

Series on Exile

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For ten weeks leading up to and including Lent last year, we preached a series of sermons on Exile. We focused on the biblical exile, but also exile as experienced in our world and by those who participate in our community of faith.

In the note to the congregation to introduce this series, we wrote:

Exile is one of the seminal events in the Old Testament narrative, yet one that gets relatively little attention. Likewise, exiles in our day are glimpsed briefly on a screen and then quickly passed by. Exile can mean being barred (or deported) from one's home. Exile can also happen within families, communities, cultures, and within our own spirit. Dislocation is a real experience for many of us and again, one we are so reluctant to address.

We structured the series using ten different Biblical characters and the ways they experienced personal and community exile. This is one of two sermons in the series using a weekly focus on a character from scripture to both illumine the theme and to assist in deeper biblical knowledge among our congregation.

Going into the series, we were skeptical, skeptical that the theme would resonate with our congregation and skeptical that we could pull off ten weeks of this without losing their, or our, interest. The response was extraordinary. The conversations around exile, shame, depression, fear, hope, doubt, and faith seemed to increase with each passing week. We discovered that what we thought might be a marginal idea was very much at the forefront of the struggle and faithful wrestling of many.

What follows is a very brief outline of each of the sermons, texts, and themes used in the series:

1. Introduction – “Breaking Camp” (Jeremiah 29:1-14 and Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-26) focused on the biblical narrative which constantly tells of God calling us out from the safe, known, comfortable and familiar—whether by a call or by forced dislocation—and how the people of God continued to discover God present with them in all those “new” and “dislocated” places.
2. “Going Backstage” (John 20:19-31 and Genesis 2:15-3:13, 3:21-24) dealt with the exile of shame through the experience of Adam and Eve in the garden. A line from the sermon, “What is it about shame that makes us uncomfortable simply hearing the word?” seemed to offer people permission to begin to look at this more seriously and deeply in their own lives. It was the reaction to this sermon that gave us a hint that we had touched something important in the midst of our congregation.
3. The sermon about Rachael and Leah, “Second Choices” (Jeremiah 31:15-20 and Genesis 29:15-28), began: “If Leah and Rachel were present with us this morning, I wonder what they would have done when we passed the peace? The sermon concluded: “If you are exiled in your family—you need to know that is not the last word about your life. You are not God's second choice. You are never going to be God's second choice. God remembers you. God remembers the exile of every person. You are God's beloved, named, claimed child. You are God's first choice—now and forever.”

4. Paul's struggle with his tradition and his new call to faithfulness and how that new call—begun on the Damascus Road—exiled him from what he had known before was the subject of “Belonging” (Philippians 3:4b-14 and 1 Corinthians 3:1-9). Seeking to answer the question raised by text (“What is your relationship to tomorrow?”), we quoted Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.”

5. On Youth Sunday, the youth of the church participated in the series with a theme of “The Exile of Expectations,” using the narratives around Martha and Mary.

6. For the First Sunday in Lent, the sermon was “It’s Tempting,” based on Matthew 4:1-11 and Mark 8:27-33. It explored exile that occurs because of our temptation, specifically Peter’s (and our) exile when we back away from Jesus’ death.

7. “Wrestling with Everything” (Romans 5:1-8, Jonah 3:10-4:11) dove deep into Jonah’s story, a story that ends with a question rather than a resolution, a story that ends with Jonah wondering about the justice of a God whose love doesn’t sort. It was a sermon about how we are prone to exiling ourselves from God when God’s ways don’t match our expectations.

8. “No End to It” follows this introduction. It is a sermon about the “exile” of having one’s life re-arranged by the grace of God.

9. Following that is “Selling Hope Short,” about self-exile, and that concluded the series a week before Palm/Passion Sunday.

We have one additional note about the use of music in this series and in the two sermons that follow. We found that interspersing music, everything from the Rolling Stones to a song used in *The Hunger Games* movie to traditional spirituals, added to the spiritual and emotional connection that this series on Exile had already initiated. We are all well aware that we “hear” in different ways, and in sermons with so many spoken words, music allowed worshippers the space to consider the plaintive cries of exile in new ways and from deeper places.