

THE END

A sermon given at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Loveland, Colorado on September 17, 2017 (Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign; he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem....

Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon.

And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem, and laid siege to it; they built siegeworks against it all around. So the city was besieged until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine became so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. Then a breach was made in the city wall; the king with all the soldiers fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden, though the Chaldeans were all around the city. They went in the direction of the Arabah. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king, and overtook him in the plains of Jericho; all his army was scattered, deserting him. Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, who passed sentence on him. They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, then put out the eyes of Zedekiah; they bound him in fetters and took him to Babylon.

In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the LORD, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. All the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had defected to the king of Babylon—all the rest of the population. But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest people of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.

- 2 Kings 24:18, 20b-25:12

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When Jerusalem was conquered and life as they had known it came to an end, many of God's people – the leading citizens of the city of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah – were carried away into exile in Babylon – about a thousand miles away from their beloved homes in what is now the modern nation of Iraq. That is what the Babylonians did with conquered people – to prevent any rebellion. And there they lived for... you'll have to stay tuned for the rest of the story, because we will learn more about the exile of God's people for the next two Sundays.

This is a pretty grim story – not exactly Bible memory verse material. But it is an important story – partly because much of the Old Testament of the Bible was written around the time of the exile – either just before, or during, or soon afterwards. It had a huge impact on the lives and faith of the people and their descendants.

And the story is still remembered and told because many of us – perhaps all of us – will have an exile-like experience in our lives. We can feel as if we are living in exile whenever the world as we have known it comes to an end; we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory, perhaps surrounded by strange people with strange customs. We may even start to wonder – as the people of Israel did – whether God might be angry at us, or has simply abandoned us. Or maybe God never really existed at all.

Have you ever felt like that? It can happen when a spouse or partner dies, and we find ourselves in an alien land of grief and loneliness. It can happen when we lose a great, well-paying job and find ourselves having to depend on food stamps; or when a marriage ends; or when we have to move out of our own home, give up driving, and live in a senior care facility.

There are as many ways to experience exile as there are people. I feel that way a little bit whenever I see people absorbed with their smart phones, while I still have a flip phone. I just don't get it.

It is good at such times to know that God's people have been this way before, and somehow survived, and even found a new relationship with God along the way.

But churches can find themselves in exile, as well. And that is what I want to focus on these next few weeks – because it will be important for this congregation in this interim time to understand where we are and where we are going.

I have come to believe – along with others – that many churches like ours are having an exile experience. The world in which many of us “more experienced” church members grew up has changed, and we find ourselves in an alien culture.

I remember when just about everyone in the communities I knew went to some church. When I began my ministry, it still seemed like a time when all a church had to do was be friendly, and offer a few good programs, and folks would flock into the church. I remember learning Christian songs in the local public school. I remember when the church was a respected institution in the community, and clergy were honored.

Many of you may be old enough to remember saying prayers in public school. It was once assumed that just about everyone in America was nominally Christian.

I have been reading some of this church's history. The program from the 50th anniversary celebration in 1965 reported that the Sunday School had 14 different age-level classes with 28 teachers and 3 officers. How many of you remember those days?

That has all pretty much changed. Most churches in America are declining in numbers these days. I'm sure you are aware of that. That world we remember is coming to an end, and it isn't likely to come back any time soon.

There are several reasons for the decline. John Dorhauer, who is now the President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ, recently wrote a book about the changes our churches are going through called "Beyond Resistance." It might be a good book for this church to study during this interim time. One of the reasons our numbers are declining is pure demographics. Our country is changing. A recent survey by the Pew Research Center showed that less than 15% of Americans consider themselves to be affiliated with mainline Protestant churches like ours. A much larger group – 23% of Americans – report that they are "unaffiliated." They have no particular religious affiliation. And my guess is that the majority of those folks are young adults.

Another 6% of Americans are non-Christians, like Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc. That number will continue to increase. This church was started to minister to the needs of recent immigrants who were Christian; many immigrants these days are non-Christian.

And where are all the children to fill our Sunday school? One simple fact that most people don't realize is that the birth rate – the number of live births per thousand in population – was over 30 in 1910; in 2010 it was 13.4. The reality is that fewer people are going to church or looking for a church, and the families that are going have fewer kids. I know many couples – like Jill and me – who have no children. American demographics are changing.

But perhaps an even more significant factor is a changing worldview. Many scholars who study our culture believe we are now in a "post-modern" time. That may be an unfamiliar term to most of you, but one of the differences between the modern world view (that most of us grew up with) and a post-modern worldview is a distrust of institutions and authority. The church used to be a place of education and culture and moral teaching. They were at the center of our communities. Today, many people see the church as unnecessary and irrelevant, but still relatively harmless. But after the clergy misconduct stories of the last couple of decades, some even see the church as dangerous. Or they see it as judgmental. When leaders of supposedly Christian churches claim the recent hurricanes are God's punishment for what they claim is sexual immorality among residents of Texas and Florida – that doesn't exactly put out a welcome mat for churches. Who wants to worship a God like that?

Post-moderns distrust authority – like preachers and priests and bishops and such. And they are suspicious of anyone claiming to have "the truth." There is no one truth anymore; everyone has their own perspective on truth.

So all of a sudden many churches find themselves in exile – trying to understand a culture that has dramatically changed in the last century. By many measures, churches like this one were very successful, and made a huge impact on people's lives for centuries. This church has not been a failure – it has done great things!

But that world which it understood and ministered to has slowly and quietly been coming to an end. What may have worked spectacularly a generation ago is no longer working. And many people in churches just like this one around the country are scratching their heads trying to figure out why, and working like crazy to do the same things that worked so well fifty years ago – with only frustration and exhaustion for a result. No one broke down the walls of the church, as the Babylonians did to Jerusalem twenty-six centuries ago; but a lot of people see no need to enter the walls of the church any more.

So what do we do? I'm afraid I don't have any easy answers. I am in exile just like you. This is a strange new world to me as well.

The first thing we must do is realize what is happening. I believe part of my task as an Interim Minister is to make you aware of the changes we are facing, because it could make a difference in what you decide to look for in a new Pastor. If you are hoping to find someone who can bring back the good, old days, I'm afraid you will be disappointed. Besides, the good, old days may not have been as good as we like to remember.

I hope you will talk to one another about what I have said today. Does it ring true? Read some books (I will have a few suggestions in next week's bulletin). Ask questions. And come back next week as we talk about what we do next and what the future might hold.

Twenty-six centuries ago God's people, Israel, had their world come to an end, and they went away into exile. But you will notice -- if you read your Bible – that was not the end of the story. God had some new tricks up his (or her) sleeve (does God have sleeves?). I believe God still has need for the church today. Just maybe in different ways.

Amen.

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