

“Preaching to Exiles”¹

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I have elsewhere proposed that the Old Testament experience of and reflection upon exile is a helpful *metaphor* for understanding our current faith situation in the U.S. church, and a *model* for pondering new forms of ecclesiology.² (Jack Stotts in parallel fashion has suggested that the “period of the Judges” might be a more useful metaphor.³ Stott’s suggestion has considerable merit, but because we are speaking of metaphors, these suggestions are not mutually exclusive.) The usefulness of a metaphor for rereading our own context is that it is not claimed to be a one-on-one match to “reality,” as though the metaphor of “exile” actually *describes* our situation. Rather a metaphor proceeds by having only an odd, playful, and ill-fitting match to its reality, the purpose of which is to illuminate and evoke dimensions of reality which will otherwise go unnoticed and therefore unexperienced.⁴

I

Utilization of the metaphor of “exile” for the situation of the church in the U.S. is not easy or obvious, and for some not compelling. I suggest the metaphor is more difficult in the South, where establishment Christianity may still be perceived as “alive and well.” For those who perceive it so, what follows likely will not be useful or persuasive. My conviction, however, is that even midst such a positive perception of old religious-cultural realities, there is indeed a growing uneasiness about the sustenance of old patterns of faith and life. That uneasiness may be signaled by anxiety about “church growth,” and about increasingly problematic denominational budgets.⁵

I wish, however, to tilt the metaphor of exile in a very different direction, one not occupied with issues of institutional well-being or quantitative measure, but with the experienced anxiety of “deported” people. That is, my concern is not institutional, but pastoral. The exiled Jews of the Old Testament were of course geographically displaced. More than that, however, the exiles experienced a loss of the structured, reliable world which gave them meaning and coherence, and they found themselves in a context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith were mocked, trivialized, or dismissed.⁶ That is, exile is not primally geographical, but it is social, moral, and cultural.⁷

Now I believe that this sense of a) *loss of a structured, reliable “world”* where b) *treasured symbols of meaning are mocked and dismissed*, is a pertinent point of contact between those ancient texts and our situation. On the one hand, I suggest an *evangelical dimension* to exile in our social context. That is, serious, reflective Christians find themselves increasingly at odds with the dominant values of consumer capitalism and its supportive military patriotism; there is no easy or obvious way to hold together core faith claims and the social realities around us. Reflective Christians are increasingly “resident aliens” (even if one does not accept all of the ethical, ecclesiological extrapolations of Hauerwas and Willimon).⁹ And if it be insisted that church members are still in places of social power and influence, I suggest that such Christians only need to act and speak out of any serious conviction concerning the public claims of the gospel, and it becomes promptly evident that we are outsiders to the flow of power. I propose that pastors and parishioners together

may usefully take into account this changed social reality of the marginalization of faith, a marginalization perhaps felt most strongly by young people.¹⁰

On the other hand, I suggest a *cultural dimension* to exile that is more “American” than Christian, but no less germane to the pastoral task. The “homeland” in which all of us have grown up has been defined and dominated by white, male, Western assumptions which were, at the same time, imposed and also willingly embraced. Exile comes as those values and modes of authority are being effectively and progressively diminished. That diminishment is a source of deep displacement for many, even though for others who are not male and white, it is a moment of emancipation. The deepness of the displacement is indicated, I imagine, by the reactive assault on so-called “political correctness,” by ugly humor, and by demonizing new modes of power.¹¹ For all these quite visible resistances to the new, however, we are now required to live in a new situation that for many feels like less than “home.” In such a context, folk need pastoral help in relinquishing a “home” that is gone, and in entering a new “dangerous” place that we sense as deeply alien.

I suggest that the “exile” (as metaphor) is a rich resource for fresh discernment, even though a *Christian exile* in a secular culture, and a *cultural exile* with the loss of conventional hegemony are very different. In fact, the two “exiles” (evangelical and “American”) arise from the fact that establishment Christianity and establishment culture have been in a close, and no longer sustainable alliance. This quite concrete double focus on “exile” is a practical manifestation of what Buber has called “an epoch of homelessness,” brought on by the intellectual revolution around the figures of Locke, Hobbes, and Descartes, wherein old certitudes have been lost.¹² My interest is not in a long-term philosophical question, but in the quite specific experience of the present church. I believe that this deep sense of displacement touches us all—liberal and conservative—in personal and public ways. For that reason, the preacher must take into account the place where the faithful church must now live.

II

I propose that in our preaching and more general practice of ministry, we ponder the interface of our *circumstance of exile* (to the extent that this is an appropriate metaphor) and *scriptural resources* that grew from and address the faith crisis of exile. (Note well that this suggested interface entails refocusing our attention, energy, and self-perception. In times when the church could assume its own “establishment,” it may have been proper to use prophetic texts to address “kings.” But a new circumstance suggests a very different posture for preaching and pastoral authority, now as an exile addressing exiles, in which displacement, failed hopes, anger, wistful sadness, and helplessness permeate our sense of self, sense of community, and sense of future.)

