

Making a home in exile

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January 12, 2015

Here's a paradox about human nature: we look for home in a world where we never feel fully and restfully at home. That paradox explains why even the most settled and contented people have moments when they wonder if they will ever arrive where they most want to be. It's why everyone can imagine what it would be like to be an exile—how it would feel to live in a place that seems a long way from home.

Almost all of us ache for a truer experience of being known, welcomed, and loved—a greater sense of being home. That ache has important lessons to teach us. As C. S. Lewis said, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in the world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.” Or as literary critic George Steiner [put it](#), “We are creatures of a great thirst, bent on coming home to a place we have never known.”

We've all been parched by that great thirst, and we know about unmet desire, unsatisfied longing, and unfulfilled yearning. There's a refugee in all of us. We want to go home.

The prophet Jeremiah [once told a band of exiles](#) that they would have to make their home in a place that wasn't their home. In the place of your exile, he wrote:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

There are steep challenges in these instructions. For one thing, God called the exiles to love and pray for their enemies, saying, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” The exiles would live in peace, only if they made peace with their enemies. Their gardens would flourish only if the conditions were right for everyone's garden to flourish. Their destiny was lined to their neighbor's destiny,

even if their neighbor was also their captor. Like Jesus centuries later, Jeremiah said, “Love your neighbor and love your enemies, even when neighbors and enemies turn out to be the same people.”

When we make our home in exile, we don’t pretend it isn’t exile. We love our enemies, but we recognize that they are enemies. They might become our friends, but they might forever be our enemies, but we love them nonetheless, which means we pray and work for God’s best for them. We still yearn for and seek our better and true home. When we live by mercy in conditions of brokenness, we don’t minimize the brokenness, but we do make the most of the possibilities for restoration. We seek peace, but we seek it because we know we don’t have it.

For another thing, God urged the exiles not to keep postponing their lives—the time for them to live their lives was while they were alive--which was the present moment.

It’s easy to defer and delay our lives, because the conditions aren’t right. After all, we’re not yet home. The irony is, however, that change doesn’t happen if we wait on the conditions to be right. The only way to effect change in the present and the future is to immerse ourselves fully in the present moment.

As we live creatively and faithfully in the here and now, we take heart from the knowledge that we will not always live in exile. God has promised to take us home. Jeremiah’s letter to the refugees included this encouragement that “thus says the Lord: ‘Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. . . . I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.’”

There would be a home-going and a homecoming for the exiles. And there will be for us, too. We won’t so much go “back home,” but forward, at last, to our real home—the place we belong, which is the place that satisfies the longings of our being.

In that true home, love puts our fears outside the door. Hope sings to us amid all the suffering and dying. Mercy gathers up the shards and fragments of our shattered hearts and puts us back together. Grace holds us while we weep over our painful regrets and shed our shameful tears, and, having cried ourselves into weary silence, continues to cradle us while we rest. And, joy surges in us, an inexplicable but undeniable joy.

Originally posted at [From the Intersection](#)