

The City of Exile

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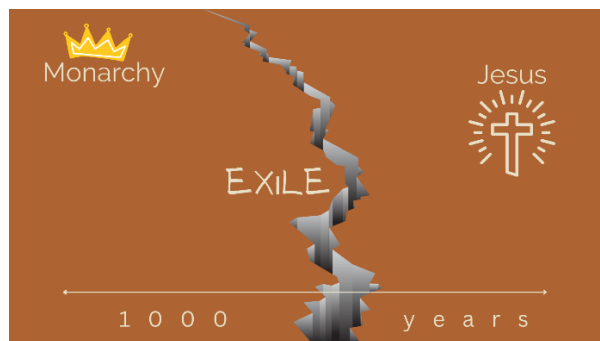
Behind the Text

I want to take a different approach to three lectionary passages for the week. 2 Kings, Jeremiah and Luke. Usually we take one passage and go in deeper in order to see what we learn for life. These are our lectionary texts for the week and I want to use a different method of reading.

Today's we'll take a "meta-narrative" approach in which we read three passages that arc across nearly 1000 years of Jewish history. We ask the question, "What is it that we learn from the three seemingly unrelated passages." Are you game?

"Meta-narrative: An overarching account of interpretation of events and circumstances that provides a pattern or structure for people's beliefs and gives meaning to their experiences."

Firstly, a 60-second history lesson on context. Here is an easy and quick way to think about the historical context of what we are considering. It is a thousand years from the establishment of the monarchy under David to the coming of Jesus.



We begin with the time of Saul, David and Solomon, the *first* kings of Israel (our 2 Kings 5:1-15 passage for the day). Thereafter, there are other kings but they live in a geopolitical wilderness dominated by Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. Then we come to Jesus of Nazareth treading the dusty roads of the highlands of Samaria on his way to Jerusalem (our Luke 17:11-19 passage for the day).

Roughly dividing this 1000-year period of history, is a cataclysmic event in which the Persians sweep into the Land of Israel and carry many people captive into distant Babylon. The "captivity" lasted about seventy years, after which the temple, which had been destroyed in the invasion, is rebuilt by Nehemiah (this is our Jeremiah 29:1-7).

End of brief history lecture! Are you strapped into your pew and ready to go?

So the invasion of lands isn't new – precisely what we see in the world today. It is all the more deplorable and discouraging in that the human race continues to repeat its self-destructive patterns.

Except for the brief period of one man's life, Solomon, who enjoyed both spiritual and political hegemony for a period of time on earth. The rest of the history of Judaism, after Solomon, was a time of political and national decline.¹ Israel has been, for almost its entire history, out of power.

That for 950 out of 1000 years Jewish experience was in the political wilderness tells us something about the Kingdom of God. It is not of this world. It is “within us” as Jesus said.

Sadly, in the time of Jesus that decline was about to reach its nadir, its lowest point of adversity and despair – the destruction of the temple and Judea itself (tune in Nov 13th for a message on that text).

In the Text

The Ten Lepers

That brings us to the healing of the ten lepers *in Samaria*. Leprosy was a terrible, contagious skin disease.

We have just lived through a time where a highly contagious disease had us stuffed up in our homes, washing our groceries and abandoning our church services. We understand the psychology of the curse of leprosy.

Obviously, this a story about gratitude. ***“Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?... This is a pretty good Thanksgiving text, sure. Be grateful, be the one who returns to thank Jesus.***

It is the details that makes it more than just about gratitude. Jesus is in Samaria. Apparently, nine of these lepers were Jewish, and one was a Samaritan.

Was none of them found to return to give praise to God except this foreigner? ...this Samaritan...

As we know from our message on the *Samaria Policy* (see July 3, 2022) he is from the hated population of central Palestine who had their own priests, temple and Torah.

Judean Jews despised the Samaritans for lots of reasons. It was not just a religious prejudice of the Jews, but a nationalist one as well. The Samaritans were syncretistic mongrels. That Luke has Jesus in Samaria for 10 chapters is more important theologically than geographically.

And thinking about from this leper’s point of view, it must have been difficult to humble himself before his enemy. Can you imagine how difficulty that would be? How would you like it?

In this story the point is that the healing of God, the release from disease and ostracism, transcended the hostilities of nationalism and religious prejudice. It blew them up! It even blew up the pathology of contagious disease.

When the power of God meets the power of empire the healing of God breaking out! This is so much so, that the healing of God to the world travelled specifically through Samaria.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The Naaman Story

Naaman is the great general of the Assyrian army (c 850 BCE). After some inquiries about how to get his leprosy healed, he was invited to leave his own country and go to the highlands of Samaria to be healed of his leprosy by some dusty prophet who was out of favor with his own government. Elisha. This all occurs nine centuries before Jesus; how is that for meta-narrative?

Assyria was the Russia of its day. It would be like asking one of today’s inhumane Russian generals to go to Ukraine, humble himself before the lowest of his enemy, and wash himself in the Dnipro River.