The most remarkable observation one can make about this interface of *exilic circumstance* and *scriptural resources* is this: exile did not lead Jews in the Old Testament to abandon faith or to settle for abdicating despair, nor to retreat to privatistic religion. On the contrary, exile evoked the most brilliant literature and the most daring theological articulation in the Old Testament. There is indeed something characteristically and deeply Jewish about such a buoyant response to trouble, a response that in Christian parlance can only be termed “evangelical,” that is, grounded in a sense and sureness of *news* about God that circumstance cannot undermine or negate. That “news” which generates buoyant theological imagination

in ancient Israel is so “hard core” that it is prerational and does not submit to the “data” of historical circumstance. I suggest this is a time for us when preachers are “liberated” to assert that hard core, prerational buoyance in a church too much in the grip of the defeatist sensibility of our evident cultural collapse.

For many preachers, this will require considerations of texts (i.e., families of texts) that were not studied in seminary. They were not studied in seminary precisely because “exile” seemed remote from us, something at the most that belonged to “late Judaism.”¹³ As a guide into these “new” texts, I suggest three useful resources: a) Peter Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, is the classic English text on the subject, providing the “meat and potatoes” of historical criticism,¹⁴ b) Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile*, a more accessible book, that exhibits theological, pastoral sensitivity,¹⁵ and c) Daniel Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*, a daring sociohistorical study that is most suggestive for seeing into the visceral elements of the circumstance, literature, and faith of the ancient exiles.¹⁶

III

While the subject of faith in exile is exceedingly rich, here I suggest six interfaces of the *circumstance of exile* and *scriptural resources*:¹⁷

1. Exiles must grieve their loss and express their resentful sadness about what was, and now is not and will never again be. In our culture, we must be honest about the waning of our “great days” of world domination (before the rise of the Japanese economy), and all of the awkward economic complications that we experience in quite personal and immediate ways. In the church, we may be honest about the loss of our “great days” when our churches and their pastors, and even our denominations, were forces for reckoning as they are not now. I suggest that congregations must be, in intentional ways, *communities of honest sadness*, naming the losses. We might be Jews on “the ninth of Av,” when every year Jews celebrate and grieve the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, a destruction that persists for Jews in paradigmatic ways.¹⁸ This community of sadness has as its work the countering of the “culture of denial” which continues to imagine that it is as it was, even when our experience tells otherwise.

The obvious place for scriptural resources for such work is in the Book of Lamentations, the text used by Jews for that holy day of grieving on the Ninth of Av. Because the text is “canon,” it intends to be used for many sadnesses of a communal kind, well beyond the concrete loss of Jerusalem. In the Book of Lamentations, I suggest three motifs among many that warrant attention: a) the collection of poems begins with a sustained and terrible negativity: “no resting place” (1:3), “no pasture” (1:6), “no one to help” (1:7), “none to comfort” (1:9, 16, 17, 21, 2:13), “no rest” (2:18). The poem is candid and preoccupied about loss. b) The poetic collection ends with a pathos-filled statement (which may be a dependent clause as in NRSV, or a question as in RSV). In either case, the final statement is preceded in v. 20 with a haunting question to which Israel does not know the answer, a question about being “forgotten” and “abandoned” by God. c) In 3:18-23, we witness the characteristically poignant Jewish negotiation between sadness and hope. Verse 18 asserts that hope is gone. In v. 21, hope reappears, because in vv. 22-23, Israel voices its three great terms of buoyancy, “steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness.” These words do not here triumph, but they hover in the very midst of Israel’s sadness, and refuse to be pushed out of the artistic discernment of the Jews. Because the sadness is fully voiced, one can see the community begin to move in its buoyancy, but not too soon. This practice

of *buoyance through sadness* is one many pastors know about in situations of “bereavement.” We have, however, not seen that the category of “bereavement” operates communally as well, concerning the loss of our “great days,” as a super-power with an economy to match, or as a church which now tends to be a “has been.”

The sadness of Jews in exile can of course grow much more shrill. It is then not a far move from lament to rage, classically expressed in Psalm 137. The Psalm is of course an embarrassment to us, because of its “lethal” ending. And yet every pastor knows about folk with exactly such rage, and for exactly the same reasons. We seethe, as did they, over our unfair losses that leave us displaced and orphaned. With such texts, the church need not engage in pious cover-up or false assurance. This Psalm in its rage is an act of “catching up” with new reality. If Zion’s songs are to be sung, it will be a long, long way from all old “Zions.” The Psalmist is beginning to engage that tough but undeniable reality.

2. The utterance of the terms “forgotten, forsaken” in Lam. 5:20 (on which see the same verbs and same sentiment in Isa. 49:14), suggests that the exiles are like “a motherless child,” that is, an abandoned, vulnerable orphan. Exile is an act of being orphaned, and many folk now sense themselves in that status. There is no sure home, no old family place, no recognizable family food. I suggest the theme of *rootlessness*, as though we do not belong anywhere. The enormous popularity of Alex Haley’s *Roots* came about, I suggest, not because of fascination with or guilt about slavery, but because of resonance with the need to recover connection and genealogy. (On a less dramatic plane, it is astonishing how many people look to Salt Lake City, in order to have the Mormons find their ancestors.)

