

Return From Exile

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Last week my colleague Mike here apologized for preaching a not-so-light summer sermon, and forgive me, but I'm definitely following in his footsteps this week. These aren't easy times we're living through. But I promise we are going to get through to the good news, just hang in there with me!

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*"Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations
of many generations
You shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in."*

Of all the countless moments of shock, rage, and moral trauma I've had to process over the past seven months – I know you've been there – perhaps my lowest point, or one of my very lowest points so far, came last March when I read about what our country had done to 252 detainees in US custody – most of them Venezuelans.

Most of you will have heard how the Trump administration illegally shipped these men to one of the world's most notoriously brutal prisons, CECOT, in El Salvador, and then shrugged when a court ordered their return, saying they were now out of US jurisdiction; there was nothing they could do.

Soon after their transfer – let's call it kidnapping – I read an eyewitness report of the brutal intake of these prisoners, how they were stripped, beaten, and forced to kneel as their heads were shaved upon entry. Exactly what would have happened to prisoners of war in the ancient world, by the way: captives of an empire like Assyria, or Babylon. Their heads would be

shaved as a part of their ritual humiliation, before they were marched off to exile in a foreign land.

Most of these Venezuelan men had no criminal records. They were not gang members, as the US insisted. They were just ordinary people.

The reporter who witnessed their arrival at was particularly disturbed by the plight of one man, a Venezuelan hair and makeup artist. He had come to the US seeking asylum as a gay man, only to be bundled onto a plane and shipped to CECOT. As I read about his brutal treatment there, I felt engulfed in darkness, sick in the depths of my soul.

I couldn't imagine how these 252 men would ever get out of CECOT. And in fact that's what their guards taunted them with: "You will never get out of here."

But they did get out. Four months later, in a prisoner exchange, they were returned to Venezuela. Free to go home, like the Judeans from Babylon. Free to begin life over.

But what can that possibly look like, after what they have been through?

Is there life after captivity? Is there life after empire?

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I remember a class assignment in my Intro the Old Testament course in seminary to draw a timeline of the history of Israel. I learned a lot as I added the kings in one color, the prophets in another. The empires I showed as mountains in a range that spread across the page of history, each empire a mountain of a different shape and color, overlapping each other as they rose to greatness and declined, one after another.

Brutal Assyria was conquered by boastful Babylon, which fell almost

overnight to the upstart Persians, who allowed the peoples Babylon had taken captive to return home the following year – among them, the people of Judah. Somewhere off the page, but not so very far off in history, Persia in turn would fall to Alexander the Great. And so on to Carthage, Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, the British empire... the United States of America...

Not pictured on my map: the ordinary people who lived through these rises and falls, the invasions and the conquests, the destruction of cities, the trauma of exile, the slow rebuilding.

We're somewhere on this timeline ourselves, but where? We don't know. We can't see it: We're too busy being in the middle of it.

But we've learned we're not immune to the shocks of history. I think that to many of us here in the US it felt as if we were immune. Depending on our level of privilege. Depending on the color of our skin, or our immigration status, we might have believed we were safe here from the assaults and sieges of history. And now we know that's not the case, never was the case. Instead, here we are. Our constitution and our historic institutions are under assault by hostile powers; our world is changing. And like so many populations before us in times of turmoil, we feel powerless to slow the dismantling.

Is there any coming back from this place? What would that look like? How would we begin to repair the damage already done? How do we even begin to build the kind of society we want not only for ourselves, but even more, for Wesley and Austin, to whom we have just promised all our love, support, and care, as we renewed our promise to live in the freedom of Christ, and resist the power of evil..?

What does life look like after exile?

This was the question facing the community re-forming in Judea after the

Babylonian captivity.

I'm going to come back to them. But first I want to ask: What happened to Andry Hernández after he got out of CECOT?

Well, he gave a remarkable interview to Tim Miller recently on the "The Bulwark" podcast. If you haven't listened to it, I encourage you to check it out. I'll include a link in the online version of this sermon.

Speaking through an interpreter, Andry answered Miller's questions about his ordeal simply and honestly. He told how he had tried to appeal his deportation, to prove that he wasn't a gang member – only to be repeatedly dismissed. How he and the others had been flown secretly out of the country on a Saturday, when the judges who would have tried to prevent their transfer were off work. How they were lied to about what was happening in order to keep them compliant. And of course, about the conditions they faced in El Salvador.

How did you survive? Miller asked. Andry answered, "We survived by holding on to God. There was not a day when we did not pray... for our families, for our mental well-being. We held on, and held hands with God."

Comradery became an essential part of their survival at CECOT. "We entered as 252 strangers," Andry said, "and left as 252 brothers." Now back in Venezuela, they still talk and joke every day, laugh about some of their experiences at the prison (if you can imagine that!), and visit each other's families. Several of the men are getting married, and the families have signed Andry up to do their brides' makeup. "The happiness we all have right now is immense," Andry told Tim Miller.

