

March 24, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
Title: "Saved from Exile"
Text: Psalm 107: 1-13, 39-43



When my first born was almost two years old, my mother gave me a book. It was filled with discipline techniques for those less than compliant little people in our lives. In scanning the table of contents, I saw a chapter about 'time out.' I thought it was a new invention. The more I read about this 'time out', I realized that "time out" was just a new term for a rather old idea. Long before we called it such, children were sat or stood facing the corner. How many Dennis the Menace cartoons were there of Dennis explaining his injustice from a cornered chair?

In the school system where I taught, In School Suspension (ISS) was a special classroom in a portable building out behind the field house where students were sent with books and assignments basically to sit in the corner all day. Their punishment was removal from the halls during passing period where all the good gossip is exchanged; removal from the lunch room where after-school plans were hatched; their punishment was isolation from the community.

Isn't that the same concept as our modern day correctional facilities? The way people are punished is by removal from society, isolation from one's friends, family, and home. Far before we began speaking of 'time out', we have understood that exile – separating people from home and community- has tremendous psychological impact.

Much of our biblical texts were written by people who were in exile. Most of our texts were written about the consequences of and the lessons learned from exile. Most of the Hebrew scriptures were recorded in or around the time when foreign armies drove the Israelites out of their homeland. The people are devastated- gone are their farms, their orchards, their homes, gone is their place of worship where they could offer sacrifices and encounter God's forgiveness, gone were their cities. Writing down their history while they are in exile in Babylon, they remember the time centuries before when they were in exile in Egypt.

The foundation of the Hebrew faith is the story of Exodus and exile and how God delivered them from the same. God delivered them from captivity in exile. The fundamental characteristic of God's nature from Hebrew scripture tells that YAHWEH is one who delivers; God saves when people are in exile. Liberation from bondage is the central meaning of salvation in both the Old and New Testaments.

We can talk metaphorically about bondage or exile that we find in the spiritual sense. We are in bondage to our culture: the one that tells us if we buy more, we will be happier. We are in exile to our bodies: when we hear if we were taller, slimmer, smoother, firmer, and younger we would be more loveable. We are in exile through our addictions, to drugs or alcohol, or food, or shopping, or television, or facebook, or twitter. We are in bondage metaphorically speaking, and our bondage can suck the life right out of us. Our exile is serious.

However, the deliverance found throughout the Hebrew narrative is a very concrete material sense. They didn't separate the spiritual exile from the material. People were in need of food; people were in need of home; people were in need of physical healing; people were in need of safety from their enemies. Their faith proclaimed that YAHWEH delivered them

from slavery in Egypt in the past, and YAHWEH would deliver them from exile in Babylon in their present, and YAHWEH would save them. YAHWEH saves nations, YAHWEH saves people. God's nature is to save. That's salvation of the Bible.

Some parts of the Hebrew scripture reads as though YAHWEH is Israel's God. YAHWEH saves Israel. God is on Israel's side. But the prophet Amos knows otherwise. He proclaims that YAHWEH is also one who delivers other nations, other people also. There is ONE God of all who would deliver and save all. There is one God who does not see human lines drawn upon a map, but who hears the cries of any who are in need.

Some say the problem started with coffee. Coffee demand in North America increased long before Starbucks popped up on every corner. In the 1850s, our eagerness to consume the dark liquid caffeine changed life more than two thousand miles away. Once we wanted it, Salvadorian coffee crops were valuable. Once they were valuable, they were taken away from the masses and claimed by the ruling class. Over decades the story grew worse and worse. Massacres and barbarity extinguished about 30,000 Salvadorians. "Death squads" exterminated entire villages; bodies of tortured and mutilated peasants scattered the countryside. Somewhere in the mess of El Salvadorian political history and repercussions the US was involved. The U.S. trained an elite Salvadorian military unit responsible for killing thousands and terrorizing all.¹

We don't have to go as far as El Salvador to find people in desperation. Our southern border has become a nightmare of existence. The American drug market created another demand. A supply pipeline emerged to meet our demand. Rival drug-lords slaughter people daily in the Mexican border towns. Parents keep children locked in their homes because it is too dangerous for them to leave their house.² Thousands of people die in drug-related violence in Mexico every few months. Journalists who report the crimes find themselves victims, so residents use Twitter to pass along locations of the latest gun battles. While the rival. Children and innocent bystanders are caught in the slaughtering.³

So they leave. They leave El Salvador; they leave Mexico; they leave homes and jobs, and oftentimes they leave the elderly behind. They leave to find safety; they leave to find hope; they leave to find a better place to raise their children. They risk the desert. They risk the river. They risk the bullets and the teargas. They forfeit their language, their holidays, they depart in sorrow from the land that witnessed their birth. They enter into a condition we reserve as punishment; they enter into exile. They enter exile in faith and hope of salvation, biblical salvation as the Hebrews tell it.

Hear these words from Psalm 107 again – ancient words from Hebrew people that speak to our context also:

Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those God delivered from trouble and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.
Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town,

¹ Harold j. Recinos, *Who comes in the Name of the Lord?* Nashville: Abingdon, 1997, 87.

² The Brownsville Herald. 17 March 2010.1A.

³ www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world/more-violence-in-mexico-as-2010-death-toll-nears-one-thousand

hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.
They cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God delivered them. ...
when the people are diminished and brought low through oppression, trouble and
sorrow, God pours contempt on princes and makes them wander in wastes,
but God raises up the needy out of distress, and makes their families like flocks.
The righteous see it and are glad.

The scriptures proclaim the right response to all who have experienced God's blessings, to all who have experienced God's deliverance, to all who have experienced God's salvation..the only response is praise and thanksgiving- and joy in sharing that salvation with others.

Yes, those who leave the land of their birth endure exile to find sustenance and salvation in adoptive lands. But we children of the European immigrants put up fences against the children of Latin American, Mexican, Haitian, African and Asian immigrants. We forget how we have contributed to their exile through our consumption. We fear instead of welcome, and we don't remember that we were once in exile too.

Jesus knew the Hebrew history of exile. He witnessed the oppression and exclusion of the weak and vulnerable at the hands of the political and religious authorities in his life. So, Jesus welcomed those his culture found despicable: the lowly, the sinners, the prostitutes, the laborers, the diseased and misshapen, the political enemies of his people. He welcomed the old and the young; he welcomed the rich and the poor. He welcomed the exiled and gave us a home in God who provides salvation

May we live the example of Jesus.