

SERMON: "BIBLE BASICS – EXILE"

TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT ISAIAH 39:1-8
OLD TESTAMENT ISAIAH 40:1-11, 27-31

August 4, 2024

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INTRODUCTION

The sports network ESPN does a really good job of promoting itself
Watch it for a bit and you'll see some promos that use humor rather well
I like the scene in the cafeteria where Arnold Palmer is going through line
He is followed by a caddie carrying his golf clubs. He stops and pours
a glass of tea – halfway, then adds lemonade – An Arnold Palmer

Another favorite features a college football player getting a talking to
His coach is yelling at him, obviously rather angry. He's just inches away
You can see spittle flying from his mouth as he yells. Then you hear
a voice over, "Yes, this is the same coach who recruited you, who
sat politely in your parents' den saying "yes, mam" and "yes, sir."

Have you ever had anyone you love, you respect, angry with you?
Justifiably agree with you? Or vice versa, you with them?
Don't we all have some experience with that? Uncomfortable, wasn't it?

That is where we find ourselves this morning with this sermon series
on bible basics. In chronological order, we have worked our way through
an outline of the Old Testament – creation, covenant, exodus, law and land
And now exile ... the part of the biblical story we tend to bypass

We do so because it is uncomfortable, because it is the story of God being angry,
justifiably angry with God's people ... and God acting on that anger.
Perhaps you said (or heard said) something like "I've had enough of your
fill in the blank" followed by some sort of act like showing you the door
or throwing out all your stuff. That is what is happening here!

What is the exile? It was a time of judgement, God's judgment on God's people.
It is when Jerusalem was overrun by invading armies. God's will that it happen.
It is when the people were led away to live as captives in a foreign land
in Babylon, where their captors made them sing songs of Zion.

When was this? Most scholars would say the exile began when Nebuchadnezzar,
the king of Babylon conquered Jerusalem. The passage we read from Isaiah 39
chronicles how the Israelite king foolishly showed all his wealth to the envoys
from the powerful nation to the east. That was around 598 BC

The exile itself, that time of judgement, would last 70 years until Cyrus
King of Persia (the powerful nation that surpassed Babylon) would graciously
release the captives and send them back to Jerusalem. God made that happen too!

WHY AN EXILE?

Why did it happen, this punishment? The prophets, Isaiah and others,
let us know how passionately and persistently God would call a rebellious
stiff-necked people back to faithfulness. Over and over and over again.
But the people kept falling short, kept failing to love God and to love neighbor

Their shortcomings, their sin ... there were and are some common threads
There is the idolatry, putting something before God. They had actual idols
We are a bit more refined with our idols – not so much statues as much as stature
There is the greed, my gain, your loss. That's still around today too.

There is the self-righteous show of religion, also still around today.
Maybe you remember the prophet Amos who speaking for God said,

**I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn
assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain
offerings, I will not accept them, and the offerings of well-being of your
fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your
songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll
down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**

I mention these common and current threads not to point a finger
I pray you notice that this is God's judgement of God's people, not others
The same you may notice in who it is that Jesus criticizes – us, not them
religious people, religious leaders especially, not secular people

There is a place for judgment in our faith as followers of Jesus
But it is not in self-righteous sneers or smears, nor in pious posturing
It is a look in the mirror. It is God not so much talking about them
It is God talking to me, God talking to you, God talking to us

So let's wrestle with that 'talking to,' with God's judgement on God's people a bit
Beth and I like to watch home improvement shows. We've watched enough
to notice a few trends. It seems most shows feature tearing down walls
and adding an island. So, let's talk about the walls and islands in your house
I don't mean the structure itself ... I mean the floorplan of your spiritual house

Thinking about the floorplan of your spiritual house, I ask you to think about the rooms
And ask you ... Is there any room in your spiritual house for God's judgment?
For God to be angry, justifiably angry, with you and with us, with God's people?

Now I must say I ask that question with some hesitation. I know some of us grew up
thinking of God as angry ... and not just angry but seemingly on the lookout
for something to get angry about. There is some truth to God's justifiable anger
God has expectations of us. You've heard that, even 'amened' it
"God has shown you what is good and what does the Lord *require of you* ..."

JUDGEMENT TO REDEMPTION

But the overall image of God is not that. It is not God as ruler with a ruler used to smack our misbehaving behinds. No, our God is a God of justice and mercy a God who is eager to show mercy. The purpose of judgement is not punishment ... it is restoration. That is true in and through the story of the exile

We began this overview of the Old Testament talking about how God talks about Godself, how God introduces Godself. I referred to it then as two lens preaching about how the covenant promise to Abram making Israel God's people and the exodus, the liberation of God's people out of slavery are the central themes of the Old Testament. The two lens through which we see the whole.

We see the whole of the Old Testament through God's two self-introductions either "I am the God of your ancestors" a reference to covenant with Abram or a reference to the exodus, "I am the God who brought you out of slavery." Now, following the exile, God adds another intro ...
"I am the God who brought you back from exile"

Isaiah chapter 40 marks a new beginning with the words that declare an end to the Babylonian captivity and a return home. God will lead the way back. You may notice the language Isaiah uses here, John the Baptist will use later.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

The difference between chapter 39 and 40 is about 70 years. This is Isaiah 2.0
Another voice in the same tradition with another message
Both chapters include an ending and a beginning.

Chapter 39 - the end of the wayward nation as it was, the beginning of judgement
Chapter 40 - the end of judgement and the beginning of restoration

Judgement is never an end in and of itself. Its purpose is and always be restoration
So if you grew up thinking of God as a strict ruler with a swift ruler for spanking, how bout we say "Enough of that!" Let's end that and move on to the restoration

Isaiah sings that hopeful and helpful tune as the fortieth chapter builds its momentum
As bad news fades (lesson learned hearing and healing through difficult time, what we talked about last week with the difficult and honest lessons of history) and the good news builds. You can hear the hope.

SUMMARY

Isaiah has this to say to a people who have been on the end of God's justifiable anger
A people who had maybe gotten used to thinking of God as angry
A people who needed some convincing that judgment has now given way
to redemption. Times, they are a changing.
God is now picking up a people who've been down.

That was them, there and then.

You know anyone who may feel that way today?

Someone who has been down and needs a hand to get back up?

Someone who needs to hear a word of hope? Hear these words!

**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"?**

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

**The Lord is the everlasting God,
the creator of the ends of the earth.**

**He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.**

**He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.**

**Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;**

**but those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.**

Isaiah 40:28-31

Yes, there is room in our spiritual house for God to be angry with us, justifiably so.
God might need to knock down some walls ... not just to do some demo ...
but to do some remodeling, some restoration and reformation.

The way I see it that remodeling needs to happen

And that remodeling will include not just an island in the kitchen
but a table spread with bread and wine ...

and a place for everyone