Exiles need to take with them old habits, old customs, old memories, old photographs. The scriptural resources for such uprooted folk, I suggest, are the genealogies which have seemed to us boring and therefore have been skipped over.¹⁹ We have skipped over them, I imagine, either because we thought those old names were not intrinsically interesting, or because we thought they referenced some family other than our own. The recovery of these genealogies could indeed give an index of the mothers and fathers who have risked before us, who have hoped before us, and who continue even now to believe in us and hope for us. The genealogies might be useful in the recovery of baptism, because in that act, we join a new family. And we are like any new in-law at a first family reunion, when we meet all the wierd uncles and solicitous aunts who seem like an undifferentiated mass, until they are linked with lots of stories.²⁰ After the stories are known, then the list becomes meaningful, and is simply shorthand that makes and keeps the stories available. Two easy access points for such genealogy are a) the Matthean genealogy which includes some of our most scandalous mothers (Matt. 1:1-17), and b) the recital in Hebrews 11 of all our family “by faith.”

The texts serve to overcome the isolation of the orphan and our sense of “motherless” existence, by giving us the names of mothers and fathers, and by situating us in a “communion of saints” who are the living dead who continue to watch over us. I suggest that if the genealogical indices are well handled, they become a way to recover old narratives that contextualize our present faith. When well done, moreover, local congregations can extend the list, not only of members of their own congregation, but of folk known publicly, beyond the congregation, who have risked for and shaped faith. It is inevitable that with this evocation of gratitude to those on the list, we enter our names on the same list with a sense of accountability, and begin to understand what it might mean to have our own names written in “the

book of life.”²¹

3. The most obvious reality and greatest threat to exiles is the *power of despair*. On the one hand, everything for which we have worked is irretrievably lost. On the other hand, we are helpless in this circumstance and are fated here forever. In ancient Israel, this despair of a theological kind is rooted in two “failures of faith.” On the one hand, Israel doubts *God’s fidelity*, that is, God’s capacity to care and remember (cf. Lam. 5:20, quoted in Is. 49:14). On the other hand, Israel doubts *God’s power* to save, even if God remembers (cf. Isa. 50:2, 59:1). On both counts, Israel has concluded that in its exile, it is without a God who makes any difference, and is therefore hopelessly in the grip of the perpetrators of exile.

The scriptural resource against this despair is voiced especially in Isaiah 40-55. This is a text well known to us, if for no other reason, than that Handel has made it available to us. Very often, however, critical study of this text has been focused on distracting questions, like “Who is the Suffering Servant?” Leaders of exilic communities in despair, as I suspect some of us are, would do better to focus on the primary intent of the poetry, namely, that God’s powerful resolve is to transform the debilitating reality of exile. Of the rich resources in this poetry, we may identify especially four motifs voiced as hope against despair:

a) It is this poetry that transforms the word “gospel” (*bsr*) into a theological term. In 40:9 and 52:7, the “good news” is that Yahweh has triumphed over the power of exile, that is, over Babylonian gods (cf. 46:1-4) and over Babylonian royal power (47:1-11). As a result, Israel’s self-definition need not be derived from that harsh, seemingly permanent regime.

b) It is II Isaiah’s words that explode the faith of Israel into creation faith (cf. 40:12-17, 42:5, 44:24). Now the scope of God’s saving power is not a “nickel and dime” operation in Israel, but the whole of global reality is viewed as a resource whereby God’s transformative action is mobilized on behalf of this little, needy community. In this poetry, creation is not an end in itself, but an instrument of rescue. Israel is urged to “think big” and to “sing big” about the forces of life at work on its behalf.

c) Speeches of judgment show God, as construed by this poet, engaged in a heavy-handed dispute with Babylonian gods, in order to delegitimize their claims, and to establish the proper claims of Yahwistic faith (41:21-29, 44:6-7, 45:20-21). The purpose of such rhetorical action is to give Israel “spine,” to enable Israel not to give up its covenantal identity for the sake of its ostensive masters. That is, Israel is invited to *hutspah* in holding to its own peculiar identity.

d) This defiant speech against the other, phoney gods is matched by an affirmative tenderness expressed in salvation oracles (41:13, 14-16, 43:1-5). Rolf Rendtorff and Rainer Albertz have noticed that “creation language” is used in salvation oracles, not to refer to “the creation of the world,” but for the creation of Israel who is God’s treasured creature.²² As is often recognized, Isa. 43:1-5 articulates something like baptismal phrasing: “I have called you by name, you are mine.” That baptismal language, however, is cast in creation speechforms.

