

“Cadences Which Redescribe: Speech Among Exiles”

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Exile, that is, social, cultural displacement, is not primarily geographical, but it is liturgical and symbolic.¹ This was the case with the Jews in exile in the sixth century BCE, as it is in our Western culture presently. In defining exile, Alan Mintz writes:

The catastrophic element in events [of exile] is defined as the power to shatter the existing paradigms of meaning, especially as regards the bonds between God and the people of Israel.²

In such a situation where “paradigms of meaning” are shattered, it is clear that exiles must pay careful and sustained attention to speech, because it requires inordinately disciplined and imaginative speech to move through the shattering to newly voiced meaning. Mintz suggests that in exile, the primal speakers (poets) attempt,

first to *represent the catastrophe* and then to *reconstruct, replace, or redraw the threatened paradigm of meaning*, and thereby make creative survival possible.³

I find Paul Ricoeur’s phrasing a useful way to understand what is required and what is possible for speech in such situations. Ricoeur speaks in terms of “limit experiences” which permit and require “limit expressions.”⁴ “Limit experiences” are those in which all conventional descriptions and explanations are inadequate. When one is pushed experientially to such extremity, one cannot continue to mouth commonplaces, but is required to utter something “odd.”⁵ The “odd” “limit expression” is in language which effectively “redescribes” reality away from and apart from all usual assumptions about reality.⁶ Thus such speech invites the speaker and the listener into a world that neither had known before this utterance.

It is clear that in exile, while something utterly new must be uttered, that is, not contained within or regulated by past utterance, this daring speech which evokes newness nonetheless employs in fresh ways speech that is already known and trusted. In order to serve as “redescription,” however, the already trusted speech must be uttered in daring, venturesome ways that intensify, subvert, and amaze.

By utilizing the theme of exile as an analogue by which to describe (redescribe?) our current social situation in the West, I suggest that our loss of the white, male, Western, colonial hegemony, which is deeply displacing for us, is indeed a “limit experience,” whereby we are pushed to the edge of our explanatory and coping powers. Such experience requires “limit expression.” Such a consideration belongs in a *Journal for Preachers*, precisely because preachers in such a “limit experience” have obligation and possibility of being the very ones who can give utterance both to “represent the catastrophe” and to “reconstruct, replace or redraw” the paradigms of meaning which will permit “creative survival.” I suggest that the preaching task now is nothing less than that twofold task.

In what follows I will consider four examples of “limit expression” which were utilized in that ancient exile of sixth century Jews, in order that their “limit experience”

of displacement could be embraced and moved through. My thought is that there are clues here for our own speech practice in a time of acute displacement and bewilderment.

I. *Lamentation and Complaint*

The first task among exiles is to “*represent the catastrophe*,” to state what is happening by way of loss in vivid images so that the loss can be named by its right name and so that it can be publicly faced in the depth of its negativity. Such naming and facing permits the loss to be addressed to God, who is implicated in the loss as less than faithful in a context seen to be one of fickleness and failure. Such speech requires enough candor to dare to utter the torrent of sensitivities that cluster, such as pain, loss, grief, shame, and rage. For this, of course, this ancient Jewish community found its best speech by appeal to the liturgic tradition of *lamentation* (which expresses sadness) and *complaint* (which expresses indignation).⁷

The richest, most extreme statement of sadness, punctuated by loss, helplessness, and vulnerability, is the book of Lamentations.⁸ It is not much studied or used among us, no doubt because it has seemed so remote from our cultural situation. If, however, we are now in a new situation of profound loss, as I have suggested, this poetry could be for us an important “speech resource.” The little book of Lamentations consists in five extended poems of grief over the destruction of Jerusalem (for which I have suggested as an analogue the loss of our accustomed privilege and certitude). In the first poem (chapter 1), the bereft city of Jerusalem is “like a widow,” abandoned, shamed, vulnerable, subject to abuse, without an advocate or defender (1:1). The recurring theme of the abandonment of Jerusalem is expressed as “no one to comfort her” (vv. 2, 9, 16, 17); “no resting place” (v. 3); “no pasture” (v. 6); “no one to help” (v. 7). The imagery is of a woman overwhelmed with tears, under assault, and subject to abuse.⁹ While there is in 3:21–33 a powerful statement of hope and confidence, the collection of Lamentations ends with a sense of “forsakenness”:

Why have you *forgotten* us completely?

