

## **Opening & Prayer**

May the grace and peace of the Lord be with you all this morning. In the calendar of the church, today is All Saints Day. It is a day when we remember and honour all of those who, going before us, have given us an image of what it means to follow Christ. So as we pray let us remember the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, and who surround us now:

God of life and resurrection, thank you for the gift of your saints, who have shown us what it means to faithfully follow you. Grant to us the grace to trust you, just as they did. Bless the words that I speak, and bless those who listen. May my words be transformed and used by your spirit to speak to them. And may your kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven. AMEN.

## **Historical Context: Understanding the People of God as a Nation in Exile**

In 1 Peter chapter 2, Peter tells his audience that they are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. But there's a problem with this image: they don't live in a kingdom. How can they be a people, or a nation, if they don't control their own state? Peter solves this problem by reaching back into Israel's history, to the experience of Israel as exiles in Babylon. He writes:

“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.”

This passage reminds us that the experience of Israel in exile was extremely influential for Judaism and for the first Christians. One of the most important ways that Christians have understood ourselves is as foreigners whose citizenship is in the Kingdom of God. But when Jeremiah wrote his prophecies, he didn't know what was going to happen. He was living in the midst of upheaval and turmoil and he was writing to a disillusioned people. The experiment with nationhood had failed. How had this come about? What could they hope for now?

Six centuries before Jesus, the Babylonian Empire captured the tiny but strategic nation of Israel. And, just like all empires, the Babylonians were worried about the people they had just conquered. At the time, the standard practice for empires was to demand a tribute and set up a client kingdom. But these treaties were often unreliable, and the empire had to return again and again to reassert control. The other option was to kill the leaders of the nations they conquered and take the people as slaves. But you couldn't kill everybody, and sometimes the people who were left behind rose up and took back

control. So, rather than setting up a client kingdom, and rather than killing all of the leaders and taking the people as slaves, the Babylonians tried something new. They took a large part of the population as hostages and spread them out throughout the provinces of the empire, and they left some of the people back in Israel.

This was a pretty clever policy, because it meant that the people who were left behind in Israel probably had relatives in Babylon. If they rose up in rebellion to throw off the Babylonians, it would put their families in danger. And vice versa, the people who were taken to Babylon knew that if they made any trouble in the empire, their relatives back in Israel would pay the price. On top of all that, this policy preserved the work force and put the skilled Israelite leaders to work for the empire. So it was a pretty smart plan. Some would probably have called it enlightened.

### **The Exile Experience Today: Understanding Ourselves as a Displaced People**

I admit that as I read this story, I couldn't really relate to Israel's experience. I've lived in relative comfort and safety all of my life, and no one has ever taken me captive. But I have had some experience with feeling alone and displaced. When I was 12 years old, my parents decided to move our family out of the city, 45 minutes away onto an acreage. It was a decision that they felt was necessary, but I was not happy about it. I enjoyed where we lived. At 12 years old, I was just getting my first tastes of independence and autonomy. I had a job that earned me a bit of spending money. I had a bike that could take me all over town. And I had friends that I could visit whenever I wanted. Grande Prairie was small enough that there was plenty of natural beauty around, and I spent many hours at the woods by my house or at Muskoseepi Park, exploring the Bear Creek ravine. So I didn't need to live on an acreage to be exposed to nature. Moving away meant that I would be leaving all the things that I enjoyed doing. Except for my family, I would be alone. I felt like I was going into exile.

But there are many people around the world today who understand the experience of exile much more acutely than I do. Too many people know what it is like to leave their home against their will. Some are driven by economic pressures, and some leave because of violent conflict. When the tanks roll into town, or when the jobs roll out of town, people are dislocated. Families are uprooted and separated. There are people in this congregation who know exactly what this feels like. You've experienced what it means to leave your home to find safety, or to leave those you love to find work and a future.

So you know what it's like to go into exile. You have literally been strangers in a strange land; a people among peoples. And so you also know that one of the challenges that exiles face is the pressure to assimilate.

## **The Temptation to Remain Aloof: Imagining Ourselves in the Experience of Israel**

When you are in exile, your body is physically in one place, but your heart and your soul belong somewhere else. You cling to your customs and your cultural practices for a sense of identity and normalcy. You may feel out of place here, but you know that somewhere else, you fit in and you belong.

As the people of Israel were being lead into exile, they were still reeling from losing the war. Many of them wanted to remain separate from their Babylonian conquerers. They longed for home, and they didn't want to get too comfortable in this foreign land.

Psalm 137 is a song of a displaced people longing for home, in deep pain:

“By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.

“On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.

“For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’

“How could we sing the Lord’s song  
in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!

“Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.”

The feeling of homesickness in this psalm is thick. But there was also a religious logic to their desire. The prophets of Israel had warned them that if they didn't follow God's laws, God would punish them. They knew what God required of them: to offer the correct sacrifices, to refrain from marrying strangers, to keep themselves pure and separate from the nations around them. But still, they had sinned. Their kings had lusted after power. Against God's wishes, they had signed trade deals with the nations around them. They had put their trust in the strength of their military, and their economy. And now they had been conquered, and the prophets explained that they were being punished

for their sin. But if they had broken God's laws while they were in their own land, where they had the temple and could worship God correctly, how much more impossible would it be for them to keep God's laws in a strange land? They knew that if they were going to survive the exile, they would need to double-down, to be extra vigilant to remain pure and separate.

