

BELPRES CHURCH

Exile and Homecoming

Jeremiah 28:1-4

Jeremiah 29:1-14

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Well, thank you for all being here. It's great to see you here in this room, as well as those of you who are joining us online today. Thanks for being here. I went to seminary in New Jersey. And having lived here in the state of Washington up until that point my entire life, New Jersey did not feel like home. I mean, to me, the people seemed kind of frosty, even compared to the Seattle freeze. The landscape was so flat. I mean, one weekend I went to the "mountains" and I'm like, those are not mountains.

Queen Anne Hill in Seattle is taller than that mountain. The sun did the wrong thing over the ocean. It wasn't home. Now, if you're from New Jersey and you like it, we have prayer ministers after the service. Seriously, man, get yourself some help. If New Jersey is home, that's great for you. It just wasn't home for me. I felt like I was in some kind of an exile. In every culture, one of the most emotionally charged words is home, for good or for bad.

Maybe you grew up in a home that wasn't safe and there was a lot of pain, or you're in that now and you long for a better home, or maybe you grew up in a great home and you miss it. The ideal home is where you feel loved. It's a place that restores you. It gives you joy. I have a friend who says home is knowing nine ways to anywhere. You just feel like you belong. But the Bible says and I think our experience confirms that often we don't feel at home in this world as it is, that we often have these sorts of feeling like exiles and a little uprooted, because this world as it is not our home.

It's not our ideal home. Now, when Jesus returns and renews everything and makes everything perfect, this world will be our ideal home. But right now, not as is. There's pain and there's death and there's hardships. Spiritually speaking, we're all living in

New Jersey. We may not be literal exiles, although there are people in this church that are in literal exiles, but we all have exile experiences in life where we don't feel at home. Maybe it's a relationship that's painful or fears about your future, about college or job or career or financial future.

Maybe it's that you have everything you could possibly want and you're still depressed. Maybe it's a health or a career crisis. If you aren't currently having a difficult exile experience, don't worry you will, because we all do. Just store this sermon away for that. Now, God doesn't cause our difficult exile experiences. Sometimes our bad decisions do, but God doesn't cause it, but God always brings good out of it. In fact, what the Bible shows is that exile has been too good for too many people for too long to be all bad.

In the Bible, whenever folks go into exile, they revive and thrive. They learn and they grow if, if, if they stay connected to God. We're right now in a sermon series looking at four major narratives, overarching narratives, major themes in the Bible that run from Genesis to Revelation and how they change our lives for the better. One of those narratives is exile and homecoming. The Bible isn't just a random assortment of stories. It is one long continuous story about a God in passionate pursuit of a world that is running away from him.

It moves from creation to the fall where we rejected God, to redemption in Jesus, to restoration where Jesus makes everything new. One of the goals of this sermon series is that y'all would have a little bit better knowledge of the narrative arc of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, which is why in each of these sermons, I've given you a plot summary of the whole Bible, which I'm going to do again today.

In the beginning, God created us and put us in the garden of Eden where we had close connection to God, close connection to each other and where there was no suffering and pain. But then we rejected God and decided to do things our way, not his way, a decision we all make, and the result of doing things our way is exile. Now relationships don't work. We hurt each other. We no longer have close connection with God. There is pain and difficulty and suffering in our world, having cut ourselves off from the source of life.

Now even our DNA doesn't work right and we get sick and we die and there's violence and crime and suffering. We lost our perfect world and we are in exile. We long to be fully known and fully loved, but this world as it is does not support that. We hate the idea that someday we're going to die and turn into fertilizer and be completely forgotten because we weren't made for that. We were designed for eternity. These longings are trace memories in all of us of the Garden of Eden.

But God wants to bring us home again. God made a plan to call one man named Abraham whose descendants would become the nation of Israel and their job was to tell

a whole world about God's love and to form an alternate society grounded in God's justice, love, and mercy, and to spread that better way of living, AKA the kingdom of God, to the whole world. God says to Abraham, "Go from your country, your people, and your father's home to the land I will show you. Go from your country."

What is that? Exile. Abraham is an exile. What he discovers in exile is that home is not a place, it's a person, God. It's interesting. God doesn't tell Abraham where this new land is going to be because the point is he wants Abraham to follow him one step at a time because Abraham's real home isn't geographic, it's in a relationship with God day by day. We were designed for relationship with God. If we are not in it, we will not feel like we are at home.

