

FINDING REST AMID RESTLESS LIVING

Recently it occurred to me that the birth of both of our kids had an interesting twist. Both Peter and Sarah were born in the middle of a blizzard. For Peter, it was a blizzard in Baltimore, Maryland, in January 1982. For our daughter Sarah, it was a blizzard in St. Charles, Illinois, in February 1985. In both cases, the evening was much the same. Everything was in disarray, and we were disoriented. Powerlines were down—cars were in ditches—white-out conditions prevailed—and eerie darkness was everywhere. But we ventured out anyhow, making it to the hospital, and then things got focused—real focused. Authority figures took over. Lights were positioned and turned on. In due time, God showed up and a miracle occurred, as on a messy night a baby was born—and the baby changed everything! Sure, the blizzard was still blaring, but a baby was now crying, and the baby changed everything!

As we enter the book of Jeremiah, the biblical basis for our message, a blizzard of sorts is blaring.¹ Israel is pictured in exile, disoriented, in disarray and darkness in Babylon. As Jeremiah 25 describes it, the Israelites are surrounded by “...horror and hissing scorn...the sounds of joy and gladness [have ended. Along with] ...the sound of people grinding meal. [Most impactful, darkness is evident as] ...lamps [no longer shine in the] houses [of the Hebrew people]” (Jeremiah 25:9-10 NET). But amid such darkness, God promises a new day: “I will satisfy the weary, and all who are faint I will replenish” (Jeremiah 31:25 NRSV).

Such newness doesn't come from magic, but a Messiah, arising from a new covenant. “...A time is coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah...I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts and minds. I will be their God, and they will be my people’” (Jeremiah 31:31,33 NET). Biblical scholars tell us this is the first mention of the term new covenant in holy Scripture. As it appears, it foreshadows the birth of Jesus and His New Covenant that indeed creates a new day. And so, the blizzard of exile still blares, but a baby now cries, a new covenant breaks forth, and that renewed sense of relationship and promise changes everything.

Have you noticed our blizzard continues? Be it the politics of division, the scourge of racism, the uptick of civil religion, the reflex toward violence, the horror of wildfires, or the never-ending pandemic, we are disoriented, caught up in disarray and darkness. But God continues to promise a new day through a New Covenant. For a baby still cries, and a Savior still reigns, offering Divine relationship and promise—changing everything.

Such Divine reality registers as we yield to God's timing. For yes, God's promise brings change, but not always according to my calendar. I don't know about you, but Amazon Prime has spoiled me. I mean, whatever I want—shampoo, hiking shoes, books, sock-locks—Amazon Prime delivers now, immediately, soon to employ drones! But unlike Amazon Prime, God often does not deliver immediately, but in God's good time. For as the Psalmist confesses: “‘You are my God.’ My times are in *your* hand...” (Psalm 31:14-15 NRSV, emphasis added). Yet we protest. Why, as Israel's exile lingers, Jeremiah is outraged: “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick... ‘Is the Lord not in Zion?’ ... Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor

people not been restored?” (Jeremiah 8:18-19,22 NRSV). Ever felt that way? I have. I mean, our current exile, our current season of unrest, is stretching out far too long, and impatience is exploding.

In my experience, there are two ways forward: graphic honesty about the angst of it all, but equal honesty about the God of it all. For God is Sovereign despite the mystery of His delivery schedule. Thus, we must release control—a tough task, since control is the crack cocaine of Western Christianity. But during this season, we’re called to go into withdrawal, losing our grip and releasing more to God. God advises in Jeremiah 9: “Wise people should not boast that they are wise. Powerful people should not boast that they are powerful. Rich people should not boast that they are rich. If people want to boast, they should boast about this: They should boast that they understand and know me...that I, the Lord, act out of faithfulness, fairness, and justice...” (Jeremiah 9:23-24 NET). God will act! The qualifier: it’s just a matter of time—God’s good time.