This combination of defiance and tenderness indicates that Israel’s seemingly helpless present is teeming with liberating intentionality. Israel is expected, in this poetry, to cease its mesmerized commitment to the rulers of this age (here Babylon) who thrive on the despair of Israel, and to receive through this poetry the freedom of imagination to act “as” a people headed “home.”²³ In our contemporary circumstance of ministry, I suggest that despair is our defining pathology which robs the church of

missional energy and of stewardship generosity. The poet who uttered these words has dared to voice an originary option against all the visible evidence. But then, faith is precisely and characteristically "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). As long as the exiles hope for nothing and are convinced of nothing unseen, it is guaranteed that they will stay in thrall to Babylon. The poet refuses such a pitiful, shameful abandonment of identity.

4. Exile is an experience of *profaned absence*. That is, the "absence of God" is not only a personal, emotional sense, but a public, institutional awareness that "the glory has departed." In ancient Israel this sense had to do with the destruction of the temple, the departure of God from Jerusalem (cf. Ezek. 9-10) so that God "had no place," and the abusive handling of temple vessels, so that the very "vehicles for God" were treated like a tradeable commodity.²⁴

In our time, it is clear that what have long been treasured symbols are treated lightly or with contempt. (I suspect that this is what is entailed in the great passion generated by "flag burning" and "bra burning," and such acts of defiance against "sacred order.") Very many people have concluded with chagrin that "nothing is sacred anymore." With the absence of God, larger "meanings" become impossible. And because God is absent, we become increasingly selfish and brutalizing, because without God, "everything is possible." (No doubt popular, "right wing" religion trades effectively on this sense of loss.)

Unfortunately, critical scholarship (and especially Protestant usage) have neglected the texts that pertain to the "crisis of presence" which are found especially in the "Priestly texts" of the Pentateuch.²⁵ With our deep-seated Protestant resistance to any sacramentalism that sounds automatic and/or routine, the P texts have been treated by us with a rather consistent lack of interest, if not disdain.

It is important for us, in our exilic situation, to renote that these texts constitute a major pastoral response to the exilic crisis of absence. I suggest that these texts might be useful resources for ministry, if we understand them as a recovery of sacrament as a way to "host the holy" in a context of profane absence. That is, the priests had no inclination, or found it impossible, to affirm that God was everywhere loose in the exile of Babylon. Indeed, a case could be made in priestly perception, that God would refuse to be available in such a miserable context as Babylon. Where then might God be? The answer is, in the sacramental life of Israel, so that God becomes a counterpresence to Babylonian profanation. The reason for coming to "the holy place" is to come into "the presence" which is everywhere else precluded in this exile which is under hostile management.

I suggest three aspects of this recovery of the sacramental, plus a footnote. a) Central to the sacramental life of Israel was *circumcision* (cf. Gen. 17). To be sure, that powerful cultic act is profoundly patriarchal. In the exile, however, it becomes a rich and larger metaphor for faith (cf. Deut. 10:16, 30:6, Jer. 4:4). Moreover, the "marking" of circumcision is transposed in Christian practice into baptism which, like circumcision, is a mark of distinctiveness. It distinguishes its subjects from the definitions of the empire, even if the Babylonians cannot see it. b) *Sabbath* emerges as a primal act of faith in exile. I understand the sabbath to be a quiet but uncompromising refusal to be defined by the production system of Babylon, so that life is regularly and with discipline enacted as a trusted gift and not as a frantic achievement. c) Most important, the *tabernacle* is an imaginative effort to form a special place where God's holiness can be properly hosted and therefore counted upon (Exod. 25-31, 35-40, cf. Ezek. 40-48 on an exilic concern for cultic presence).

I am not convinced that this text of Exod. 25-31, 35-40 describes any concrete, practiced reality in exilic Israel. It may be nothing more than a textual fantasy. Nonetheless, it is a fantasy about presence, about the willingness of the Exodus God to sojourn midst this displaced people of the wilderness. While God is thus willing to occupy and visit a disestablished people, the presence of God is not casual or haphazard. It requires discipline and care that is almost punctilious.

It is thoroughly biblical to attend to modes of presence that are visible (material, physical), so that the whole of presence is not verbal (or sermonic). I understand the reasons why conventional Protestantism has avoided such modes of thought and practice. Such a resistance was necessary in order to break the terrible and destructive power of the old sacramentalism in the sixteenth century. It is the case, however, that our present “exilic” crisis is not marked by a threat of “popish sacramentalism,” as in the sixteenth century. Our threat rather is a technological emptiness that is filled by the liturgies of consumerism and commoditization. And the issue in our own context is whether holy presence can be received, imagined, and practiced in ways that counteract that powerful, debilitating ideology. It is clear that the letter to the Hebrews (chapters 7-10) does not flinch from thinking Christologically in terms of tabernacle presence. I suspect that for exiles, a verbal presence by itself is too thin, which is why the Priestly materials came to dominate the canon. It is also why Reformed faith in the magisterial tradition may want to make ecumenical moves to reengage the very sacramentalism it scuttled. Exiles who live in a profaned context have a deep need to “touch and handle” things unseen.