Why have you *forsaken* us these many days (5:20)?

This same sense of being “forgotten” is evident in the more abrasive and indignant complaint of Psalm 74. The poet is more aggressive in here describing to God the situation of dismay, and in pressing God to act.¹⁰ The poem provides for God a play-by-play of what “your foes” have done to “your holy place” (v. 4, cf. vv. 4–9). It then moves to a doxology (see below), recalling to God God’s own powerful miracles of the past (vv. 12–17). These concern God’s sovereign rule over all of creation, and God’s capacity to bring life out of chaos. By juxtaposing the present calamity of the temple and God’s glorious past, the poem makes intercession that God should now act, both to defeat the impious enemies and to act so that “the downtrodden are not put to shame” (v. 21, cf. vv. 18–23). One is struck in this psalm with the directness of speech, the candor about the current trouble which is catastrophic, and the vigor with which God is expected to act in fidelity.

Through both the lamentation and the psalm of complaint, the catastrophic is vividly “represented,” to make it palpable to God as it is to the community. My suggestion, insofar as our current Western dismay is a parallel to this ancient travesty, is that a primary pastoral task is to voice the felt loss, indignation, and bewilderment that are among us. The reason extreme imagery is required is that the speech must cut through the enormous self-deception of political-economic euphemism. For the truth is that the old, settled advantage in the world upon which we have counted is over and

gone, as over and gone as was Jerusalem's temple. Sadness, pain, and indignation are not inappropriate responses to the loss, either then or now. They require abrasive, insistent speech to be available, and ancient Israel gives us a script for our own daring "representation" of the trouble.

II. Assurance

In the laments and complaints, Israel speaks to God. Israel takes the initiative in rightly naming its displacement to God. In times of debilitating dismay, it is the one who experiences the dismay who must courageously come to speech.¹¹ This is abundantly clear in the speech of ancient Israel. But Israel's "limit expressions" are not restricted to the voice of Israel. The voice of Yahweh also sounds in the daring rhetoric of the exile, precisely in the context where Israel had sensed its abandonment by God. Indeed, in the poetry of II Isaiah, God acknowledges that God has been silent too long and will now break that silence in powerful speech. God says,

For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
Now I will cry out like a woman in labor,
I will gasp and pant (Isa. 42:14, cf. 62:1).¹²

In the "salvation oracles" of II Isaiah, Israel hears the classic assurance that God is present with and for Israel, even in its dismay and displacement. Most precisely and succinctly, this oracle of assurance asserts on God's lips, "Fear not, for I am with you" (cf. Is. 41:13, 14, 43:1-5, 44:8, Jer. 30:10-11).¹³ Joseph Sittler among others has seen that this speech is closely paralleled to the way a parent reassures a child who has had a nightmare.¹⁴ Such parental assurance is indeed a "redescription." Indeed, this assurance is a nightmare-ending speech, for it asserts a caring presence which is trusted enough and powerful enough to override the sense of absence evoked by the exile. Now, in this utterance, what had seemed to be a place of absence is known to be a place of presence, thereby invested with great potential for life.

While the salvation oracle proper is highly stylized, Claus Westermann has seen that there are great variations on the theme of assurance expressed in a variety of forms, including what he calls "assurance of salvation," "announcement of salvation," and "portrayal of salvation."¹⁵ We do not need to pay too close attention to the variations in form. What counts for our consideration is the situation-transforming capacity of the utterance, what Ricoeur would term "redescription."

