

# “Finding Meaning in Exile

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February 8, 2026

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**Scriptures: Psalms 137:1-6, Jeremiah 29:4-7, Isaiah 41:8-10 and 40:26-31**

**Psalms 137:1-6, Common English Bible (CEB)**

Alongside Babylon's streams, there we sat down, crying because we remembered Zion. We hung our lyres up in the trees there because that's where our captors asked us to sing; our tormentors requested songs of joy: "Sing us a song about Zion!" they said. But how could we possibly sing the LORD's song on foreign soil?

Jerusalem! If I forget you, let my strong hand wither! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I don't remember you, if I don't make Jerusalem my greatest joy.

**Jeremiah 29:4-7 (CEB)**

The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

**Isaiah 40:26-31 (CEB)**

Look up at the sky and consider: Who created these? The one who brings out their attendants one by one, summoning each of them by name. Because of God's great strength and mighty power, not one is missing.

Why do you say, Jacob, and declare, Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD my God ignores my predicament"?

Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn't grow tired or weary. His understanding is beyond human reach, giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted. Youths will become tired and weary, young men will certainly stumble; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.

**Isaiah 41:8-10 (CEB)**

But you, Israel my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, offspring of Abraham, whom I love, you whom I took from the ends of the earth and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant; I chose you and didn't reject you": Don't fear, because I am with you; don't be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will surely help you; I will hold you with my righteous strong hand.

## Sermon

Tomorrow it will be exactly two months since we were ordered to evacuate our building. For some of us that day is still traumatically etched into our minds! And it may still be that way for some time!

You may recall that the following Sunday, we celebrated the 3rd Sunday of Advent, gathered around our computers as a dispersed community on Zoom.

The lectionary for that day (which I had no role in choosing) was from Isaiah 55 which was written by a priest and prophet who was living with the Jewish community in exile in Babylon. This exile was one of the darkest periods in all of Jewish history and though it lasted only about 70 years it had a profound impact. Now of course our current experience of exile cannot compare to the experience of those Jews who were forced from their homeland. But it did get me to thinking, "Why would God allow such a thing to happen and can God's people find meaning in such an awful experience?"

Over the Christmas holidays I got into a conversation with Tony Brun, a Latino Mennonite writer, theologian, and member of the community that we were a part of in DC. For him the theme and the experience of being exiles is a central element for those who seek to follow God's true path!

Maybe you can help me out here, but just off the top of my head here are some of the instances of exile found in the Bible. Only three chapters in, in Genesis, we find the very first humans, Adam and Eve, being thrown out of the Garden of Eden. Then there's the, "Tower of Babel" where the sudden multiplicity of languages caused folks to depopulate the city for other lands. Abraham of course comes quickly to mind whom God called on that starry, starry night to leave his homeland and take his family and flocks to an unknown but "promising land!"

How about that Jacob fellow who swindled his brother's birthright and had to get outta town pronto and then fled to his mom's folks in Aram. Jacob does eventually return and reconcile with his brother, but after a enough time to marry two wives and have a bunch of kids that included 12 sons.

And one of those boys was named Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his own brothers and ended up in Egypt as first a slave, but in the end he became an adviser to the Pharaoh! Later he convinced his father and brothers to "come on down" to Egypt while a great famine raged through that land of promise. Then, a couple generations

later, God had to call a reluctant Moses to lead former slaves to freedom and back to that promised land. It was a journey of 40 years which is called the Exodus and certainly a sort of exile as they wandered in the desert.

In the New Testament Jesus, himself, claimed to be a homeless vagrant who seldom seemed to stay put for very long in one place.

And then we have the Apostle Paul, who was not only a traveling preacher and evangelist but who often got carried off against his will to jails, or forced to leave towns by rowdy crowds and who eventually ended up a long, long way from home in a Roman prison. We also know that the early church was constantly on the move due in part to evangelistic zeal as well as persecution.

And of course we have our own Anabaptist history which too is filled with folks often needing to leave home for some other land in order to save not only their faith but also their very lives.

Now not too long ago, a well known US theologian began suggesting the use the phrase, "resident alien," as the best way for Christians in the U.S. to describe themselves. As in, we just so happen to find ourselves residing in this country, but just as the early Anabaptist would say, "our primary allegiance is not to this country but first and foremost to God's Kingdom." If, then, we find ourselves persecuted, maligned or misunderstood, maybe that is how it should be since we don't know, or understand or cannot conform to all the values and customs of this nation? This should help us to more easily identify ourselves with other folks who are also not "fitting" into the values and behaviors that are so often demanded by the American empire.

And just as there are many reasons to find ourselves in exile both externally or even internally, there are also a variety of potential responses. Our various readings this morning are all taken from passages written during the period of the Jewish exile in Babylon however each one expresses a very different type of response. Psalms 137 is a mournful cry out of the pain and despair of those who have recently "lost everything." Their grief is raw and so much so that they cannot bear to even lift their lyres to play or sing their songs from home. And in that pain and grief they vow to never let go of the past at any price.

The Jeremiah passage was likely written a few years later and it is much less despairing and a bit more, shall we say, practical. "We ain't going nowhere soon, especially not back to our homes. So it's best we get on with living?" And, "maybe it's time to start

making the best of a bad situation.” Being in exile certainly does suck! But sometimes if we cling too tightly to the past it can only make it worse. As they say, “Sometimes what doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger!”

And this is where the two Isaiah passages from 40 and 41 come about. Likely written several decades later, these two passages are part of a larger group of chapters from 40 - 55 that begin to express another response. By carefully balancing the past with the reality of current circumstances they express the fact that not only had God not forsaken them but that God had actually sustained them in their darkest hours. God has sustained them on their journey thus far because God is strong and God is faithful and God, as some of my classmates in Seminary used to say, “is able to make a way out of no way!”

And, well, it also just so happened that Cyrus the Great, the King of the Persian Empire was on the cusp of destroying the once greatest and might empire ever known, Babylon. Babylon, who by the way had destroyed the once greatest and the mighty Assyrian empire. (Tell me if you see a pattern here?)

Now each response was totally understandable and appropriate given their specific circumstances. And I might add that not only is each response appropriate, it is not necessarily a formula that is linear; where A, must be followed by B, and then C! Each response can happen in any time and each can repeat. We should never forget our past, but neither can we allow ourselves to stay stuck, wanting to go back to “how it was.”

We do need to adapt and change and certainly become an integral part of our new places and times. But if we assimilate too much that also ain’t good, since it eliminates what makes us distinct and causes our faith to become irrelevant. We desperately need to maintain hope and to wait with unbridled optimism on God’s salvation as we witness our world in its death spiral. But we also need to be open, to being lead to a new land, to a new imagining of how to be God’s people, and to a fuller understanding of what it means to be true citizens of God’s rule of love and peace!

In the end it does not matter where you are currently at in your attempt to respond to and to make sense of your exile. It matters more where you are headed. The most beautiful thing about true community is that we are all going to be at different points at any given moment. And these different places and different feelings and experiences are the gifts from a loving God that we bring to one another. These gifts are given to us to sustain one another, especially as we experience and learn from our periods of exile together.