Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church  
Knoxville, Tennessee  
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A Word A Week: “Babylon”  
Psalm 137  
2 Kings 24:8-16

In this sermon series, we’re on a train going through the Old Testament. We’ve stopped each week at significant events, on significant words, like in the Creation story on the word, good. We stopped with Abraham on the word covenant, Moses and the word wilderness, Gideon and the word, fleece, and last week with King David and the word, Bathsheba. Today we stop at the exile, and the word is Babylon.

Jehoiachin (jay-hoe’-a-kin) was eighteen years old when he began to reign; he reigned three months in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Nehushta (na-hush’-tah) daughter of Elnathan (el-nathan) of Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, just as his father had done.

At that time the servants of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came up to Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to the city, while his servants were besieging it; King Jehoiachin of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself, his mother, his servants, his officers, and his palace officials.

The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign. He carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king’s house; he cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the Lord, which King Solomon of Israel had made, all this as the Lord had foretold. He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people of the land. He carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon; the king’s mother, the king’s wives, his officials, and the elite of the land, he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon.

The king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, seven thousand, the artisans and the smiths, one thousand, all of them strong and fit for war.

So, where are we? God makes a covenant with Abraham almost 2000 years before Christ. The promise is to make of Abraham a great nation, give them a land, and bless them so that they can be a blessing to all the families of the earth. (Gen.12:1-2). That doesn’t happen right away! Some say there was 645 years between Abraham and the exodus of Israel from slavery in Egypt. That’s a long wait!
But then there is the wilderness, followed by the battles to enter the Promised Land, and finally King David who established Israel as a great nation, some 1000 years after the promise was made to Abraham. *(God has never seen a calendar or a clock!)*

King Solomon, David’s son, builds the temple in Jerusalem. Years later, the kingdom divides into Judah and Israel. There is a string of kings and prophets, and then it happens. In 598 BC, approximately 1400 years after the covenant was made with Abraham, Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar lays siege to Jerusalem. It falls.

The numbers vary, but *Babylon* carried away the leaders of Israel; the warriors, the artisans, the priests and judges, the king and the queen, and the entire Royal Court. The common people were left to provide manual labor. Israel became a Babylonian colony. After all that history, how in the world could that happen? But it did. Israel went into exile. Due to their unfaithfulness, they lost the Promised Land.

*Babylon* became a symbol for failure, judgment, shame and despair. It became more than a geographical location. It became a state of mind. *Babylon!* **The challenge is to live in a hostile land, and not forget who you are.**

* Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman suggests there was a historical exile and there is exile as a metaphor. Exile as metaphor is any place and time when we “lose the safe world we knew.” *(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yw3ZiyXp-mE)*

Some would ask if America has entered an early phase of exile. Are we losing the safe world we knew? Is our moral superiority waning in influence? What about our growing national debt and the future security of our children and grandchildren? After all our history, how in the world could that happen?

It could also be asked if the Church is in a form of exile? How do the Christian values of hospitality, forgiveness and generosity stack up in a culture of consumerism, commodities, nationalism, racism, sexism, classism and hedonism? Has the Church lost its influence, its identity, in American culture? After all that history…

* There is no prescription that will cure the exile, but Brueggeman holds **three strategies for maintaining identity** while in *Babylon.*
  - Recover the traditions.
  - Have a vision for something other than what is in front of us.
  - Live by the disciplines. *(ibid)*

**Traditions** tell us who we are. The Jews found their traditions in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Christians find our traditions in the Old and New Testaments, in the teachings of Christ. We are reminded of who we are, and of who we are not. When in exile, you become hungry for your traditions, for those things that
define you. Your goal is to get back home, to get back to who you were, to who you are.

But how do you have a vision for the future while you are in exile? How do you see something other than reality, other than what is? How do you hope for something you can’t prove exists? Vision is a gift from God. It’s not meant to be rational or logical. At times it even appears foolish. And vision is always at odds with what you currently see. Only God can grant us vision while in exile. Without a vision you fold into what is. When you fold into what is, you begin to perish.

And what does it mean to live by the disciplines? Any good coach could tell you exactly what this means. How do you think Tennessee came to be ranked #1 in Men’s Basketball? Rick Barnes can tell you. Live by the disciplines, the fundamentals. Dribbling, passing, lay-ups, free throws and sound defense. When you get lost in a game, go back to the basics, to the disciplines, to the fundamentals. That is also true in life.

The Jews kept the Sabbath while in exile. That was their discipline. The Sabbath is counter-cultural to the empire. It’s not just a day of rest, it’s a day of no work, no productivity, no building up the coffers. This day belongs to God. That’s how they reset their focus, their priorities, their identity. It still is. Live by the disciplines.

So, are there any universal truths that transfers from a historical exile to our modern-day setting? There’s at least one. It’s easy to lose your Christian identity in this world. That’s true. In fact, it’s not very popular to keep it. Christians can be seen as narrow-minded, judgmental, hypocritical, pietistic and boring. (That’s what somebody told me! I don’t think they were talking about me!)

And I have noticed this. When someone gets into real trouble, when they are broken or lost, they welcome the hospitality, the forgiveness and generosity of a true Christian. They find unconditional love, hope, resurrection, and power to live a new life. They’d rather see you knock on their door than just about anybody else.

But it’s easy to lose that identity, to blend in, to go along and not stand out. It doesn’t happen overnight, but slowly over time you abandon the core values of the Christian faith. That’s a form of exile. The challenge is to live in a hostile land, and not forget who you are.

A hundred years ago, when I was a teenager, (back when phones were tied to the wall with a cord!), as I was heading out the door for a fun night on the town, my dad would often say, “Just remember who you are.” (I hated it when he said that!)

But it begs the question, “Who am I?” Well, I was the son of a United Methodist minister, and my mother, who made all of us believe we were as good as we thought
we were! I was a brother to my siblings, an Eason, (*with Halstead, Norris and Matthews blood*). I was once President of the Senior Class, a drummer in a Beach band, a friend, a student (*occasionally! OK, not so much!*). And at the bottom of the pile, I was a baptized Christian. (*Oh, that one would ruin many a good night!*) Or did it?

I tried to forget that’s who I was, but I couldn’t. My parents didn’t just baptize me, the whole church did, and church folks take that stuff seriously. “You belong to us. Christ got up from the dead for you. You need to make something of your life. So what are you gonna do?” They said all of that without words.

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So, who are you? There’s something worse than living in exile, something worse than living in *Babylon*, and that’s forgetting who you are. That would be the greatest tragedy of all.

You can’t forget your identity in Christ just because you have a house and a mailbox in *Babylon! Babylon* doesn’t get the final word.

You might want to be here next Sunday. The next stop is on the word *Temple*. They’re going home! They get their life back!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Congregation; *Amen.*