If we try to make anything else our home, school or career or money or relationships or politics, anything more important to us than God, we are going to still feel like we're in exile, which is why there are so many people who have everything you could ever want and are still depressed. A woman from our church told me that she didn't grow up going to church at all. But after she got divorced, she started going to a church and she took a class there called Experiencing God, but she was really cynical about it.

She said, "I refuse to pray and I refuse to do the lessons from this class." Well, one night she woke up at four in the morning and felt nudged to do the lesson. She said, "I'm not going to do the lesson at 4:00 in the morning." And then about an hour later, she woke up again, same nudge, do the lesson. She said no, but it kept happening. Finally, in disgust, she got up and said, "Fine. I'll do the lesson." One of the questions in the lesson was, do you love God with your whole heart, soul, and mind?

She said, "No, I don't love God at all. With this divorce, I don't even know what love is." As soon as she said that, the verse from 1 Corinthians 13, the passage that gets read at weddings a lot, it popped into her head, love is patient, love is kind, love endures, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Suddenly, she felt the Holy Spirit around her and she felt intensely loved by God for the first time in her life. Nothing like a divorce to make you feel unloved, but feeling loved by God gave her hope, joy, confidence.

She said, "God kept bugging me until I turned to him." She found her home in God. We were made for relationship with him. If we're not in it, we're not home. Abraham's descendants multiply and generations come and go. Eventually, they all ended up as slaves in Egypt until a man named Moses led them out of Egypt. And then they end up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years looking for the land God had promised them. 40 years wandering in the desert. That's a lot of wandering, 40 years.

Someone needed to ask for directions. I mean, seriously. I mean, if not Moses, then Mrs. Moses, someone needed to ask for direction because they were in exile for 40 years. But

what they discovered is that in exile, God develops in us things we were going to need for our future. While they wander in the desert, the Israelites develop a legal system, an army, a government, all the things they're going to need for their future as a nation. What exile experience are you having? Trust and believe that God is developing in you things you're going to need for the future he has for you.

Well, eventually they enter their promised land and they become a prosperous nation, but they forgot God, worshiped idols, and they failed to do justice, all of which weakened their culture. Until eventually after centuries, the Babylonians came and conquered them, burned Jerusalem and the temple to the ground and carried the Israelites off into exile in Babylon. There's the exile thing again. They're far from home. There's a bunch of false prophets. False prophets saying, "Don't worry, this exile is only going to last two years tops. Then we're all going home to Jerusalem from Babylon."

But God comes along and says, "Eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, not so fast. Nope, nope, nope, nope. Build houses. Settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage your prophets to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. When 70 years are completed for Babylon, then I will bring you back to Jerusalem," and then the verse that's on toothbrushes and bumper stickers and all that.

For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. A little bit different verse in context, isn't it? God basically says to the exiles in Babylon, all your dreams are not going to come true and your worst nightmares are, but I know the plans I have for you. You're not going home. You're going to die in exile, but I know the plans I have for you. They aren't your plans, but they're still good plans. Just because they aren't your plans doesn't mean they aren't good plans.

Somebody needed to hear that today. When he says seek the peace and prosperity the city that you've been exiled to, the word for peace, the Hebrew word there is shalom, which means so much more than peace. It means complete, total, social, emotional, spiritual, and economic flourishing. What this means is that in exile, God is going to use you there. The purpose isn't exile and God doesn't cause it. But in the exile, God has a purpose for you, to use you there to make the world a better place.

Two weeks ago I told you about a man who got wealthy owning a construction company, ended up addicted to drugs, which eventually ended him up being homeless for a while. And then after he got clean, he started a church for people who were drug addicts, and through his ministry they're getting clean. God used him in his place of exile, addiction, homelessness, to make the world a better place, which gives him a deep sense of meaning, purpose, and joy. God has a purpose for you in the exile.

About five or six years ago, I was the speaker at a conference in Amarillo, Texas. I've been to Dallas, San Antonio, Houston, but Amarillo is Texas Texas. This is real Texas. One of their claims to fame in Amarillo is Cadillac Ranch, which my host took me to. There's a picture there. A couple of guys got together and bought these Cadillacs and half buried them nose in the ground, and now it's a tourist destination where people come along and spray paint the cars. The next picture is me after spray-painting some of those cars, which was shockingly fun to do.