5. Exile is an experience of *moral incongruity*. That is, the displacement and destructiveness of exile make one aware that the terrible fate of displacement is more massive than can be explained in terms of moral symmetry. The classic biblical response to exile is that exile is punishment from God for the violation of Torah. Such a guilt-focused interpretation does indeed keep the world morally coherent and reliable. But at enormous cost! The cost of protecting God’s moral reliability is to take the blame for very large disorders. This sense of “blame,” in my judgment, exacts too high a cost for moral symmetry, and so produces the practical problem of theodicy, the awareness that this “evil” cannot be explained by or contained in our “fault.” Something else besides our “fault” is loose and at work in the destabilizing of our world.²⁶

In the Old Testament, the problem of theodicy, that is, the thought that God is implicated in a morally incoherent world, surfaces in the book of Job. While the book of Job cannot be securely tied to the context of exile, most scholars believe it belongs there, and many believe it is a direct and intentional response to the oversimplification of retribution theology.²⁷

Mutatis mutandis, the problem of theodicy belongs appropriately to our own exilic circumstance. If exile be understood as “the failure of the established church,” it is difficult to think that this failure is “our fault,” for the forces of secularism are larger than us, and it does not much good to blame somebody. If exile be understood as “the failure of the white, male, Western hegemony,” it is difficult to take the blame as a white male, even if one is generically implicated. The book of Job is able to entertain in any exile, including ours, that something more is at work than fault, so that our circumstance of exile is not easily reduced to moral symmetry.

I think that the honest surfacing of this issue of theodicy, in Joban terms, would be a liberating act among us. It is an act that fully acknowledges moral asymmetry, that does not reduce reality to “scorekeeping,” that refuses to accept all the blame, and

that dares to entertain the unsettled thought of God's failure. In the poem of Job, both the terrible indictment of God (9:13-24) and the confident self-affirmation of Job (29-31) prepare the way for the whirlwind which blows away all moral issues (38:1-42:6). In the extremity of exile, I believe it would be an important pastoral gain, to have the whirlwind obliterate and blow away many of our all-consuming moral questions. In the poem of Job, the questions of failure, fault, blame, and guilt simply evaporate. We are invited to a larger vista of mystery that contains wild and threatening dimensions of faith. The poem extricates Israel from the barrenness of moral explanation and justification, and thinks instead of dangerous trust and affirmation in a context where we cannot see our way through. The world of Job is filled with wondrous crocodiles (41:1-34) and hippopotamus (40:15-24) along with cunning evil, deep, unanswered questions, and vigorous doxology.

It is also a world where, through the dismay, gifts are given and life inexplicably goes on (42:7-17). If Job be misunderstood as an intellectual enterprise, it may cut the nerve of faith. But if it be taken as a pastoral opportunity to explode petty, narcissistic categories for a larger field of mystery, it might indeed enable exiles to embrace their self-concern, and then to move past it to larger, more dangerous dimension of living in an unresolvable and inexplicable world where God's mystery overrides all our moral programs.

6. The danger in exile is to become so preoccupied with self that one cannot get outside one's self to rethink, reimagine, and redescribe larger reality. Self-preoccupation seldom yields energy, courage, or freedom. In ancient Israel, one of the strategies for coping shrewdly and responsibly beyond self were the narratives of defiance and cunning that enjoined exiles not to confront their harsh overlords directly, but to negotiate knowingly between faith and the pressures of "reality."²⁸

If we can get past difficult critical problems, we may take some such narratives as models and invitations for living freely, dangerously, and tenaciously in a world where faith does not have its own way. Smith shows how these narratives perform a crucial strategic function and includes in his analysis the tales of Daniel, Joseph, and Esther. We may comment briefly upon these resources:

a) The story of Joseph concerns the capacity of an Israelite to cooperate fully with the established regime (perhaps too fully), but to maintain at the same time an edge of discernment which permits him to look out for his folk. He does not fully adopt the "reality" defined by his overlords. b) The tale of Esther shows a courageous Jew willing and able to outflank established power, to gain not only honor for herself, but well-being for her people. c) The story of Daniel shows a young man pressed into the civil service of the empire, able to exercise authority in the empire precisely because he maintained a sense of self rooted quite outside the empire.

This practice of narrative admits of no easy "Christ against culture" model, but recognizes the requirement of an endlessly cunning, risky process of negotiation. Such negotiations may seem to purists to be too accommodationist. And to accommodationists, they may seem excessively scrupulous. If, however, assimilation into the dominant culture is a major threat for exiles, the lead characters of these narratives do not forget who they are, with whom they belong, nor the God whom they serve. I imagine many baptized exiles must live such a life of endless negotiation. These narratives might name and clarify the process, and tilt self-perception toward membership in the faithful community. The stunning characters in these narratives are indeed "bilingual," knowing the speech of the empire and being willing to use it, but never forgetting the cadences of their "mother tongue."

IV

It is clear that “exile” is a rich and supple metaphor. As the biblical writers turned the metaphor of exile in various and imaginative directions, so may we. Note well, I have made no argument about the one-to-one match between metaphor and reality. I have proposed only that this metaphor mediates our experience to us in fresh ways, and gives access to scriptural resources in equally fresh ways.

