

“A Return From Exile”

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The Return of the Exiles
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Readings

From *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Ordinary Words*
by David Whyte

The hope for unconditional love is the hope for a different life than the one we have been given. Love is the conversation between possible, searing disappointment and a profoundly imagined sense of arrival and fulfillment; how we shape that conversation is the touchstone of our ability to love in the real inhabited world.

Excerpts from Jeremiah 31
as interpreted by John Philip Newell in *Celtic Treasure*

You shall come back from the land of your enemy.
There is hope for the future.
There is promise for your children.
I have loved you with an everlasting love
and will continue my faithfulness to you.
The city shall be rebuilt.
Again you will make music and sing.
Again you will plant vineyards and enjoy the fruit.
Your life shall become like a watered garden
like a deep spring whose waters never fail.
Then shall your young women sing and dance
and young men and old shall be merry.
For the One who makes the sun shine by day
and the moon and stars glisten by night
will turn your mourning into joy
and give you gladness instead of sorrow.

As members of the human family, you and I share many qualities, needs, and aspirations. These are the commonalities that bring us into relationship with one another. We all have a need to belong, to feel that we are part of a meaningful collective. It starts early on the playground, and extends throughout our lives. Even the strongest introvert needs some form of community and contact, a sense of belonging.

We all need to be loved. I think this is a big reason why the teachings of Jesus still resonate after two thousand years, because when he said, “Love one another as I have loved you,” he touched on something primal and existential that transcended his own time and space. He was speaking to the universal human need, that which brings us together, that which makes us truly human. We know that young infants struggle to survive if they are deprived of human touch, affection, and love. And even seasoned adults struggle in complex ways to survive without love. We all need to feel safe and secure, and to have access to healthy food, clean water, and the resources to care for our health. We need only to look up and down the streets of our cities to see what happens when people lose their sense of security. They lose hope for the future, and the light slowly leaks from their souls. We need laughter and joy in our lives, and the enjoyment of our loved ones. We need care, compassion, and empathy—both to give it and receive it. These common qualities, needs and aspirations make us human, and make us family.

As we have often said, the church is an environment in which our human needs may be met. Our shared experiences may not always be perfect, but they can express loving community in a radical, and sometimes counter-cultural, way. The church, when it is truly being the church, can be an antidote to hate and vitriol, to injustice and inequality—a petri dish for a higher order of life, the practice room for greater human interaction, the gym for developing the muscles of human connection, respect, and forward vision. And if our only real dogma is to love and care for one another the way Jesus loved his friends, then we will have become an expression of the highest good that exists in the cosmos. We will have fulfilled our purpose. We will have done what we came here to do. In the words of the apostle Paul, we will have run the race well and finished the course. There are, however, some obstacles to navigate. Just ask the ancient Hebrews.

According to the prophets, five centuries before Jesus there was a large band of Jewish exiles who had lost their homeland, their society, and their culture. Robbed of four decades of their lives, many among them died in exile. Their religious center had been destroyed. Everything they knew was taken away. They were strangers in a strange land. But when their conquerors themselves became the conquered (that is, when the Babylonian empire fell to the Persians), the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, decided to let them go home, and as a result, as the psalmists tell us, they felt like they were in a dream.

Have you ever felt like you were in a dream? Have you ever had to pinch yourself to see if something was real? I remember the day the Berlin Wall began to fall, and images came across our screens of East Germans moving freely in and out of the Brandenburg Gate. As part of a generation who had little memory of life before the Cold War, I wasn't sure I could believe what I was seeing. Was this possible? *How* was this possible? Could we trust it? Was this a good thing, or was something awful about to happen? It took a while to think that this could be so. And then it was so.

The return of the ancient Jewish exiles was bittersweet, for when they first laid eyes on Jerusalem, their joy at being free was tempered by grief and sadness as they surveyed the ruins of the life they had once lived. The land was there waiting for them, but all that had been built upon it lay in ruins. They would have to start again, which is exactly what they did. In the spirit of Jeremiah's words:

The city shall be rebuilt.
Again you will make music and sing.
Again you will plant vineyards and enjoy the fruit.
Your life shall become like a watered garden
like a deep spring whose waters never fail.

To understand this theme is to understand the Bible, at least in large part. It's about the oppression of a faithful remnant, the suffering throngs set free by a powerful deliverer, the setting about to find a new life, a new covenant, a new future that is even brighter than the once glorious past. If you want to know what salvation is, this is it: something happening in the collective that cannot be realized individually, a recognition that we are stronger, brighter, and more resourceful together, the "someday" when we shall indeed overcome.

To call our pandemic experience with "exile" is to stretch the metaphor a little too far. This hasn't been a forty-year lockdown. We have lost some people dear to us, but not an entire generation. Our cities have not been leveled. But ours is not the only human experience. If you are homeless, the metaphor does not go far enough. If you've been evicted, it's as if your buildings have been leveled. If you are hungry, it is impossible to make music and dance. We are surrounded every day of the year with exiles, as the oppression of Babylon continues. There are encampments in my neighborhood with people who are strangers in a strange land.

If you are the subject of racial injustice, the metaphor does not go far enough. If you are in an oppressed minority of any kind, a return from the exile of COVID 19 is just the tip of the iceberg. As David Whyte has said,

The hope for unconditional love is the hope for a different life than the one we have been given. Love is the conversation between possible, searing disappointment and a profoundly imagined sense of arrival and fulfillment; how we shape that conversation is the touchstone of our ability to love in the real inhabited world.

I know that we are collectively and individually desirous of having our lives back as they were before the pandemic, and that there are emotional scars that have come from isolation, separation from family members, and the inconveniences of our interrupted lives. But there are millions of exiles among us, and a wave of evictions could add to their number.



What will grow out of this laboratory of love at the top of this hill? What can we do to bring the exiles home? How can we heal racial inequities? How can we provide good accessible health care for all? How can we welcome the solutions to homelessness in our very own neighborhoods? How can this laboratory of love encompass the real inhabited world, and not just the one we have created for ourselves? This is our moment to answer that question.