But the whole time I was there, one word kept going through my head, why? Why would you do this? I would've loved to have been in a meeting where they thought that up, 'Hey, guys, we've got some money. What should we do with it? Ooh, ooh, I know. Let's bury Cadillacs in the ground. Okay, no bad ideas, but let's keep workshopping this.' Why? When we are in exile and in pain, we ask that question all the time. Why? Why? It is not Cadillac Ranch. There is a meaning. There is a purpose.

God will use you in your exile to make the world a better place. The other thing the Israelites experience in Babylon is that God will bless you even in exile. God says, "I have plans to bring you a future and a hope right there in exile, in Babylon, right there. Where you don't think I can possibly bless you, that is where you're going to prosper. I know you think I only live in the temple in Jerusalem. Oh no, I'm God of the whole world and I'm everywhere. I am your ultimate home. I can bless you even in the place that you think is hopeless. I can bless you there."

Because see, here's the thing, God has yet to bless anyone, anywhere other than where they are. Now, God eventually did. After 70 years, God did get the second generation out of Babylon and back into Jerusalem, back home to Jerusalem for the second generation after 70 years. Sometimes God does deliver us from our exile experiences, but you don't have to wait to get out of exile to be blessed. You don't have to wait to get into that perfect college or that perfect relationship or that perfect marriage or that perfect career or those perfect finances.

You don't have to wait to be blessed, to get to those things to be blessed. God can bless you right where you are. That's how powerful he is. In exile, God pried the Israelites' hands off their temple, their power, their prestige. What they discovered was even without those things, they could still have joy, all of which brings us to Jesus, who is God himself coming in human form in Jesus. What Jesus shows us is that God not only blesses us in exile, God is going to meet you in your exile.

Whatever your exile experience is, you're not alone in it. God loves you so much, he willingly exiled himself from his perfect heaven to become one of us in Jesus to meet you in your exile. Jesus' whole life was one of exile. He wasn't even born in his hometown of Nazareth. He was born in Bethlehem on the road. Immediately after that, King Herod

ordered all the baby boys to be killed, so his parents had to take Jesus as an exile in Egypt to hide him. He was crucified outside the city gates, exiled from the city even in death.

On the cross he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Because at that moment, all the sins of every person, including you and me, were placed on him. As he died, he paid the price for those sins that needs to be paid or there's no justice. In that moment, he is exiled from God's presence. Jesus goes into exile so we can be reconciled to God. He is cast out so that we can come home. Which brings us to the very last chapter of the Bible, very last chapter of the Bible, when Jesus returns to renew this earth to be our perfect home the way he always intended it to be.

The text says, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will make his home with them. He will wipe every tear from their eye. There'll be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. The story of exile starts in Genesis 3 when we reject God and it ends in the new heaven and the new Earth. Now, that ultimate homecoming won't happen until Jesus returns, but we can still have moments of that, moments of God's presence, moments of God's joy, moments of being at home with God right here on earth as it is in heaven.

Two action steps for this week. Two actionn steps for this week. What does God want you to hear today? I mean, I just said a lot of things. Which one is the Holy Spirit highlighting for you other than don't live in New Jersey? Which if that's all you get from this sermon, that's not bad, but it might be something else, like God is our true home. In exile, God develops in us things we'll need for our future. God will use you in exile, bless you in exile, meet you in exile. Which is the Holy Spirit underlining for you?

And then second action step, lose the if onlys. I know I do. We all have lots of if onlys, if only I was married, if only I got into this college, if only I had this job, if only, if only I had different parents, if only I had different kids, then I'd be happy, then I wouldn't feel like I was in exile, then I'd feel like I was home. For the Israelites, it was if only we could get back home to Jerusalem. But God says, "I can bless you wherever you are, even in Babylon, even in Bellevue, even in Issaquah, or that job or that health crisis."

Now, that doesn't mean that God won't deliver us from our problems. Sometimes he does. It just means we don't have to wait to get out of our problems to be blessed. God is so powerful, he can bless us right where we are. Right after my wife and I moved here from California to take this job, I was depressed for a while. You can ask her about it. Not because of you, you were great, but we had two little kids, another one on the way. Up to that point, I'd only been a college pastor and this was a much bigger job, so I was freaked out by that.