There are two by-products in the utilization of a countermetaphor which I will mention. On the one hand, pondering this metaphor helps us think again about a rich variety of metaphors in scripture that can function as a kaleidoscope, to let us see our life and faith in various dimensions, aspects, angles, and contexts. Such an exercise may move us past a single, frozen metaphor which we take as a permanent given. On the other hand, the availability of a countermetaphor which opens us to a plurality of metaphors helps us notice that our usual, “taken for granted” world is also a metaphorical construct, even if an unrecognized or unacknowledged one. That is, postmodern awareness helps us to consider that there is no “given reality” behind our several constructs, but even our presumed given reality is itself a rhetorical construct, whether of the cold war, or consumer capitalism, or the “free world,” or the male hegemony, or whatever.²⁹ An awareness of this reality about “world” and about “self” opens the way to liminality which permits transformation of all those “givens.”³⁰

1. In the argument I have made, there are important interpretive issues to be considered by the preacher. I suggest that the Bible be understood as a set of models (paradigms) of reality made up of images situated in and contextualized by narratives.³¹ These narrative renderings of reality in the Bible (as elsewhere) are not factual reportage, but are inevitably artistic constructs that stand a distance from any “fact,” and are filtered through interest of a political kind. I think it a major gain to see that the Bible in its several models is an artistic, rhetorical proposal of reality that seeks to persuade (convert) to an alternative sense of God, world, neighbor, and self.

2. As there are interpretive implications to the argument I have made, so there are also crucial ecclesial implications in construing life through the metaphor of exile. This literary, rhetorical focus invites the baptismal community to construe its place in the world differently, and I imagine, faithfully.³² The engagement with this metaphor may deliver pastors and people from magisterial notions of being (or needing to be) chaplains for the establishment, and guardians of stable public forms of life.

I understand the liberty given through this metaphor quite practically and concretely. As the preacher stands up to preach among the exiles, the primal task, (given this metaphor), concerns the narration and nurture of a counteridentity, the enactment of the power of hope in a season of despair, and the assertion of a deep definitional freedom from the pathologies, coercions, and seductions that govern our society. The preacher is not called upon to do all the parts of public policy and public morality, but to give spine, resolve, courage, energy, and freedom that belong to a counteridentity.

As the congregation listens and participates in this odd construal of reality, the metaphor might also make a decisive difference in the listening. The working woman or man knows that “it is a jungle out there,” and that one without a resilient, resistant identity can indeed be eaten alive. The teenager off to school is in the rat race of success and popularity, leave alone competence and adequacy. And now every man, woman, and child is invited to a zone of freedom which the dominant culture cannot

erode. That zone of freedom is grounded in what the baptized know:

- that our sense of *loss and sadness* is serious and honorable, and one need not prop up or engage in denial;

- that our *rootedness* enables us to belong, so that we are not swept away by every wind of doctrine, every market seduction, or every economic coercion, knowing who we are;

- that the promises of the creator surge in our life and in our world, so that the *manipulatable despair* of the hopeless, which turns folk into commodity consumers, is not the live edge of our existence;

- that there is a *holy, awesome presence* that persists against the emptied profanation of promiscuous economic and lustful sexuality, that true *desire* is for the presence that overrides all of our trivialized desires that are now robbed of authority;

- that the world is *not morally coherent*, but there is a deep incongruity in which we live, that we need neither to resolve, explain, or deny. A raw, ragged openness is linked to the awesome reality of God's holiness;

- that we are always about to be domesticated, we have these *narrative models of resistance, defiance, and negotiation* which remind us that there is more to life than conformist obedience or shameful accommodation. We know the names of those who have faced with freedom the trouble that is caused by faith.

3. There is nothing in this faith model of "sectarian withdrawal" of the kind of which Hauerwas and Willimon are often accused.³³ The baptized do indeed each day find themselves finally in the presence of those who preside over the exile, that is, in the presence of "Babylonians." They are unavoidable, even in this model, or especially in this model. This baptismal identity is not designed for a ghetto existence. It is rather intended for full participation in the life of the dominant culture, albeit with a sense of subversiveness that gives unnerving freedom.

Jeremiah knew about the dangers of withdrawal from dominant culture. For that reason, in his letter to the exiles, the prophet encourages the exiles with amazing, endlessly problematic words:³⁴

But seek the welfare (*shalom*) of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare (*shalom*) you will find your welfare (*shalom*) (Jer. 29:7).

There is no "separate peace" for exiles, no private deals with God, no permitted withdrawal from the affairs of the empire. The only *shalom* these troubled Jews would know is the *shalom* wrought for Babylon. The letter implies that the exiled community of Jews can indeed impact Babylon with *shalom* through its active concern and prayer, but only as the community knows that it is not Babylon. The distance from Babylon makes possible an impacting nearness to Babylon.

