



**Returning From Exile  
Psalm 137 and 126  
October 18, 2020**

We are returning from exile. That's what the pandemic did...put us into exile from church, from each other, from visiting those in care facilities, from being with loved ones in the hospital, from flying in airplanes. I haven't seen my parents for over 10 months. Many of you may have loved ones you haven't seen for a long time. We are exiled from hugs and touch and smiles. I tell people to smize – smiling with our eyes.

When I learned I was preaching today – the second Sunday after returning from being exiled from our sanctuary for 7 months, I immediately thought about the Israelites. They knew a lot about exile for they experienced it. I think we can learn from them.

First, what it was like in exile. They had been removed from their beloved city of Jerusalem and their temple. Not for 7 months, but 70 years. They wrote about it; they sang about it; they lamented about it.

Our first scripture reading was how exile felt. You will see the name Babylon which was the country that attacked them and removed them from Jerusalem (called Zion in the passage below). Here is what it felt like to be in exile:

Read Psalm 137: 1-4

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.

<sup>2</sup> There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,

<sup>3</sup> for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

<sup>4</sup> How can we sing the songs of the LORD  
while in a foreign land?

While in exile, the Israelites lamented. The women's Bible Study is learning about lamenting this year. We have experienced extreme disruptions, and lamenting allows us to honestly admit to ourselves and to God and to others just how it all upsets us.

One third of the Psalms are laments. In the one I just read, the Israelites are so grieved that they cannot be in the temple to worship God, they refuse to sing. "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" I spoke with one of our church members who told me she could not sing the hymns while watching our recording worship service online. We are meant to sing together, she said. I don't want to sing alone. So she laments.

In this Psalm, as the Israelites are exiled from their beloved temple, they felt somehow less than the people of God. They wondered about the presence of God. Was God still with them? Were they still the people of God without a temple? Our questions in exile were similar: can we still be a church when we cannot meet together? Can we still be a people of God without a sanctuary?

I want you to look at the picture on the front of your bulletin. This is the Choluteca (chew-lu-tech'-a) Bridge in the Honduras. Notice something strange? When the bridge was built, it did go over a river. It was a regular suspension bridge modeled after the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch, a natural event, hit the Honduras. The picture you see is the aftermath. The hurricane moved the river away from the bridge so the bridge no longer served its original purpose of going over water. The name of the bridge was changed to "Bridge to Nowhere."

This pandemic, a natural event, has changed our ministry landscape. The pandemic moved the location of where our ministry happened, away from the structures we built, such as a sanctuary, a church building.

We didn't want to be a church that went nowhere, so we went outside the structures and went where the river was in order to do our ministry. We went to email blasts, our webpage, Facebook, Zoom, and upped our phone calling. We have never been more distant from each other, but in some ways we became closer.

So now, we take small steps to return. We started carport church by meeting under the solar panels on Sunday mornings. You had such joy at seeing each other again. Pastor Craig and I watched as you tried so hard not to shake hands, hug each other. Practicing social distancing was difficult because it was hard to hear with a mask on, but you did your best. You had joy.

Which brings us to our second scripture passage about how the Israelites felt when they finally got to return to their beloved Jerusalem and temple after 70 years of exile.

Read Psalm 126: 1-3

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dreamed.

<sup>2</sup>Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,  
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

<sup>3</sup>The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.

These Israelites, returning to their land, were like those who dream, bursting with uncontainable joy. Their mouths were overflowing with laughter and their tongues were singing with joy. They discovered that the temple of God had been destroyed, but learned that God was still with them even without the temple and the familiar practices of worship.

It was kind of like that last Sunday. You were filled with joy, even though you couldn't sing, or hug, or sit next to each other. You couldn't do the passing of the peace or give an offering during worship. But, you still got to come into the sanctuary. It was the first steps out of exile.

Returning is a frequent theme in the Bible. It signifies change and significance.

For example, Jacob returns home and on the journey wrestles with God. He is changed forever and given a new name (Genesis 32).

The prodigal son in Jesus' story returns to the fold and in the process comes to a whole new understanding of who he is and of his father's love (Luke 15).

God was always asking his people to return to him in the scriptures: "Return to Me," declares the Lord of hosts, "that I may return to you." (Zechariah 1:3)

Returning is a core part of our Christian journey. It happens at the beginning of our faith when people who were made for God return to God. It is a re-turning from our own ways. It marks a change of mind, heart and living.

So what should we expect as we return from the period of the pandemic? Will we be the same people? Will our church be the same? Will everything revert to the same old, same old?

I hope not. The world will be different. I think we will be, too.

How will we have changed as this particular People of God, this Family of God, this Body of Christ, this Holy Temple, this Bride of Christ?

I hope we will have an even greater passion for worship. The Israelites certainly discovered this as they built the temple first before rebuilding their own homes. Let us more greatly desire to worship the Lord.

I hope we will be a more people-focused church than a program-orientated church. This is certainly what we did during the pandemic because we couldn't do programs. So we focused on you. It was all about people. It is about our needs and the needs of those outside our doors. Let us more greatly desire to focus on people.

As your discipleship pastor, I hope we will have a thirst and hunger to go deeper with God. I learned that our church really isn't into Zoom classes. That's okay. We are a people who like to see each other in person. But when you return, I hope you will take advantage of the prayer group, or Bible studies, or Book studies. We will be offering an all-church study for Advent to bring us together by all studying the same thing. May we become a church that desires to know God more.

I pray we will depend on God and be a church that prays more. That is what is happening in the rest of Psalm 126. The first three verses were remembering what it was like to come out of exile. But something has happened, some kind of difficulty, and in the last three verses they turn to God and prayed with confidence. Let's read them:

Restore our fortunes LORD,  
like streams in the Negev.

<sup>5</sup> Those who sow with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.

<sup>6</sup> Those who go out weeping,  
carrying seed to sow,  
will return with songs of joy,  
carrying sheaves with them.

Because of how God lead them out of exile, they now have confidence in their prayers. Do it again, Lord, do it again. Restore us. Turn our weeping into joy. Let us become a church of prayer.

And finally, I hope we become a church that focuses on the journey as well as our goals. As most of you know, several weeks ago, I took a week off and traveled up north to see Sedona and the Grand Canyon. This has been a goal of mine for 11 years, ever since I lived here.

And yes, the Grand Canyon and Sedona were incredible. But do you know what sticks in my mind more than the Grand Canyon and Sedona? The journey to them. I traveled with people I loved. We laughed together. We prayed together. We discussed tough issues together. We played lots of games together. We ate really great food together, especially a picnic in the woods. It is the journey I remember the most.

So church, yes we will have goals. But now that we have come back together, enjoy the journey. Worship together. Pray together. Go deeper with God together. Enjoy each other together, your brothers and sisters in Christ. Meet the needs of those around you together. And when we do, maybe people will say "God has done great things for them."

Welcome home, church. Welcome home.

**The Apostle's Creed (stand)**

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and earth;  
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son Our Lord,

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead;

He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father  
almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

