

Exegeting Blockbuster

Jeremiah 29:1-14; Peter 1:1-2, 13-17, 22, 2:1-5, 9, 11-12, 5:12-14

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The prophet Jeremiah's remarkable letter to the exiles in Babylon is found in Jeremiah 29:1-14. That letter suggests that sometimes our life with God involves living in exile, suffering at the hand of God because of our own disobedience and sin. I'll refer to Jeremiah's letter here and there, but mostly what I want to do in this sermon is reflect further on the notion of living in exile—*our* living in exile. I want to lift up a few points and wonder about them, wonder if they are true, and wonder what they might mean if we really are living in exile.

1. Here's the first point: Will Willimon, former dean of the chapel at Duke University and presently Bishop of the North Alabama conference of the United Methodist Church, is one of many people who have argued that the church in North America is in exile, far from God's favor and blessing, suffering God's judgment in a culture that is openly set against God's ways and God's people. He's written quite extensively on the subject, at times with his Duke colleague, the theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, and, as I said, there are others who concur with this judgment.

In one of his recent books, Willimon states that Christians here in the United States are "those who are forced, by the nature of American society, to live in circumstances of exile without the conceptual means to resist."¹ Let me repeat that: Christians are those who are forced, by the nature of American society, to live in circumstances of exile *without the conceptual means to resist*. Ponder that for a moment. *Without the conceptual means to resist*. The absence of resistance strategies means that there is no real option for North American Christians but to abdicate our faith and to assimilate to the surrounding culture—in Jeremiah's terms, the Babylonian Empire; in our terms, the American one. Either culture is not our true home. That's point one.

2. Here's the second point, seemingly far removed from Willimon. When I was a kid I took private art lessons. I was a decent artist back then (no longer) and I was little. I thought the art resided in my hand. I told my teacher so one day. "Oh no," she told me. "It isn't in your hand at all. It is in your eyes. It is in how (and what) you see and how you transfer what you see to what you draw."

This is, of course, right and true, though I still think a bit of dexterity doesn't hurt. Regardless, art is a *way of seeing*. So is reading. Good artists and readers see things that the rest of us miss. And this isn't true only for artists or literature professors. It's also true for doctors and lawyers and psychologists and so on and so forth. The art of interpretation—or, to use fancier terms, hermeneutics and exegesis—is one of paying attention. Seeing. Noticing. Noticing the symptoms a patient or client manifests; seeing the gaps in the one law that make the other case pertinent; paying attention to the fine details of a literary text, whether it is Mark Twain, Shakespeare, or the Gospel according to St. Mark.

So, what do you see when you look around? Be interpreters of culture for a

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minute. Be “hermeneuts” of society for a moment. *Pay attention* to what you see and hear and encounter and take in. Linguists say that we hear as many as 100,000 words per day.² *Interpret* those. What are they about, do you think? Or consider the images we see: on the web, on TV, on the movie screen, in the video store. Exegete the local video store. Ponder that for a moment.

Here’s one interpretation: my own. Here’s what I see when I go to the video store. I see two things, mostly—two things, equal in importance, equal in vividness, equally vying for my attention, equally trying to capture my imagination—so much so that I’m not sure which to mention first. They are perfectly tied in a dead heat (both appropriate words as we will see!). So, for want of a preference, I’ll put them in alphabetical order. Here they are: first, I see Sex. Everywhere Sex. Sexiness, eroticism, enticing suggestiveness. And, to be quite frank, sexuality of a certain type: one from a male perspective that objectifies women as sexual objects of male fantasy. (That’s why you see so many more scantily clad females than scantily clad males in the video store.) And I’m not talking about the porno section of the video store. No, I’m talking about something more mundane and insidious than that. I’m talking about the “pornographication” of our society, of the video store, of motion pictures, of music, etc. That’s the first thing I see when I walk into the local video store.

The second thing I see is Violence. Violence, horror, evil. And not just in the horror section. No, I see it everywhere, often combined in disturbing ways with the sexuality: a scantily clad female covered in blood, for instance, or holding a semi-automatic assault rifle, or some other such thing I wish I had not seen, especially as I’m in the store with my small children, looking for a video that they might like to watch. And all this sex and violence is everywhere in the store, from front to back, so you can’t miss it. I can’t miss it. *They* can’t miss it. And if the sexuality piece objectifies women, the violence piece objectifies victims. Both women and victims are denigrated and dehumanized in the process. That’s what I see in the video store. And I could be wrong, but I think that is what an alien would see if one were to visit the video store and try to identify our primary cultural values: “Sex,” they would say, “of the objectifying-of-females kind, and then, in alphabetical order, Violence, especially murder—those are the values of North America’s entertainment media society.” That’s what I see and how I exegete the video store. Now, maybe I’m wrong about all that; maybe you see things very differently. And I do not want to give the impression that absolutely everything in the video store, let alone our culture, is wrong and evil, or that it is irredeemable, or that the Spirit isn’t at work or possibly at work in all of this, or at least in parts of it. This is just one interpretation, my own, of my latest visit to the video store.