4. Finally, but not too soon, the preacher's theme for exiles is homecoming. The home promised to the exiles, however, is not any nostalgic return to yesteryear, for that home is irreversibly gone. Rather, the home for which the exiles yearn and toward which they hope is the "kingdom of God," an arena in which God's good intention is decisive. The New Testament struggles to speak concretely about that realm, and can do so only indirectly and by allusion, for that realm lies beyond all our known categories.

It is no stretch to link *homecoming* to *gospel* to *kingdom*. The linkage is already made in Isa. 40-55 and in Ezek. 37:1-14. It is telling that Karl Barth speaks of the

“obedience of the Son of God” under the rubric of “The Way of the Son of God into a Far Country.”³⁵ The textual allusion is of course to the Prodigal Son, though Barth’s accent is on the “emptying and humiliation” of Jesus, as in Phil. 2:5-11.³⁶ Conversely, in speaking of the exaltation of Jesus, Barth writes of “the Homecoming of the Son of Man.”³⁷ An important critique may be made of Barth’s usage, for it reflects his characteristic transcendentalism, whereby the course of human existence is by definition exile. It is my intention to suggest that the metaphor of exile-homecoming which Barth handles Christologically, and which Buber handles philosophically, be understood among us ecclesialogically with reference to the concrete realities of economic, politics, and social relations.

Consider then, what it means to be exiles awaiting and hoping for homecoming to the kingdom of God! In the Bible, the image of “Kingdom of God” is stitched together by narratives of miracle and wonder, whereby God does concrete acts of transformation which the world judges to be impossible. The “Kingdom” is a time and place and context in which God’s “impossibilities” for life, joy, and wholeness are all made possible and available.³⁸ In the meantime, the waiting, hoping exiles are fixed upon these impossibilities. In so doing, the exiles refuse the world’s verdict on the impossibilities, and, as a result, they pay less heed and allegiance to the world’s wearisome possibilities. The alternative to this subversive entry into the world is to accept the world’s possibilities as the only chance for the future. Such a decision rejects the miracles of God and so enters endlessly into the seductive land of exile. Failing the countervision of the Gospel, we will no doubt “labor for that which does not satisfy” (Isa. 55:2).

NOTES

¹ My assigned title is reminiscent of E. W. Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles; A Study of the Prose Tradition in the Book of Jeremiah* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970). Nicholson was one of the first in the recent discussion to discern the important role of exile in the generation of Old Testament faith. Nicholson in fact deals only with the late texts in the book of Jeremiah which, in my discussion, I will not take up.

² Walter Brueggemann, “Disciplines of Readiness,” *Occasional Paper No. 1*, Theology and Worship Unit, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville, 1989), and “Rethinking Church Models Through Scripture,” *Theology Today* 48 (July, 1991): 128-38.

³ Jack Stotts, “Beyond Beginnings,” *Occasional Paper No. 2*, Theology and Worship Unit, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville).

⁴ On the significance of metaphor for reading the biblical text and for theological reflections, see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 31-59, and Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 1-66, and *passim*.

⁵ In my discussion of the church in relation to pluralism, I have decided not to address what I consider to be the related issue of the faltering of denominations. On that crisis, see Dorothy Bass, “Reflections on the Reports of Decline in Mainstream Protestantism,” *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 79 (1989): 5-15, “Teaching with Authority? The Changing Place of Mainstream Protestantism in American Culture,” *Religious Education* 85 (Spring 1990): 295-310.

⁶ On the trivializing of such symbols in the life of ancient Israel, see Peter Ackroyd, “The Temple Vessels: A Continuity Theme,” *VTS* 23 (1972): 166-81.

⁷ Jacob Neusner, *Understanding Seeking Faith; Essays on the Case of Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 137-41, has shown how the historical-geographical experience of exile has become a paradigm for Judaism, so that Jews who did not share the actual concrete experience of exile must nonetheless appropriate its paradigmatic power in order to be fully Jewish. In what follows, I am especially informed by the splendid study of Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless; The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington: Meyer Stone Books, 1989).

⁸ I use “world” here in the sense of Alfred Schutz, *Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967). A more accessible rendering of the same notion of world is

found in Peter L. Berger and Thomas Lückmann, *The Social Construction of Reality; A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966).

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens; A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

¹⁰ The long-term threat to the viability of faith is not rightwing religious, ominous, and destructive as that is, but secularism. I think it most unfortunate that the church uses as much energy as it does on the former, when the latter is so pervasive and relentless among us.

¹¹ On the theme of "political correctness," see Rosa Ehrenreich, "What Campus Radicals? The P.C. Undergrad Is a Useful Specter," *Harper's Magazine*, December, 1991, 57-61, and Louis Menand, "What Are Universities For? The Real Crisis on Campus Is One of Identity," *Harper's Magazine*, December, 1991, 47-56.

¹² Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 126, writes: "In the history of the human spirit, I distinguish between epochs of habitation and epochs of homelessness." Buber understands our own epoch to be one of homelessness. On the same theme, informed by Buber, see Nicholas Lash, "Eclipse of Word and Presence," *Easter in Ordinary; Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 199-218.

