

## **Exiles in Babylon**

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Have you ever been to Penn Station in New York during evening rush hour? It is not for the fainthearted. Waves of people flow through the halls, headed for the Long Island Railroad. You have to keep moving with the crowd even if you are clueless about where you are going. One day I stopped dead in my tracks and was nearly trampled. I was spell bound before a large overhead sign. In big, bold letters it said: TRAINS TO BABYLON.

Trains to Babylon? Trains to BABYLON? Has anyone read the news about Babylon from the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament? Never mind that Babylon is modern Baghdad, a contemporary American battle field. An earlier story there marks one of the great turning points in our religious heritage. Babylon is the far country where our spiritual forbears learned the meaning of hope. It is the place of loss where they discovered their identity among strangers.

It began in the year 587 BCE, when Israel was conquered by the dreaded Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem was reduced to rubble, and the great temple was destroyed. It was so catastrophic that the event shapes the rest of the Bible. When you say 587, it's like saying 9/11. It conjures up a deep, common trauma that represents the community's worst experience.

But in 587, Nebuchadnezzar did not stop at physical devastation. He had a bigger defeat in mind. He divided up the Jews and dispersed them all over the region in order to destroy their culture and identity. He took the strongest of the refugees to Babylon and made them watch as the artifacts from their temple were laid at the feet of Babylonian idols. This was like pouring salt into the prisoners' wounds. Would they lose God, too?

One of the psalms written in this time cries, "By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." It goes on to describe how the Babylonians made fun of them and said, *now* sing us one of your old hymns. But the Jews put away their harps and would not sing. "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" the psalmist asks. It was a time of great lamentation.

But the story does not stop there. Years went by, and then a generation. The captives settled into Babylon and made their way. Some eventually got good jobs and became successful. But they never forgot that they were in exile. Babylon became familiar, and Babylon became their address. But it did not give them their identity. After several generations they probably would echo the 20<sup>th</sup> century words of James Agee. In writing about his origins he said they "...will not, oh will not; not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am." Babylon provided the exiles with a life but not an identity. As a result, their spirits became parched and dry.

So there I was on a Tuesday afternoon in Penn Station, remembering all these things as I watched people rush for the train to Babylon. I suspect that many people in this country make that journey today, not to the Babylon of geography but the Babylon of the spirit. In a world of mobility and rapid change, we inhabit places that are familiar but do not inform us. We find ourselves in a modern world that will not, oh will not, not now, not ever tell us who we are.

So listen again as we hear a voice from the Exile this morning. Ezekiel "...was among the exiles by the river" and he writes about the times when he saw visions and had conversations with God. The most famous vision is the one we hear today, the valley of the dry bones. It is the first resurrection story in the Holy Scriptures. Imagine heaps of old bones lying in the dirt. Think of the killing fields in Cambodia with its rows of skulls. Think of Picasso's painting of Guernica with its victims' bodies flying apart. That's the valley of dry bones. They have been there for over a generation, bleached and cured until the whole valley rattles every time the wind blows.

And you know what happens next. God orders Ezekiel to speak, to prophesy, and those dry bones begin to move. Ezekiel says "suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone." Wait! This is just like Genesis when God created the world through speaking: let there be....light, humankind. Now God shares the honor with Ezekiel. The prophet speaks and the bones become bodies, with muscles and flesh. What an achievement! But Ezekiel cannot fix everything. Only God can breathe life into those old boney bodies, just as God breathed life into Adam. Ezekiel says, "The breath came into them and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." Then God introduces Ezekiel to the rehabilitated bones and says, "...these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely' ... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

Ezekiel's story takes off now as the people come together and plan for the future. They even argue about what their plans should be. That's when the reader knows the exile is pretty much over. Anytime a group of people argue about their future, they already live in hope and anticipation. The Babylonian exiles will never have what they lost, but they will have a future. They also have an identity because God has breathed life into them, as only God can do. They have become the people for whom to know God is to live. It is as clear as if it were on a driver's license.

We hear a lot of arguments about our future these days. The presidential candidates and the administration and the press are all weighing in. Even in the church there is no shortage of opinions about how things should be done. At Trinity we have involved parishioners in planning for the future and we don't always agree, although there is a Spirit-filled convergence of ideas here.

Isn't it great that we believe the future is worth arguing about? Isn't it wonderful that we live in anticipation of a shared future? That's the breath of God blowing among us. That's when Babylon loses its hold on us. We know who we are and to whom we belong in a

complex modern world. We are those who for whom to know God is to live. It is our identity.

For the captives in Babylon, their identity grew out of a renewed relationship with God. They began to cherish their religious traditions and even wrote them down for the first time. A lot of our Scriptures were recorded in this era because they wanted to pass them along to future generations. They also had to articulate their faith in new ways in their setting. They built the first neighborhood synagogues to replace the long lost temple. In time the exiles knew exactly who they were in Babylon. They had that breath of life that only God can give.

Last week the Pew Research Center released a new report on the shifting religious landscape in America. It confirms a lot of what we already know, but also gives fresh insight. One of the largest and most rapidly growing religious groups in this country is labeled “unaffiliated.” It is made up predominantly of those who believe in God but have not found a religious identity in a specific faith community. This group often includes our own friends and families. I hope that many of these folks find their way to Trinity and experience the Spirit of God among us here.

I pray that all of us here will know the breath of God blowing through the dry bones of our spirits. If you feel parched in your prayer life, if you feel doubt and indifference knocking around in your head like old bones, if you are exhausted by the demands of living in Babylon, it’s alright. God continues to speak to you and breathe life through you. There are new ways for you to encounter God, because to know God is to live.

The exiles in Babylon learned this, Jesus preaches this, and now we receive it. God’s Spirit is breathing life all around us, all the time. Let us inhale and exhale as we give thanks for today and embrace the future. Let us give thanks for the blessings of today, and be poised to embrace the blessings of the future.

Amen.