

Worship in Exile

Welcome to our new church year! This is the Holy Communion in our new church year and it still finds the majority of our church family and friends still experiencing worship online or through printed manuscript. And we rejoice for those that have experienced worship together in the sanctuary. That said, we are aware that there are many who are still not ready for in-person worship for varied reasons. We encourage you to follow your conscience on this matter. The 5th Avenue Reentry Task Force Team continues to work diligently to ensure that the sanctuary is clean and all required safety procedures are in place to ensure your protection when you're prepared and ready to join us. Until that time, we will continue to post services on-line and deliver to those who do not have internet access. You may notice that the services are a little bit different, however it is our intention to continue to make sure that everyone who wants to stay connected to their church family and worship has the opportunity to do so. As always, if you have any questions or would like to talk, please do not hesitate to contact me, Pastor Clarissa, or anyone in ALB leadership. We hope and pray that the start of our new church year represents a sincere first step in an ongoing process of getting back to sharing worship and fellowship together.

Read 1 Peter 5:1-7.

Prayer: We pray this morning to You, O Lord, from our scattered locations and times. Please hear our hearts together, and bless them, reminding us that we are Yours and no matter where we are or how downcast our souls may be, You are near and always will be. We especially pray for those who are ill, and those suffering the most from the isolation of these days. Give us patience and love for them, even as we receive patience and love from them. As we worship today, may we not focus on empty seats in the sanctuary, or even our own too familiar walls. Instead, may we focus our hearts on You alone. In Jesus Name we pray, amen.

~Monday, 7 September 2020 & Tuesday, 8 September 2020 (Happy Labor Day) – Read Daniel 1:6-20

As I am writing this weekly devotion, we have had positive in-person worship services for the past 2 ½ months. Even so, we are continuously monitoring, reviewing, and implementing recommended safety procedures and protocols. Living in uncertainty continues to be one of the themes of 2020! But even when we are back together, it will definitely not be “back to normal.” There may still be only a fraction of our usual attendance, far more rules, a new tension in the air that seems to go with these times. Also, there will be no singing, no visiting in the hallways before or after the service, no fellowship hour, and no programs for children.



The truth is, our Sunday mornings will probably feel like a bit of a letdown for quite some time. I expect it will be crystal clear to everyone that it isn't over! The good thing is, our faith isn't supposed to be just about Sunday morning anyhow!

In the Jewish world of the Old Testament, the Sabbath was on Saturday (the last day of the week) in accordance with the story of creation and the 4th commandment. And so, on that day the people would go to the Temple in Jerusalem if they lived close by, or to their local Synagogues if they lived further away. Their worship was not that different from ours (other than the fact that men and women were separated) as it included gathering, music, scripture reading, prayers, sermons and socializing.

That was the norm for much of the thousand plus years between the giving of the law and the establishment of the church, but it didn't always happen. There were times when worship of God was not a priority to the Israelites, and there were times when it seemed to be almost impossible. Sometimes it was because most people had forgotten about

God and had turned instead to the gods of their neighboring nations. At other times it was because they were in exile – uprooted from their homes and sent far away.

While I admit there are a number of critical differences between my own experience and the experience of exile, I do remember a little what it is like to be uprooted and placed far from home – although in this case it was completely my choice.

At the age of 17, I left home to serve in the United States Navy. I remember thinking how far away Bremerton, Washington was. For 2 years I didn't come home. While my church attendance before joining the Navy was very close to 100%, it was pretty dismal when I was in Washington state. As a confession, I can only remember going a handful of times to church over those 2 years and they were, "get in and get out."

You see, this was the first time in my life no one was forcing me to go to church, there was no expectations on me. It was my first taste of freedom and I exercised it by choosing to blend in with everyone around me rather than use this transitional time in my life to take my faith seriously. I am not proud of that choice, but it was an honest one at that time of my life, and God used it – as God does – to eventually help me to re-engage with church as a choice just a year later. That said, the bottom line was that I chose to stay home and set God aside for a while; a self-imposed exile from worship.

My choice to stay home was different from the choice we have faced over the last few months. Our experience has been more like a true exile – prevented from physically coming together on Sunday mornings. But no one has prevented us from taking part in worship!

Contemplate on our "exile from worship" over the last 3 months.

- Have you seen it as an opportunity to skip worship and do what you wanted?
- Or have you hungrily grabbed hold of worship in any form that you could because you knew you needed it in your life?
- Or has your experience been something in between?

Prayer: When gathering for worship is suspended and social isolation for so many is advised, it seems that we are now in a season of exile. We may be separated by circumstance, but we remain in community as we seek the Lords face together, and endeavor to shine His light at this time of global, national and personal turmoil. You're invite to join with us in saying the Lord's Prayer...