Thus Lam. 5:20 ends with haunting sense of being "forgotten" and "forsaken":

Why have you *forgotten* us completely?
Why have you *forsaken* us these many days?

In Isaiah 49:14, the same two terms are reiterated (probably deliberately quoted):

But Zion said,
"The Lord has *forsaken* me,
My Lord has *forgotten* me."

But then in 49:15-16, these haunting fearful questions are answered by the God who does not forget or abandon:

Can a woman *forget* her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may *forget*,
Yet I will not *forget* you.

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
Your walls are continually before me.

Or in Isa. 54:10, after conceding that there had been a brief abandonment of Israel by God (vv. 7-8), and after comparing the devastation of the exile to the flood in Genesis (v. 9), the poet has God utter a sweeping assurance of God's reliable durability:¹⁶

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed,
but my *steadfast love* shall not depart from you,
and my *covenant of peace* shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has *compassion* on you (v. 10).

This triad of Yahweh's characteristics—steadfast love, covenant of peace, compassion—is more than enough to override the flood, to overcome the absence and shame, and to overmatch the terror of exile.

We are so familiar with such assurances that we may fail to notice what a daring act of faith such an utterance is, how blatantly it speaks against and beyond perceived circumstance, in order to “reconstruct, replace, or redraw the threatened paradigm of meaning.” It is an act of powerful faith on the part of the speaker, but also on the part of the listener. The intent of the assurance is to create faith in the listener. The exile was widely seen to be a season of God's absence, and now this poet dares to assert that God is present in that very circumstance, faithfully at work to bring a newness out of the defeat.

The analogue in our own time is for the preacher-poet of the gospel to make such an utterance in the midst of our failed privilege and hegemony. The utterance of assurance is not to prop up the old paradigm, for the assurance comes only after the “representation of the catastrophe,” that is, after the felt and expressed situation of lamentation and complaint. The assurance asserts that in the very midst of economic displacement and bewilderment about sexuality, where all old certitudes are in profound jeopardy, just these meanings of a new kind are being wrought by the power and fidelity of God, “new things” shaped like covenantal faithfulness that will become visible only in, with, and through the displacement.¹⁷ Such utterances are indeed “by faith alone.” But then, that is always how the gospel is uttered in such problematic circumstance.

III. *Doxologies of Defiance*

The counterpole to lamentation and complaint is the hymn of praise which emerges from “victory songs.” That is, hymns are sung when situations of great trouble are transformed by the power and mercy of God. Israel has been singing such songs since the deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 15:1-18, 21). These daring doxologies sing what Israel has seen and heard about the decisive power and reliable commitment of Yahweh to intrude in life-giving ways in circumstances of defeat, disorder, and death. Thus the doxology of remembrance in Ps. 74:12-17 reaches all the way back to creation and to God's capacity to order chaos. And the despondent worshipper in Ps. 77:11-20 ponders the remembered Exodus. Out of these treasured, concrete memories, Israel's hymns also constitute acts of hope, confident that what God has done in the past is what God will do in the present and in the future.

In the exile, the doxologies are not primarily acts of remembering God's past “wonders,” but they are anticipatory assertions concerning what God is about to do. Israel is summoned to sing a “new song,” to sing praise for God's sovereign liberating action that is now about to occur (Isa. 42:10).

In the situation of exile in Babylon, it was “self-evident” that the Babylonian gods had triumphed, that Yahweh had failed, either because of weakness or because of

indifference. Either way, the evidence suggested that loyalty to Yahweh no longer worked or was worth practicing, because other powers could give more reliable and immediate payoffs.

The poetry of II Isaiah, however, will not accept that “self evident” reading of reality. The hymns offered by the poet are assertions against the evident, insisting that Yahweh’s saving power is at the break of new activity. Thus, Israel has concluded that God does not care about Israel:

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God”? (Isa. 40:27).

