

# Into Exile – Rev Sam Waako (Curate)

2 Chronicles 36.11-20

Isaiah 40.3-5

This week's sermon begins a two months sermon series looking at Israel's return from Exile in Babylon to help us as we continue to look forward to coming out from the Covid 19 pandemic and it's resulting restrictions into whatever God has in store for us, or as the rest of the world seems to call it; 'The New normal.'

This series will aim to draw out similarities between Israel's exile and our 'exile' caused by the pandemic and things we can learn from this significant period of Israel's history. And I believe we could not have begun this series at a better time. Just this week on Tuesday, zero covid deaths were announced in England for the first time since the pandemic, and it's thought that the government's roadmap of ending restrictions on June 21st is still on course.

The recession of Covid 19 glimmers on the horizon, there is a general sense of things looking up; sorrow is giving way to joy, light is dawning in the darkness, even the weather is finally joining in in the cheer, especially in this half-term week, where it's been greatly appreciated. Just like the Israelites looked forward and longed to their return home in Jerusalem, we too are looking forward to returning 'home', to normal.

We will find out later in the series that when the Israelites returned home, it was not exactly the same as they had left it, lots of rebuilding had to be done. And as we have already seen, returning back to 'normal' for many of us if not all of us is not going to be the same, lots of 'rebuilding' (not literally) is going to be needed. A lot has changed, and if we are to be honest, we too have changed and are different in many ways than we were over a year ago. This Series is aimed at helping us enter into the experience of people who were exiled from their homeland – Land that gave them belonging, purpose, and an identity as God's people. Exile was more than just Geographical dislocation; it was more than that. Hopefully, this series will help us begin to think of how we can navigate the next season of our lives.

## **Into Exile**

The story of Israel's exile and eventual return to Jerusalem I believe is poignant to help us navigate this particular season in which we find ourselves. But why

Exile? We are told in our reading in Chronicles that *"...all the leaders of the priests and the people became more unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations and defiling the temple of the Lord, which He had consecrated in Jerusalem"* (2 Chron 36.14). In doing so, Israel had broken God's covenant relationship with His people that He had entered with them following the Exodus.

God was to be their God and they His people (Jeremiah 32.38). One of the consequences of rejecting God was that "they would find themselves scattered among the nations." Ultimately thou, exile came for Israel not because they had sinned (which they had), but because they spurned God's offer of reconciliation over and over again. God in his great mercy and pity for His people had sent many prophets and warnings but we are told they were all rejected. We are told, "they mocked God's messengers, despised his words, scoffed at the prophets until the wrath of God was aroused..." This rejection of God's message and His messengers sealed the doom for Israel.

I have heard in my circles a school of thought that we too are in this 'exile' because we have rejected God's message. And I think that might be partly true when we look around us and see how people have rejected God and are so negative, resistant they are to God's word.

That said, I want to think that we are in this 'exile' because of the enemy that is Covid 19. One of the other reasons that Israel went into exile was because of the Babylonian power ~ the rise of the enemy so to say. Israel's defeat and eventual exile two fold; Rejecting God and the rise in power of the 'Babylonian empire' where they were exiled.

While in Exile, in a state of captivity, the Israelites found themselves living in a state of perpetual discomfort and fear of the unknown, suffered from loss of community, grieved the loss of loved ones experiences that were normal to them in Jerusalem and were now forced to ride out the wave of uncertainty. In Exile, the Israelites were forcefully ripped out of their places of comfort and plunged into an extended period of grief and lament as they experienced the loss of familiarity, safety, independence, social ties, religious expression (temple was the centre of worship), things that am sure will sound very familiar to all of us in this season.

Living in the reality of exile raised questions for the Israelites about God, their own identity and purpose, whether God was after all just another tribal deity

just like other gods at the time, or perhaps He was weaker than these gods. And could they still be seen as God's chosen people, especially without the access to daily temple worship??

Many of us are sure will relate with some of these experiences that the Israelites went through in captivity, especially the loss of familiarity, safety in relationships or jobs, lack of independence because of lockdown, loss of social ties, loss of religious expression; thank God for technology in our case, but many haven't been able to join in with worship and there are many who this hasn't been enough. And this season of covid and lockdowns has had a knock-on effect on every aspect of our lives, including our faith. Not being able to worship together, have familiar routines for prayer, bible study and fellowship have led some to question, just like the Israelites did.

### **Lament**

Many of the Psalms express the people's lament in exile, and rightly so. And it's ok to lament, to question, it's ok to cry out to God and ask in prayer where God is in all of this. But we also need to remember that God laments over exile. Remember He created all creatures for worship, and until a restoration of abundant communal life can take place, God laments and He continues to provide.

Even in exile, where it's depressing and the situation looks hopeless, Isaiah reminds us in our second reading that 'the glory of God shall be revealed.' The prophet was seeking to awaken hope – hope focussed on the person of God and not circumstances or formulas. As we long to return to normal, God is calling us to prepare to see Him at work. Despite the challenges, God called the Israelites and is calling us to prepare the way of the Lord, even when evidence seemed to suggest He had abandoned them.

### **Conclusion**

As we ponder Israel's exile and hopeful return, and as we ponder our own return to the new normal, I believe it's always worth looking back, seeing how God has seen us through whatever difficulties we have been through, the things we have missed while in 'exile'. We also need to remember that the previous 'home' might no longer be the home of our memory, we need to embrace the new normal. When the Israelites returned, there are things they returned with and things they left back. In our own experience, what do we carry on into the new normal what needs to be left behind? There will be those

who have settled into the exile arrangement and don't want to return or be disturbed, there are others who are longing to get back, perhaps majority in the latter group! Hopefully this series will help us engage fully with some of these thoughts and questions.

Above all, lets be open to what the Lord is doing, in our lives, in our communities and in the world, He still reigns.