In the meantime, we’re to carry on, no matter the length of our difficulty. The Israelites did just that, persevering for 70 years in long exile (Jeremiah 25:8-11 NRSV). They did so, not only with struggle and lament but also productivity, fulfilling God’s call in Jeremiah 29 to “Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat...Marry and have sons and daughters...Grow in number [and] do not dwindle away.” (Jeremiah 29:5-6 NET). God is reminding us that honoring Sovereignty is not synonymous with passivity; releasing control is not equal with jettisoning response-ability. We’re to steward times of exile, recognizing the unique opportunity this change of pace provides.

Beyond productivity, the second calling in exile is subversion.² Daniel models this in the book of Daniel, as he displayed not only industry in Babylon, but countercultural loyalty to the King of all Kings. Why, when an edict is issued in Daniel 6 to pray to King Darius and not to the one true God, Daniel “...entered his home...[and] three times daily [knelt and offered prayers] and thanks to his God just as he had been accustomed to do...” (Daniel 6:10 NET). That action, as you might remember, got Daniel thrown into a lion’s den, but in the end the witness of the one true God triumphed.

In our exile, the witness of the one true God must also triumph. As civil religion soars, Jesus must soar higher. As racism intensifies, Jesus must intensify further. As post-modernism dominates, Jesus must dominate wider and deeper and more. As William Stringfellow reminds us: “The biblical lifestyle is always a witness of resistance to the status quo in politics, economics, and all society. It is a witness of resurrection from death. Paradoxically, those who embark on the biblical witness constantly risk death—through... exile...persecution...harassment...Yet those who do not resist the rulers of the present darkness are consigned to a moral death...That, of all the ways of dying, is the most ignominious.”³ Translated: dishonorable. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to be ignominious. I want to honor God above all, allowing God and God’s Word to have the last Word. That will continue to require deep change in my life and lifestyle, but in the spirit of Jeremiah 9, my most important desire is to boast that I know and understand God, advancing His activity to transform the world with “faithfulness, fairness, and justice” (Jeremiah 9:23-24 NET).

It's ultimately through that boast that we find rest amid restless living. No other declaration or happy talk will work. Only deep resolve that God acts out of faithfulness, fairness, and justice works—along with unflinching belief that God has not abandoned us, but instead accompanies us even in exile, becoming manifest when we least expect it or deserve it.

My freshman year in college at Towson State in Baltimore, Maryland, was a very trying time for me; you might say I felt in exile as a sense of disorientation and disarray grew. Classes were tanking, friends were not materializing, and I felt far from home. Then one Saturday morning, I looked out my dorm window and thought I saw a hometown car—a Hagerstown, Maryland car. But not just any Hagerstown car—an old, beat-up Mercury Comet car—my father's car. And then I saw him; my dad was inside! Rushing out to the curb, I just looked at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh," Dad said, "I just was in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop in." Far from it—he had driven all the way from Hagerstown, Maryland to Baltimore, Maryland—just to drop in. Why? Because he sensed I needed him. And I did. That visit—my *father's* visit—had a definite impact, making a difference in a difficult, disorienting season.

Friends, our parent God also wants to make a difference in our difficult, disorienting season. He wants to offer His accompaniment and assurance. And so, look for God out your window, for God does drop by when we least expect it or deserve it—not because it's convenient, but because He is full of compassion.

I want to encourage us to continue to be very real about the blizzard and angst of this exile season. It's a tough season. But I equally pray you're very real—even boastful—about the God who accompanies us. For a baby is still crying—a Jesus is still reigning, living out a new covenant, acting out faithfulness, fairness, and justice. I pray we rest in that relationship and that promise, thus finding nourishment, even during these days of restless living!

- Paul Munday

¹ Two recommended commentaries on Jeremiah follow:

Leslie C. Allen. *Jeremiah: A Commentary. Old Testament Library*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

Elmer A. Martens. *Jeremiah: Believers Church Commentary*. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1986.

² This element was inspired by Tim Mackie. Jon Collins. "The Way of Exile." The Bible Project, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/y4cqns56>.

³ William Stringfellow. *Instead of Death*. New and Expanded Edition. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004. p. 101.