The responding hymn of vv. 28-31 asserts in wondrous lyric that Yahweh is the God of all generations, past, present, future, is not weary or faint or powerless, but gives power to those who hope. The outcome is not only a statement about God, but an assurance to those who trust this God:

Those who wait for the Lord
shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint (vv. 30-31).

Notice that the doxology completely rejects the notion of the rule of the Babylonian gods. Against their apparent rule, it is, so the hymn asserts, in fact Yahweh who holds power and who gives power (cf. 46:1-4).

That same contrast is evident in the defiant doxology of Isa. 41:21-29. Negatively the gods of Babylon are called to give account of themselves, and they fail miserably (vv. 21-23). This leads to the conclusion that they are nothing, nothing at all. Moreover, those who trust such “nothing gods” are as “nothing” as their gods.

You, indeed, are nothing
and your work is nothing at all;

Whoever chooses you is an abomination (v. 24).

Positively, it is Yahweh who is able to act visibly, decisively, and transformatively (vv. 25-27). Israel’s doxologies are characteristically against the data, inviting Israel to live in a “redescribed world,” in which meaning has been “reconstructed, replaced, or redrawn.”

In our own situation, the hymnic act of praise has become largely innocuous. It happens often among us that praise is either escapist fantasy, or it is a bland affirmation of the *status quo*. In fact, doxology is a daring political, polemical act which serves to dismiss certain loyalties and to embrace and legitimate other loyalties, and other shapes of reality.¹⁸

In the context of II Isaiah, the hymnic wager is on Yahweh’s intention for homecoming, and therefore the refusal of the Babylonian gods who seek to define the world in noncovenantal ways. In our situation of upheaval and confusion, hymns which celebrate the God of the Bible wager on a covenantal-neighborly world powered by the neighborliness of God, and wager against any characterization of the world that bets on selfishness, greed, fear, abuse, or despair. Our current world of bewilderment is often described as though everything good is ending, as though the forces of chaos have won. This hymnic tradition authorizes the church to identify and redescribe this present place as the arena in which the rule of the creator-liberator God is working a wondrous newness. Our singing and utterance of such lyric faith assert that we will not submit to the gods of fear and anticovenantal power relations. In such a situation

as ours, the words and music for a “new song” are acts of powerful renewal.

IV. *Promises*

The assurances and hymns upon which we have commented are anticipatory. That is, they look to the resolve of Yahweh to work a newness that is not yet visible or in hand. Exiles, however, have a way of speech that is more directly and singularly preoccupied with God’s sure future, namely, oracles of promise. Israel believes that God can indeed work a newness out of present shambles, and that that newness will more fully embody God’s good will for the world. It is cause for amazement that Israel’s most daring and definitional promises were uttered in exile, that is, precisely when the evidence seems to preclude such hope. The promises are assertions that God is not a prisoner of circumstance, but that God can call into existence that which does not exist (cf. Rom. 4:17).

Here I will cite three of the best known and most powerful of such exilic promises. In Jer. 31:31-34 the promise asserts that God will work a new covenant with Israel that is aimed at Torah obedience (v. 33), but is rooted in the overriding reality of forgiveness (v. 34).¹⁹ The dominant assumption about exile in the Old Testament, propounded especially in the Deuteronomic tradition, is that exile is punishment (II Kings 17:7-23; see even Isa. 40:2). This promise, in the face of a theology of guilt-and-punishment, is an assertion that forgiveness will overpower sin, and Israel’s primal theological reality is the future-creating graciousness of Yahweh who will “remember their sin no more.”²⁰

In Ezek. 37:1-14, the prophet Ezekiel searches for an adequate metaphor for exile and homecoming. The most extreme imagery available is that exile equals death. But from death, there is no hope for the power of death is strong and decisive. In a radical rhetorical break, however, the prophet dares to assert that by the power of God’s spirit, “I will open your graves,” that is, “I will place you on your own soil” (vv. 13-14). Exile is not the last word, that is, death is not the last reality. Israel’s situation is not hopeless, because God’s transformative wind (spirit) blows even in the dismay of exile, in order to work a newness toward life.