3. In light of Jeremiah 29, I really shouldn’t be surprised by Sex and Violence living at the video store and on my TV set and in the movies and on the radio waves. Let me correct that: not just living there, but *ruling* there. I shouldn’t be surprised by that for two reasons: For one, I shouldn’t be surprised because, according to Jeremiah 29, I’m in exile and this Empire is not the Lord’s. Number two, I shouldn’t be surprised because, though this Empire is not the Lord’s, it is nevertheless one where gods rule. *Other gods*. There are always gods of one sort or the other, our God or other gods, who are ruling, demanding our thanks and praise, dictating our service. And these two, Sex and Violence, are among the most important of the gods. There is a third god, however, maybe the most important one of all: Almighty Dollar. These

three together form what you might call the Unholy Trinity: Money, Sex, and Power (violence is one manifestation of the latter).³ This is the Unholy Trinity of this empire, and, if Willimon is right, this is *our* Trinity, *as Christians*, because, according to Willimon, we lack the conceptual means to resist.

Now, if we have an Unholy Trinity, we should perhaps look for an unholy place of worship—an Unholy Temple. How about the shopping mall? That seems to be the temple of modern society. It isn't just the mall, of course. It is the consumeristic capitalism of our culture where we are what we buy, where our worth is measured by our buying power and consumptive practices, where style is always thought to be more important than substance, where, in fact, people in our society *worship*. They congregate there, they spend their time there, they spend their money there, they bring their best there to offer up on the altar of goods and commodities and stuff.

So, we have an Unholy Trinity, the gods of Money, Sex, and Power; and an Unholy Temple, consumeristic capitalism symbolized by the mall; all we need now is an Unholy Scripture. Happily (or rather, sadly), we have one. It is mass media culture, isn't it? How many of those 100,000 words per day that we take in are from *Holy* Scripture? A fraction of a fraction of one percent? If that. The vast, vast, vast majority—99.99 percent in a conservative estimate—are from mass media culture: television, radio, music, videos, movies, web, etc. *That* is our Scripture, *that* is our authoritative literature, *that* is what we live our lives by, *that* is our rule of faith and life. And what is that about? What messages does it preach? Well, many different things, of course, and sometimes, sure, good things, but much of the message, you have to admit, is about the gods—Money, Sex, and Power—and about their worship: consumption and purchase and stuff, and more and more and more and more stuff, which means more and more and more Money, Sex, and Power.

4. Now, personally, I don't like alarmism or alarmists. I'm not trying to be an alarmist about all this. I'm just trying to be a realist about it. You can be alarmed by it if you'd like. It *is* disturbing. It *is* alarming. But it also just *is*. This is the world, the Empire where we live in exile. And yes, of course, it isn't anything new; it has always been so. And yes, of course, it is likely to be so for a long time to come no matter what: Jeremiah promises that exile will last a full and complete lifetime—the schematic seventy years of exile (29:10). But, as Jeremiah's letter also says, if this Empire is not our ultimate home, what then should we do about all this? Do we, to go back to Willimon, have conceptual means, conceptual tools by which to resist this exile?

I think so. Let me mention three. Instead of an Unholy Trinity populated by Money, Sex, and Power, we have the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These Three are One, according to Christian theology. That means that there is a diversity to the Godhead that is not at odds with and comes at no expense to its unity. And there is also a unity that is not at odds with and comes at no expense to its diversity. These Three are One. That means that there is no unhealthy rule of one over the other two, no domination marked by power or violence. These Three are One. They set us an example of life together marked by equality, mutuality, and self-giving love.⁴ That model permits no sex that comes at the expense of someone else's humanity; even if you don't know his or her name, they're just on the screen or a click away. That model will permit no power that comes at the expense of someone else's personhood; even if you don't know them, they're just

on the screen or a click away. It will permit no “bottom line” that cares for “dead presidents” more than the real life person staring into your eyes or who lives on the other side of your decision-making. Instead of Money, Sex, and Power, we have the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And these Three are One.

Instead of the Unholy Temple of the shopping mall, we have places of Christian worship—churches, chapels, Bible studies, camp meetings even!—places that do not (and ought not) traffic in the ways of modern American consumeristic capitalism. We have places that come away from all that, places where we ought to seek truth and justice, beauty and peace.⁵ No more and no less. We have places where we *pray* for truth and justice, beauty and peace, and where we lament and complain with anger and rage to God when they are not present or experienced, and where we praise God when they are. Places where people are valued not for what they drive or what they wear or how they look or their purchasing power or their productivity, but because they are *beloved, truly and deeply* beloved, by God and by the family of God. That last part means that they are truly beloved *by us*; and we can do that, love like that, because we are enabled to do so by the Holy Trinity who loves in that same mutual self-giving way. Instead of the shopping mall, we have Christian worship.

