

EXILE

Sermon for Christmas 2B: Mt. 2:13-15, 19-23; Jer. 31:7-14

LPC, 1/4/09

I'm sure there are international agencies that track things like the number of people living in exile around the world at any given time. There must be millions. Fortunately to those of us living in America the idea of exile is blessedly foreign. The idea of being driven from our homes and forced to live abroad is further from us than from many people in the world. But still we can imagine the displacement, desperation and fear that the state of exile engenders.

There are situations that come up in our lives, however, that have a lot to do with exile. There are exile situations that do not literally take us from our physical homes. Instead we are occasionally displaced from our nesting places of comfort and assurance, figuratively speaking.

This happens to people who have been diagnosed with a potentially fatal disease. Or to people who have been fired from their jobs. Or to people in grief and mourning.

When things like this happen to us, everything feels temporarily out of place and we long for home – some place of security that is for the time being denied to us. Sleep or company or our usual diversions do no more than distract us momentarily from the awareness that we are displaced. Then the knowledge of being in exile comes flooding back and the longing for home, for normalcy, returns.

People in this kind of spiritual exile feel forsaken by God. But in fact exile is an extremely common theme for the people of God in the Bible. The ancient Hebrews were in exile in Egypt, in the time of Moses. Years later the people of Israel were exiled to Babylon. This is the situation behind the passage from Jeremiah we heard this morning.

Jesus himself, as an infant, is exiled with Mary and Joseph to Egypt. This is the story we heard in this morning's lesson from the Gospel of Matthew. When the little family is finally able to return to the land of Israel, they are unable to return to Bethlehem, and take refuge in Nazareth. You might say that that Jesus grows up in exile.

From the prevalence of the exile theme in Holy Scripture we must conclude that the experience of exile is a common one for the people of God. Far from being a sign of God's withdrawal, exile is portrayed in the Bible as a situation in which God acts.

Furthermore, in the case of Jesus' little family, we have an example of exile imposed as a means of protection. As traumatic as leaving Palestine was for Joseph and Mary and their little baby, it was only thing they could do. Jesus could not have fulfilled the ministry God intended for him if not for going into exile early on. If Joseph had not made this tactical retreat, Jesus would have been massacred by Herod's men along with the rest of the male babies of Bethlehem. Going into exile not only saved Jesus' life, it enabled him to fulfill God's will for him later on.

Another thing to note about the exile of Joseph's family is that God continues to communicate with Joseph even in exile. God continues to look out for him, communicating from time to time about Joseph's best course of action. Being in exile does not mean being forsaken. I will interpose here that although being in exile does not mean being forsaken, an exiled person may still *feel* forsaken. But God does not need our feelings to remain faithful. God remains faithful, even if this can only be perceived in retrospect.

The final thing I will say about biblical lessons on exile is derived from the prophecy of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was addressing the people of Israel at their absolute nadir. They had been stripped of their land and enslaved by the Babylonians. Bear in mind how vastly significant their land was to the people of Israel. Their land symbolized God's gift to them, God's favor to them, God's promise to them. Being deprived of the land was more than mere displacement. It looked like God had abandoned them.

It's in the worst of this exile situation that Jeremiah, who is certainly no Pollyanna, promises restoration: "The Lord has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion (Jerusalem), and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord."

Jeremiah's lesson is this: Your exile is not permanent. God will redeem you. God will bring you home.

Most of you know that before I came to Wheeling I was working in the Diocese of Washington as an assistant at a suburban church. My working conditions were good, my boss was kind, and the parish dynamic was healthy. And I was miserable. My prayers and my consultations with my spiritual director were wracked with anguished questions, "Why can't I be happy here? Whatever is wrong with me?" All I knew was that something wasn't right. It sure felt like exile.

I don't believe that God makes people suffer just to build character. But I couldn't otherwise make sense of my situation. Finally God led me to Lawrencefield, and it was like coming home. My sense of exile simply went away. In retrospect, I can now make sense of my unhappiness in suburban Washington by thinking of it as exile. This exile may, as in Jesus' case, been a means of protection, or it may have facilitated the fulfillment of God's plan in a manner hidden from me. I don't know.

I only know, in retrospect, that God stayed with me. I can also see that God eventually led me out of exile. God's promise held.

God's promise holds. Your exile is not permanent. God will redeem you. God will bring you home.