Naaman is healed and goes to the man of God, stood before him and said, ***“Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”***

By the way, an interesting detail of the narrative is that Naaman thought he could buy his healing. He brought 750 lbs. of silver and 150 lbs. of gold to Elisha, who refused to accept it. Healing can't be bought. It only comes from a place of humility. Both the leper of Luke and Naaman had to bend the knee before their enemy.

In this story the point is that the healing of God transcended the hostilities of nationalism and religious prejudice; even the pathology of contagious disease. The brush of the power of God and the power of empire, results in the healing of God breaking out!

Sidebar: Ancient Syria was known as Aram. You may know that the lingua franca of Palestine was Aramaic; Jesus' native tongue.

The City of Exile

The story of Jeremiah 29 is how the Word of the Lord came through Jeremiah to the exiled people of Israel when they were resettling in their new city of Babylon. They had been brought there as captives after Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed the temple of Jerusalem c. 590 BCE.

When crushed under the heel of empire, what is the advice of God through the prophet Jeremiah?

He says, ***Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:***

Build a house, plant a garden, get married, have kids, ...***do not decrease.***

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jeremiah 29:7).

When the power of empire, mammon, worldly power overshadows us, we remain the patient confident people of faith. We seek the well being of the place to which God has called us – the city of our exile.

Sidebar: Do you want to hear how the First Nations Version renders the name “Israel” (remember Jesus is *Creator Sets Free*)? It is *Wrestles with Creator*. Moses is *Drawn from the Water*. Peter is *Stands on the Rock*.

Do you ever wonder how your name would be rendered? What is in a name?

From the Text

Here are some ways I suggest we can take lessons for living from these three stories which suggest that God's power is stronger than the earthly powers.

The teaching is about what happens when the power of God brushes up against the powers of this world. You see, we are actually in a City of Exile.

Lesson #1: God's answer to empire is seek the welfare of the city. Be a good citizen and vote.

Lesson #2: The church isn't a citadel; we aren't a fortress; we are an outpost of Yahweh, of Creator Sets Free, in a City of Exile. Judea was a outpost to the world (to Assyrians, the Persians, Greeks, the Romans). And likewise we are a missionary outpost in this city.

The church isn't here to protect you. The church is here to make you competent to live in the City of Exile. As one said, "It is far better to render Beings in your care competent than to protect them." And the question for parents is "...do you want to make your children safe, or do you want to make them strong?"²

Lesson #3: We do well to remember that Isaiah 9:6 prophesied that the government will be on *His* shoulders, not ours. We aren't called to run the world. And when he came into the world it was not with the power of empire, but the mighty power of grace, love, forgiveness and sacrifice.

Yesterday in my CNN feed I read about a film entitled "Stranger at the Gate." It just won a special jury prize at the 2022 Tribeca Film Festival (CNN story, October 8, 2022).

The film is the story of a former Marine back from several tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq, Mac McKinney, went to a mosque in Muncie, Indiana intending to plant a bomb. A big, mean looking guy with tatoos.

On a reconnaissance visit he stormed into the Islamic Center of Muncie and was met by people who, although they knew this guy was trouble, were so kind and welcoming that he was saved by their love. He was embraced by the community and eventually converted to Islam and found his way back from his despair and consuming hatred. The power of love overcoming the power of hate.

Lesson #4, and our greatest lesson from this meta-narrative: When political power intersects with the power of God something extraordinary happens; something unexpected, something otherworldly: God comes out. Even in a mosque.

The greatest inspiration in history about our relationship to power and the secular community is the life of Jesus. When he was confronted with empire he responded by bringing healing and redemption and forgiveness. We mustn't lose this marvelous hope we have.

You never saw Jesus take up the cudgel of earthly power. His confrontation with empire cost him everything. Death, even death on a cross. But it produced the hope of the salvation of the world. When Jesus encountered the Roman Empire love broke through, God came out, healing and redemption rose victoriously from the violence.

Last Tuesday we hosted an All Candidates Meeting here at the church. Organized by Leif and very capably emceed by our own Pastor Gary. It was standing room only! I wanted to get up and preach.

But seriously, it was really inspiring to see people actively engaged in discussions about the welfare of the community.

I was the guy who got to ring the bell when they went overtime. It was awesome! I've rarely felt so powerful.

Why should we work so hard for the well being of our City of Exile? Because the path of life isn't predetermined. The reason God calls us to a life of endeavor, prayer and what I'll call *holy resilience* in life, is because God gets out through our determination to be agents of change and redemption, even in the City of Exile.

It's not about power or being victorious over the world. We can shape the world around us by through our dynamic relationship with the divine. That is our hope! That is the gospel!

Thanks be to God.

¹ On a small number of occasions before the monarchy the power of God overtook the political powers of the day. Moses defeated pharaoh to lead the people out of Egypt. Joshua conquered Canaan. Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal. The sun stood still in the sky during battle for Joshua in Joshua 10.

² Jordan Peterson, *Twelve Rules for Life*, p. 47.