And instead of an Unholy Scripture—mass media culture—we have Holy Scripture. A book. *Just* a book. *Just one* book. Not that long, readily available to us in bookstores, in hotel rooms, in our mother tongue, easily portable, even memorizable. Imagine that! A book full of words and stories and poems and songs about our true Lord, about worship, and about our life with God, even about our life with God when we are in exile, far from God’s favor and God’s blessing, suffering God’s judgment. Instead of all the words on the radio, TV, web, etc., we have our book, our one book: Holy Scripture, the Holy Bible.

Oh, I know these three means of resistance aren’t very sexy, certainly not like Sex. And, I know they aren’t powerful, not like Power. They definitely won’t get you rich, not like Money. But if that’s what you want: Money, Sex, and Power...well, you’re probably in the wrong place. This place, right now, is a Holy temple. This place, right now, is a place of Christian worship, and we are gathered here to worship the Holy Trinity, to listen to Holy Scripture, to wait and listen and learn how we can live lives of faith in a world that is quite literally dead set against (suicidally so) God’s purposes of love, grace, and mercy. So, if you want Money, Sex, and Power—and let’s face it: who doesn’t?—I suspect you can make it to the nearest mall before it closes. But if it’s closed, don’t worry: you can get anything you want, and I mean *anything and everything* you want 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year online—it’s just a click away.

But if you happen to be in the right place, then maybe we ought to take a clue from Jeremiah and exiled Israel and think about how we can be faithful, not in denial of exile, *but in the midst of it*. I don’t know exactly what such faithfulness might look like. It’s very important to point out, though, that for Jeremiah at least, it is *not* a complete withdrawal from society. No, Jeremiah says *pray* for Babylon (29:7), don’t try to destroy it or think you can outrun it. Jeremiah advocates building houses and planting gardens (29:5) and that is going to take some money. And he says you’re supposed to get married and have children (29:6), and the last time I checked, that included sex. And I’m sure power is involved in the whole spiel somehow. But it is a matter of degree, isn’t it? What is your ultimate allegiance? Who is your true

God? And how do you show that? For exiled Israel, you could *just tell*. You could tell in what they ate and what they didn't eat, what they read and studied, and what they didn't read and didn't study, where they went on the Sabbath and what they did on the Sabbath, and where they didn't go and what they didn't do on the Sabbath. In these ways and in many others, they *resisted* the Babylonian empire. In these ways they *remained* Israel, God's covenant people. In these ways they remained faithful. What about us? I worry about that. I worry about that quite a lot.

5. Here's the fifth and final point to ponder: Jeremiah 29 suggests that life with God sometimes involves living in exile as the result of *our own* disobedience and sin. That's true, but it is also true, according to some passages of Scripture, that we could be living in exile because of the sins of our parents or grandparents—previous generations, that is, who came before us.⁶ That's a sobering thought for a number of reasons, one of which is that it makes us second generation immigrants to the Empire of exile. If you know some immigrant families, you know how that goes, don't you? First-generation immigrants—the parents, born and raised in another land—remember everything: they remember their home, they keep speaking their original language, they keep practicing the traditions and rituals of their homeland.

The second generation, well, they go off to school with the Babylonians; they have to speak the local language while they're there and their parents don't like it. They stop speaking their parents' native tongue even at home, and they're always walking around the house using Babylonian slang words that the parents don't understand. And then they want the latest Babylonian sneakers and jeans, and the Babylonian boys and girls start looking attractive to them—why shouldn't they date a Babylonian? What's the big deal? And they start desiring the latest in Babylonian styles and fashions and traditions...and religion. And why not? They're watching Babylonian TV all the time, and they see the ads. "I mean, come on, Mom, for Marduk's sake! Uh, er, um, I mean, for the LORD's sake, Mom—for the LORD's sake. Sorry." And, in a generation, or maybe two or three, it's over. It's all over. Total assimilation. No more Israel, just Babylon. Other gods. Other temples. Other scripture.

What if we are second-generation exiles, second-generation immigrants to the Empire of exile? I worry about that. I worry about that quite a lot. It could be over in a generation or maybe two, maybe three. Maybe sooner because, as Willimon says, it appears that we lack the conceptual means to resist our exile. Or do we?

Hear these words from 1 Peter, from a letter in Holy Scripture, another letter to some later exiles:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance. (1:1-2)

[P]repare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." If

you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile (13-17).

Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. (22)

Rid yourselves...of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (2:1-5)

[Y]ou are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light....Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge. ((11-12)

I have written this short letter to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings....Peace to all of you who are in Christ. (12-14)

Notes

1 William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 205.

2 Jean Aitchinson, *Teach Yourself Linguistics* (6th ed.; Chicago: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 4.

3 Among others, see Richard J. Foster, *Money, Sex, and Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985). Later reissued as *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life: Christian Reflections on Money, Sex, and Power* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1989).

4 See, e.g., Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Sacra Doctrina; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) for an argument that analogies between the Trinity and human capacities; not all theologians would agree.

5 See Patrick R. Keifert, “The Bible and Theological Education: A Report and Reflections on a Journey,” in *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel*, eds. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 165-82.