The poem of Isa. 65:17-66 (which may be dated slightly after the return from exile in 520 BCE) offers a “portrayal of salvation” in stunning anticipatory fashion. The poet anticipates a new earth and a new Jerusalem characterized by new social relations, new economic possibilities, and new communion with God. Indeed, the poet foresees a complete and concrete inversion of Israel’s current situation of hopelessness.

Notice that all of the promises, specific as they are, are cast as God’s own speech, the authority for which is not found in any visible circumstance, but in the trustworthiness of the God who speaks. It is God’s own resolve to work a newness that will impinge upon what seems to be a closed, hopeless situation.

Exiles inevitably must reflect upon the power of promise, upon the capacity of God to work a newness against all circumstance.²¹ Promise has become nearly an alien category among us. That is partly an intellectual problem for us, because our Enlightenment perception of reality does not believe that there can be any newness “from the outside” that can enter our fixed world. And partly the loss of promise is a function of our privilege in the world, whereby we do not in fact want newness, but only an enhancement and guarantee of our preferred present tense.

As our white, male, western privilege comes to an end, we are likely to experience that “ending” as terrible loss which evokes fear and resentment.²² Evangelical faith, however, dares to identify what is (for some) an alienating circumstance as the matrix

for God's newness (for all). Thus evangelical speech functions to locate the hunches and hints and promises that seem impossible to us that God will indeed work in the midst of our frightening bewilderment. But the preacher will work primarily not from visible hints and hunches, precisely because hope is "the conviction of things not seen," a conviction rooted in the trusted character of God.

V. *The Ministry of Language*

Speech, or as Mintz terms it, "the ministry of language" is one of the few available resources for exile.²³ Exiles are characteristically stripped of all else, except speech. And what exiles do is to speak their "mother tongue," that is, the speech learned as children from mother, as a way to maintain identity in a situation that is identity-denying.

In that ancient world of displacement, the Jews treasured speech that was "redescriptive," precisely because it was not derived from or sanctioned by the managers of the exile. It was, rather, derived from older speech practice of the covenanted community, and sanctioned by the evangelical *hutzpah* of poets who dared to credit such defiant utterances as complaints and lamentations, assurances, hymns, and promises. These are indeed forms of speech from Israel's "mother tongue."

In the "modernist" church of our time (liberal and conservative), there has been a loss of "mother-speech," partly because of subtle epistemological erosion, and partly because we imagine that other forms of speech are more credible and "make more sense." The truth is, however, that speech other than our own gradually results in the muteness of the church, for we have nothing left to say when we have no way left to say it. Exiles need, first of all and most of all, a place in which to practice liberated speech that does not want or receive the legitimacy of context. I take it that the old "paradigms of meaning" are indeed deeply under threat among us. We can scarcely pretend otherwise. We may learn from our ancestors in faith that in such a context, we must indeed "represent the catastrophe" and then "reconstruct, replace, or redraw" the paradigms of meaning. Both tasks are demanding. It belongs nonetheless to the speakers rooted in this tradition of liberated, defiant, anticipatory speech to take up these tasks. It is in, with, and from such speech that there comes "all things new."

NOTES

¹ On my understanding of exile as a useful metaphor for the contemporary crisis of the U.S. church, see Walter Brueggemann, "Disciplines of Readiness," *Occasional Paper No. 1*, Theology and Worship Unit, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville, 1989), and "Preaching to Exiles," *Journal for Preachers* XVI (Pentecost, 1993): 3-15.

² Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), x. I am indebted to Tod Linafelt for this most remarkable reference.

³ Mintz, *Hurban*, 2.

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975): 107-45.