¹³ The disregard of "late Judaism" in Christian scholarship and theological education reflects the power of the "Wellhausen hypothesis" in which the postexilic period was regarded as degenerate, inferior, and not worthy of attention. More recent scholarship has to some modest extent broken loose of the grip of that hypothesis in order that the period can be taken with theological seriousness.

¹⁴ Peter Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration; A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century B.C.* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968).

¹⁵ Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile; A Theological Interpretation* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

¹⁶ Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*. Smith's study represents a most important advance beyond Ackroyd and Klein in terms of method, as he pays attention to the interaction between the social realities of the exile and its impact upon the way in which literature functions.

¹⁷ It is evident that I will proceed with something like a "method of correlation" not unlike that proposed by Paul Tillich. I find such an approach practically useful in establishing a "dynamic analogy" with the text for our own time. The method is a convenience for me and reflects no commitment to a program like that of Tillich, about which I have great reservations.

¹⁸ See Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentation; A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 7A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), xl-xli.

¹⁹ For a critical understanding of the function of the genealogies, see Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies: With Special Reference to the Genealogies of Jesus*, SNTS Monograph Series 8 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), and Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

²⁰ A wonderful example of such stories and such characters to people imagination are the biographical statements by Russell Baker, *Growing Up* (New York: New American Library-Dutton, 1983) and *The Good Times* (New York: New American Library-Dutton, 1991).

²¹ Cf. Exod. 32:32f., Isa. 4:3, 56:5, Dan. 12:1, Rev. 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 15, 21:27.

²² Rolf Rendtorff, "Die theologische Stellung des Schöpfungsglaubens bei Deuteronesaja," ZTK 51 (1954), 3-13, Rainer Albertz, *Weltschöpfung und Menschenschöpfung; Untersucht bei Deuteronesaja, Hiob und in den Psalmen*, Calwer Theologische Monographien 3 (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1974).

²³ On "as" as "the copula of imagination," see Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology & the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 73, 140, and *passim*.

²⁴ Ackroyd, "The Temple Vessels: A Continuity Theme," shows how the temple vessels can be narrated to report a complete and decisive break in historical continuity, or conversely, can be used to enact continuity in the midst of enormous discontinuity.

²⁵ On the general theme and problem of presence, see Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence; Toward a New Biblical Theology*, Religious Perspectives 26 (New York: Harper & Row, 1978). More specifically on presence as understood in the Priestly tradition, see Robert B. Coote and David Robert Ord, *In the Beginning; Creation and the Priestly History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), especially chapters 9-11.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 255-260, traces the way in which Genesis portrays human persons as both *perpetrators* and *victims*. Already in that narrative, which is characteristically read as though it concerned only fault, Israel has carefully nuanced the

ambiguity in social experience.

^{27.} See Samuel Terrien, "Job as a Sage," *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 231-42, and Rainer Albertz, "The Sage Adds Pious Wisdom in the Book of Job: The Friends' Perspective," *ibid.*, 243-61.

^{28.} Concerning these narratives, I am primarily informed by Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*, 153-78.

^{29.} Green, *Imagining God*, 41-60, has taught me the most concerning the fact that our "givens" are dependent upon paradigmatic construals of reality. On the cruciality of rhetoric for reality, see the suggestive interface of religion and rhetoric suggested by Wayne C. Booth, "Rhetoric and Religion: Are They Essentially Wedded?" *Radical Pluralism and Truth; David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*, ed. Werner G. Jeanrond and Jennifer L. Rike (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 62-80.

^{30.} On the use of the notion of liminality from Victor Turner in the interest of religious transformation, see Urban T. Holmes, "The Priest as Enchanter," *To Be a Priest: Perspectives on Vocation & Ordination*, ed. Robert E. Terwilliger and Urban T. Holmes (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 173-81, and Marchita B. Mauck, "The Liminal Space of Ritual and Art," *The Bent World: Essays on Religion and Culture*, ed. John R. May (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), 149-57.

^{31.} See Roy Schafer, *Retelling a Life: Narration and Dialogue in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), especially chapter 2.

^{32.} See William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

^{33.} The critique often levelled against Willimon and Hauerwas, that they are sectarian, is driven by the long-established categories of H. Richard Niebuhr concerning "Christ and Culture." It is now clear that those older categories are no longer adequate for the actual situation of the church in Western culture and that a critique must be made of Niebuhr's typology. See for example, Robert E. Webber, *The Church in the World; Opposition, Tension, or Transformation?* (Academie Books; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 261-78 and *passim*.

^{34.} Daniel Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*, 127-38, provides a most discerning study of the letter concerning the "social psychology of a group under stress."

^{35.} Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) #59, 157-210.

^{36.} *Ibid.*, 180-83, 188-94.

^{37.} Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958) #64 20-154. On the parable of Luke 15:11-32, see pp. 21-25.

^{38.} On the "impossibilities" of the kingdom, see Walter Brueggemann, "'Impossibility' and Epistemology in the Faith Traditions of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:1-15)," *ZAW* 94 (1982), 615-34.