When my family moved, we began looking for a new church to attend. But like the people of Israel, it was hard for me. I didn't really want to go to a new church. At my home church, I was well known. It was a big church, and they had fun games. In just a few years I would be old enough to join the youth group. But as we visited the churches in the small towns nearby, I was an outsider. I didn't fit in. They had small classes, and they all knew each other, and they did things differently than I was accustomed to. I told myself that I didn't need these people, that I was part of a better community, and that someday I would go back.

Mennonites also have some experience with dislocation. Right from the beginning, we have been a people in exile. And for much of our history, Mennonites have spoken Low German wherever we went. Speaking our own language allowed us to stay separate, to not assimilate into our surrounding cultures. We believed that we had a better language, and we preferred our own community.

### **Seeking Shalom: God's Plan to Preserve (Save) the World**

It was in this kind of situation, and to people like us, that the prophet Jeremiah spoke. These words still speak to me when I find myself in strange and uncomfortable situations:

“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 houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and 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.”

Rather than counselling the people to remain pure and separate, as they had always understood their religion, Jeremiah flipped the script and told them that God wanted them to assimilate. They were not to lose their trust in God; they were to remain distinct. But they were to become friends with their neighbours, to integrate their families through marriage, and take an interest in the wellbeing of the local community.

This called for a radical shift in thinking, but the people listened to Jeremiah's prophecy, and obeyed the Word of the LORD. They sought the peace of their city. And while they were in exile, the leaders of Israel adapted their religion to their new situation.

Previously, they were used to offering sacrifices in a central temple, but that wasn't possible anymore. So they invented the synagogue, and they said that, if a minimum of 10 Jews gathered together, they could read Torah and worship God together. And most importantly, they re-interpreted the concept of sacrifice: they said that the sacrifice that God requires is to act justly and to love mercy.

After my family moved, I was upset and homesick for my old house. But that summer, my brother and I began looking for things to do, and we decided to build a tree fort. We built a ladder and a platform, and on top of that platform, we built a second platform, which could serve as a roof. It made me feel like this was now my home, and it made me start to look for the good things in my new place. As long as I was focused on what I'd lost, I was miserable, and I made those around me miserable. But when I could engage with my new place, everyone around me was better off as well.

Similarly, when this congregation at Lendrum was founded, you also chose to engage with your new location in Edmonton, Canada. You made a conscious decision to use English, not German, in your worship. After generations of separation, your decision to speak English was a choice to enter into Canadian society. As long as you remained separate, you were able to maintain an ethnic identity. But when you chose to integrate, your influence and values began to spread throughout the city. You helped found EMCN, the Edmonton Recycling program, Edmonton's Habitat for Humanity, and so many other organizations.

### **Salt and Light**

It reminds me of what Jesus said in Matthew chapter 5. In Jesus' day, six centuries after the Jeremiah's time, the people of Israel were again spread throughout a global empire. This time it was the Romans. But now there were synagogues in all corners of the empire. And it wasn't just Jewish people who worshiped at the synagogues, but godfearers (or righteous gentiles) as well. These were people who worshiped the God of Israel, but didn't observe all of the practices and rituals of the Jews.

So in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says to his listeners: "you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world."

Today we worry about too much salt in our diets. But at that time, salt was more than just an overused flavour enhancer. Salt is essential for animal life. And in an era before refrigeration, salt was an effective food preservative. And because of these life-giving properties, salt had a sacred quality and was used in ritual sacrifices throughout the

ancient world.

Similarly, today we we have light pollution. But at that time oil for lamps was costly, and light at night was a luxury. A small town would probably be completely dark at night. Only a large city would have lights on at night. If they saw a city with lights on, people would marvel at the extravagance of having light at night, and they would praise that city and talk of its glory. And if you were a traveler after dark, the lights of a city would also be a beacon guiding you to safety – a very welcome sight.

So Jesus said to his listeners: You are the salt of the earth: you are necessary for life, you are a sacred preservative. And you are the light of the world: your works are a beacon of hope, enhancing the glory of the city wherein you dwell.

### **Conclusion**

So what about us today? As a church, and as Christians, we are a people among peoples. We are foreigners whose true citizenship is in the kingdom of God. We are an exile nation.

Jeremiah's vision was huge. He saw that God wasn't just working to save Israel, God was working to save Babylon too.

Jesus expanded on Jeremiah's vision, and taught us that God is working to save the entire world. God's people are the preserving salt. And through the uncomfortable experience of exile, we are being spread into the world and worked into all of its crevices, into the places that we didn't plan to go, as a preservative.

So then let us remember the words of Jeremiah to exiles: Settle down. Build houses. Plant gardens. Get married and have kids. Take care of the people around you, and the places where God has put you. For when they are healthy and prosperous, you will also be healthy and prosperous. And the nations around you will give glory to God. AMEN.