⁵ The "odd speech" with which Ricoeur deals includes proclamatory sayings, proverbs, and parables. Cf. "Biblical Hermeneutics," 109-18.

⁶ Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 31, 127, and *passim*.

⁷ The basic book on lamentation is Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

⁸ Mintz, *Hurban*, 17-48, has the most suggestive discussion of the Book of Lamentations known to me. The most reliable commentary is Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 7A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1972).

⁹ Mintz, *Hurban*, 24, most helpfully discerns what is at stake in this particular imagery:

The serviceableness of the image of Jerusalem as an abandoned fallen woman lies in the precise register of pain it articulates. An image of death would have purveyed the false comfort of finality; the dead have finished with suffering and their agony can be evoked only in retrospect. The raped and defiled woman who survives, on the other hand, is a living witness to a pain that knows no release. It is similarly the perpetualness of her situation that comes through most forcefully when Zion is pictured as a woman crying bitterly alone in the night with tears wetting her face (1:2). The cry seems to ululate permanently in the night; the tear forever falls to the cheek. It is a matter not just of lingering suffering but of continuing exposure to victimization.

¹⁰ The contrast between the book of Lamentations and Psalm 74 is the difference between “lament” and “complaint.” Erhard Gerstenberger, “Jeremiah’s Complaints: Observations on Jer. 15:10-21,” *JBL* LXXXII (1963) 405, n. 50, draws the distinction nicely: “A lament bemoans a tragedy which cannot be reversed, while a complaint entreats God for help in the midst of tribulation.” The distinction and interrelatedness of the two are nicely expressed in German, *Klage* and *Anklage*.

¹¹ On the cruciality of coming to speech, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

¹² There is a powerful play of imagery in the relation between Jerusalem as an abused widow and Yahweh as a restless woman about to give birth.

¹³ The most complete study of the genre is by Edgar W. Conrad, *Fear Not Warrior: A Study of ‘al tira’ Pericopes in the Hebrew Scriptures* (Brown Judaic Studies 75; Chico: Scholars Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Joseph Sittler, *Grace and Gravity: Reflections and Provocations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 99-100. See the more comprehensive discussion by Gail R. O’Day, “Toward a Biblical Theology of Preaching,” *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*, ed. Gail R. O’Day and Thomas G. Long (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 17-32.

¹⁵ Claus Westermann, “The Way of the Promise Through the Old Testament,” *The Old Testament and Christian Faith: A Theological Discussion*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 202-209.

¹⁶ On this text, see Walter Brueggemann, “A Shattered Transcendence?: Exile and Restoration,” *Problems and Prospects in Biblical Theology*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger et. al., forthcoming from Abingdon Press.

¹⁷ I name economics and sexuality, because these are the twin issues that vex and will continue to vex the church. It will be helpful to see that the two are deeply interrelated, as the parallel criticisms of Marx and Freud make clear.

¹⁸ See Walter Brueggemann, “Praise and the Psalms: A Politics of Glad Abandonment,” Part I, *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song* 43 (July, 1992), 14-19; Part II, *ibid.* 43 (October, 1992), 14-18.

¹⁹ See the helpful discussion of this passage by Norbert Lohfink, *The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 45-57. Lohfink makes clear that the text cannot be interpreted in a Christian, supersessionist way.

²⁰ On “forgiveness,” see especially the exilic text of I Kings 8:27-53.

²¹ On the practice of promise among exiles in order to fight off despair, see Rubem A. Alves, *Tomorrow’s Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 182-205. Alves writes: “Why is it so important to go on hoping? Because without hope one will be either dissolved in the existing state of things or devoured by insanity,” 193.

²² My use of the term “end” here as a sense of terrible loss is intended to counter the argument of Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). In my judgment his self-serving argument, i.e., self-serving for Western capitalism, is a romantic fantasy. He understands the current “end” to be one of triumph.

²³ Mintz, *Hurban*, 29.