taught Italian in Paris, so Evdokimov assumed care for children after he completed his theology degree.

During World War II he worked with the French Resistance, administering hostels and caring for targeted soldiers. He had a special heart for students and he listened to their troubles with patience and love. Evdokimov mentored another talented theologian, Elizabeth Behr-Sigel. Her lasting memory of the theologian was the sight of Evdokimov feeding his children, then bathing them at the end of day. With his fatherly duties complete, he discussed the Church Fathers with his spiritual and intellectual daughter in the faith.⁴

How do you live well in exile? You listen well to those who are troubled and you lead them to prayer. You bathe and feed your children. You speak about the beauty and faithfulness of God we have inherited from our ancestors. Even in exile. Especially in exile. Nothing will satisfy our hope expect the God who comes to tend his flock like a shepherd, to gather the lambs in his arms and carry them. And then the beauty and glory of the Lord *shall be revealed, and all flesh shall so it together* when our exile is ended and we are finally home with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

⁴Paul Evdokimov, *Ages of the Spiritual Life*, 1-6.