

The experience of exile is difficult to understand fully without going through it yourself. Exile is a rare combination of pain and suffering, aching and longing, that calls into question one's purpose and one's very identity. Exile, in different forms, was a popular political weapon in the ancient world. The Greeks would exile individuals from their city-states as a criminal punishment they considered worse than death. The Babylonians took the entire nation of Israel into exile as the final stage of a massive land-grab.

Taking a nation into exile was supposed to dissolve their identity, but it had the opposite effect on Israel, forging them into a stronger, more cohesive, more determined nation. That didn't make it any less painful. Being cut off from that which is most dear cannot be otherwise.

Moving to take advantage of an opportunity doesn't count as being exiled; I'm talking about being cut off from your home community involuntarily. This doesn't necessarily involve a physical relocation. One common experience is that of spiritual exile, the gnawing pain of separation from God and from the community of the faithful. The prophets of Israel blamed national exile on spiritual exile — they argued that since God's people had turned their backs on God, refused to worship God or live according to God's way, that God allowed them to be conquered by militant foreign pagans.

I'd say that spiritual exile is actually worse than geographical exile, both more painful and more of a threat, for God's sustenance and love are greater than any land; God is the ground of our very being. Sometimes we feel alienated from God because we've been disappointed or wounded, and other times because we're ashamed of things we've done, or left undone. The feeling can be sharp and acute, or it can become a dull ache we try to ignore. In a state of spiritual exile, we might feel like our identity is dissolving. Fortunately, God doesn't want us to live like this, and much more fortunately, God is willing to do something about it.

In our first reading, the prophet brings a powerful message of hope to people in exile: the time of homecoming is very near. God is already preparing the return, and God has decided that it will not be a simple reversal of the past, but instead an event that lifts the nation to a new level of dignity, a joyful state of glory and a newfound closeness with God. Instead of restoring the good old days of David and Solomon, God will step in and create an even brighter future for those who had enough faith to follow God on the level path God laid out. And God's promise was fulfilled.

But centuries later, in the time of Jesus, Israel was experiencing a new kind of exile. The nation was physically in its homeland, but only under layers of religious and political authority, all ultimately controlled by militant foreign pagans. The Romans held all the cards: they held Herod's strings, they exercised a veto over the selection of the Jewish High Priest, and just to make sure things went their way, they had a notoriously harsh territorial governor who answered directly to the Emperor.

God sent Jesus's cousin John the Baptist to confront this spiritual wilderness of

exploitation and corruption and point the way to newfound closeness with God. John the Baptist was not going into exile by going into the physical wilderness, but rather, he was following God, in order to bring God's people out of spiritual exile, by proclaiming that once again, God will step in and create a brighter future. God will make a way in the wilderness, in order that God's justice and God's love will be the way of the world. The Romans called it treason. We call it the beginning of the Good News.

The big news was that, as great as God's earlier triumphs and glories had been, God would do even greater things than these. While God had redeemed Israel from powerful enemies time and again, this time, God's plan was even bigger. Now, God is redeeming not just the holy and chosen nation of Israel, but starting with Israel God is redeeming *all flesh*, every nation, all the people of the Earth. God's cosmic glory will break upon the world in a radical inclusivity, offering goodness and peace to absolutely everybody.

As wonderful as the terrestrial kingdom of Israel was, the kingdom that God was bringing into existence is wonderful beyond our imagining. For one thing, God's kingdom is one without geographical boundaries. Not only is the kingdom of God open to all, by existing throughout all places, no one can exile anyone from God's kingdom. Even if we try to exile ourselves from God's kingdom, we are never beyond redemption. No matter how far we have strayed from God's ways, God's grace, love, and mercy are always near.

Much as we struggle with the full implications of these ideas today, in the days of John the Baptist, it was an utterly alien concept, but also a compelling message: the God-centered peace and fulfillment last known in Eden would return from exile to put sin into captivity and finally break the tool of tyrants, death. And so John the Baptist began to win followers.

John showed that the way towards this promised land, this new Jerusalem, is the way of repentance, of moving in a new direction. Every time we turn away from sin, every time we forgive, every time we choose to add to the grace of the world, we take another step forward on the way of the Lord. As we do, we never walk alone, for "the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion." And we never walk alone because we enjoy the grace of the mission and evangelism work of those who went before us.

None of us would know the name of Jesus but for other faithful people who introduced him to us through their words and their examples. So please take a moment today and give thanks to God for those voices whose words connected you to Jesus, those who, like John the Baptist, spoke out and asserted that Jesus is Lord, and the way of his Cross is none other than the Way of Life. Consider how you might follow their example of proclamation. Allow yourself to be dazzled by the possibility that you could even surpass their example, for there is nothing to stop you and all the powers of heaven to support you.

Walk in the way of God with boldness, for the enemy's defeat is assured. Walk with your head held high, for you have left exile to join a royal procession. Walk with your eyes open, and you will see God changing the world. Walk in hope, for God has gone before you, and God will smooth your journey. You will see the salvation of God, and know you are truly, finally, home.