We missed our family and our friends in California. For a while, I felt like I was in exile, and I had a lot of, if onlys, if only I didn't have such a stressful job, if only I didn't have all these responsibilities, if only I were back in California. Well, one day I got a call from a former student from my college ministry, and he was trying to decide whether or not to propose to his girlfriend. He was hesitant about it. He said, "I don't know. It just seems like you get married and it's great for a while, but then you have kids and you get a mortgage and you have a stressful job."

It's hard to change jobs because you've got all of these bills. You feel trapped, and then you have to get a minivan." He said that last one like it was death. And then he said, "But you know what? I'm young. I probably don't know. It's probably not like that, right?" I said, "Actually, it's exactly like that. That's exactly what it's like," but that was depressing, so I just started rambling, hoping that eventually I'd say something helpful. It's a counseling technique I've developed. I started talking about the first three years of my marriage to Christina.

The first three years, I call them the golden years. No kids. We went to Italy three times. I wasn't yet doing that college ministry and the stress of all of that. And then the Holy Spirit did something. Suddenly, probably against my will, I suddenly said, "But you know what? If someone said to me, I can magically make those golden years permanent," and when I said that to him, I choked up and I felt this surge of joy. I said, "If someone offered to make those golden years permanent, I would say not on your life in a heartbeat, because then I would've missed so many blessings."

I wouldn't have my amazing kids. Brad, we wouldn't be having this conversation because I never would've been a college pastor, so I wouldn't know you and wouldn't know so many other people that I love. I wouldn't have gotten a chance to lead this pretty cool church, BelPres, with some pretty amazing people. No, I do not want those golden years to be permanent."

Suddenly, I felt a freedom and joy because I realized all those years I did college ministry, stressed out much of the time, wanting another job, felt like I was an exile, but all along God had been blessing me in what I thought was exile. God used me in the lives of hundreds of college students. God had been developing me skills that I was going to need to lead this church. If God met me in "that exile," then wouldn't he meet me in this new one? And he has in some beautiful ways for almost 21 years.

In the midst of a move and a scary new job and missing friends and family in California, I felt joy because I could see that God was blessing me not somewhere else, not if I had something else, but right where I was. I found my home in God and my home in what God was doing, and I did not feel like in exile. One of the most important verses in the

entire Bible, super important verse in the Bible. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. It's from the story of the Prodigal Son who asked his father for his inheritance now, which in that culture was the same thing as saying, "I wish you were dead, old man." And then he goes to a far country in exile, squanderers all of his money, and ends up starving and returns to his father's home to ask his father to be a hired hand. Returns from exile to ask his father to be a hired hand. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him.

What that means is that the father had not stopped scanning the horizon every single day, hoping for some sign of his son. He ran to him. Men in that culture did not run because they'd have to hike up their robe to do it and they'd look ridiculous, so they didn't run. But this father had cared only about his son, so he cast his dignity aside and runs to his son and embraces him and kisses him. Jesus tells this story, which in some ways is about Jesus. Jesus left his father's home in heaven, went to a far place, exiled to a far country, was crucified, then raised from the dead and returned to his father.

It's about Jesus, but it is also obviously about us and God. What does God like? What does God really like? He is this Father. Whatever exile we're in, whether it's through our own bad decisions or just external events, he is our true home. Turn to him because he is waiting, scanning the horizon for you. In the words of an old hymn, softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me. Come home. Come home. You who are weary, come home. As we go to prayer, just invite you to close your eyes.

If you have never found your home in Jesus, if you have never made Jesus your leader and forgiver and you are being nudged to do that, then just in your mind agree with this prayer. Jesus, I know you're my home, but I'm far from you. Jesus, please come into my light, be my leader, be my forgiver, and give me power to follow you every day. If you prayed that prayer, now you're a Christian and you just need to do one other thing. Before you leave today, tell someone. Tell me, tell someone you've seen upfront, tell a prayer minister so that we can help you take your next steps.

And then for the rest of us, Jesus, I know at least for me, and I'm guessing there's some people in this room that could say this, you've been my home for a long time, but I keep leaving home. I keep walking away from home for other things that I think are going to feel more like home, but I just end up back in exile. Jesus, thank you that you're always calling for us, always scanning the horizon for us to return. Jesus, we want to find our home in you. Keep calling us, reaching out to us, bringing us closer and closer to you. You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Bring us home, Jesus, through your power and in your name, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How would this radical concept sound to the Jews living in refugee camps in Babylon?
- What does this text tell us about exile?
- What reasons does God give for extending the exile?
- How does this instruct us to respond when we are in a season of "exile"?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.