Did you think the story was going to go in that direction? I didn't. In fact, it seems impossible that it could.

But honestly so does Jesus' resurrection seem impossible. So does his word of forgiveness to his tormenters spoken from the cross. So does his greeting to the disciples when he returned from the exile of the tomb – the friends who fled when he was arrested, who denied that they knew him, who hid behind locked doors: "Shalom," he said to them. "Peace be with you."

These aren't just stories from the Bible. They're being lived out every day by ordinary people like Andry, who even now expresses only grace toward the American people, and deep gratitude toward those who have been reaching out to offer their support.

"Shalom."

And it fills my heart with a wild hope that no matter what awfulness may yet be in store – no matter what the road ahead may look like, love is still the strongest, realest, most untamed thing going, a burning light that no darkness can overcome, not by scheming, not by the bulldozing of political norms, not by lying, cheating, betraying, lawbreaking, psychological warfare, or reckless brutality.

We may find ourselves morally and spiritually exiled from our homeland, but we don't have to become exiled from ourselves, and who we are in our realest beings: God's beloved ones, formed in God's image, made to love and be loved, to forgive and be forgiven; made for community and generosity and kindness and creativity and laughter and endless gladness.

We don't have to be recruited into the darkness and shadows. We don't have to be remade or redefined by the powers. We are free, by God's wild, untamed grace, to choose differently.

How do you rebuild after exile? For the majority of Judeans in the post-

exilic period, the answer seems to have been to devote themselves to religious purity and ritual observances like fasting, perhaps in the hope that things would start to go better for them. Or just to play it as safe as possible.

But there was another tradition that didn't embrace this path. Another vision, let's call it the Isaian dream, of a new society built around compassion and justice.

"Is not this the fast that I choose," God says through Isaiah, after mocking the fasting rituals of the day:

*to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

The "you" here is the community of Judea. God is calling the whole people to moral and social renewal. But in Hebrew it's the second person singular you, not the plural. The prophet is speaking not just to the community at large, but to the heart of each individual hearer. Calling each one of them, and by extension each one of us, to responsibility, repentance, and renewal.

"If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil..."
if you fast not from food, but from placing the yoke of wage and wealth

inequality on your neighbors' shoulders, if you fast from sky-high housing prices and unaffordable health care...

if you fast from blaming the ills of society on immigrants like Andry Hernández, on people of color... on LGBTQ+ folks... if you fast from telling poor and marginalized neighbors that it's their own fault they're struggling just to survive...

well, now you and God are starting to get on the same page.

You can get out of exile, but to get the exile out of yourself is a whole other thing. Getting out from under empire is only the start: You have to do something about the empire that's worked its way under your skin, recruited you into its patterns and ways of thinking.

We have to do something different if we don't want to keep ending up back in Babylon.

So much of human life throughout history has been about exile, about dislocation and uprooting. God holds out to us the promise, the assurance of return. But as we read deeper into Isaiah, we realize that "return" in God's plans never means a return to the way things were. That past is over and gone. Your ancient ruins will be rebuilt, yes, but the new buildings will not be replicas of the old. There is no going back to a time before things fell apart. There is only forward. Forward in hope, in purpose, in vision. Because nostalgia for the past aside, let's be truthful, as our holy God is clear-eyed and truthful: the past was not actually one worth returning to. That was a world of unjust social structures, unfair distribution of resources, and unequal social relations. Assyria swept those away, Babylon swept those away – or really, if you take Isaiah's theology seriously, GOD swept those away. They lie now in ruins. And the chance is before the people to begin anew.

“See, I am doing a new thing,” God declares. “Now it springs forth: Do you not perceive it?”

Our passage today gives us a glimpse of what that newness looks like – and to me it looks a lot like a gentle hair and makeup artist from Venezuela with a flair for beauty pageants. It’s rooted in prayer, in kindness, in mutuality, and in attention to what is happening to the most vulnerable in our midst – so that all have what they need, and no one is left behind.

In the words of our summertime invitation to confession: “Because we seek the renewal of the world, let’s start here, among us, with our own hearts.”

That’s the place where exile ends, and freedom begins: where we begin to say no to the old, destructive patterns of fear, greed, and power over others, and yes to God’s astonishing mercy and grace...

...grace for the sake of Wesley and Austin and my new-born grandchildren and all children, grace for the sake of the peoples of the world, grace for the sake of the earth and its creatures, and for the astonishing beauty of it all.

“We held on, Andry said, “and held hands with God.”

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May it be so. Amen.

Interview with Andry Hernández on the Bulwark: <https://youtu.be/-ySsBj3OOg0>