By sharing together in this daily discipline, we stand together, in community, united in praise, worship and intercession.

We walk by faith through this season of exile, knowing that the Lord reigns, we walk with humility, seeking only to respond to His leading as we lean on the Holy Spirit, we walk in love, for the Lord and for each other, and we walk in gratitude, maintaining a heart of thankfulness in all we do. Amen.

~Wednesday, 9 September 2020 – Read Daniel 1:6-20

While there are a number of examples of life in exile in the Bible (Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus escaping Herod's threat and hiding in Egypt; or the Apostle John on the Island of Patmos in his later years), the most clear example of life in exile from the Bible is given to us in the Old Testament book of Daniel. The Northern Kingdom had been defeated years earlier by Assyria, and eventually the Southern Kingdom was defeated and almost completely destroyed, with some of the best and brightest taken away to Babylon to serve their king.

In the first chapter of the book of Daniel we meet 4 of these young men: Daniel (Belteshazzar), Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach) and Azariah (Abednego). Over the first 6 chapters of this book, we see these devout young men living in a far-off land, showing us how they remained faithful to God, even when they were forbidden from worshipping together, or even worshipping at all!

In this initial account of their lives in exile, we see these young men facing the temptation to set aside God's dietary laws. These laws were not just inconvenient, it became dangerous for them to even try to comply. The 4 of them were under tremendous pressure to give in and conform, and given their circumstance it would have been tempting for them to believe that God would look the other way. But rather than compromise on a commandment that they understood to be non-negotiable, they proposed to live on a vegetarian diet rather than the more rich and nutritious food from the King's table. Those in authority over them were concerned about this choice – but agreed to let them give it a try. The result was that they thrived on this more restrictive diet, and received it as a gift of God for their willingness to be obedient.



- I wonder if the 4 faithful friends felt the temptation to not make waves and go along with the much easier decision to conform.
- And not only that, I am sure that most of us would have seen this as an opportunity to take advantage of a great privilege and luxury.

Yet, they chose to remain faithful to the law of God. A choice that was most likely one of a long line of choices made over the years. A choice that came out of their conviction that while they were called to be captives who served a foreign king, their primary calling of serving the One True God could never be altered. These convictions not only helped them pass this test, but would be a further foundation for greater tests to come.

We no longer live under the Law, but under grace. We have the freedom in Christ to eat whatever we want; to eat without fear of compromising our faith – even if it may compromise our health! But the point of this isn't about our stomachs, it is about our hearts and souls. Even with all of our freedom, we still face a similar choice every day:

- Will we choose God over the immediate gratification of our lesser desires?

Sadly, we know that we don't always choose God, even when we clearly know what He wants for us; even when we know deep down that our choices are hurting us. These 4 devout young men inspire us to live with integrity – to make choices that are consistent with what we say we believe.

Food for Thought:

- Can you think of a choice you made that you knew was wrong, but you did it anyway?
- Quietly ask God to bring it to your attention, name it for what it is – sin, and through sincere repentance ask Him to forgive you.

Prayer: Father, we reflect on the song of the exile, written by the psalmist centuries ago. We are exiled from our normal life, exiled in our homes, away from the company of family and friends, exiled from work and from the routines and patterns of life we have taken for granted. We mourn the loss of our gathering for worship and acknowledge to you that we have had an attitude of complacency; freedoms we have taken for granted for so long. Father forgive us. We, too, wonder how we might sing the Lord's song in this foreign wilderness, where the landscape is unfamiliar, and the future is uncertain. Lord we look to you to show us. Teach us a new song, and how to sing it. Give us the grace to live out this season of exile in a way that honors your Name. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, Lord and Saviour, amen.

~Thursday, 10 September 2020 – Read Daniel Chapter 3

In Daniel chapter 3, the stakes are raised for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The text tells us that King Nebuchadnezzar had a huge 90-foot statue built and had commanded all of them to bow down to it, under punishment of death. The text tells us that the 3 friends refused to compromise their faith by obeying this decree, making the

officials and the king so angry that they were ordered to be burned alive in a furnace. One of the most powerful words of Scripture are recorded in Daniel 3:16-18, words that reveal the depth of their convictions: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, *“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hands, O king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

Those are pretty gutsy words to say to the king of Babylon – the most powerful man in the world at the time – especially when he is about to execute you! They didn’t plead with either God or the king for their lives, but were content to trust God, even in their deaths! When their years of choosing Him over and over again was put to this ultimate test, they chose God over expediency, over comfort, even over their own lives. It is never a question whether or not to worship God when you believe in Him like that!

Food for Thought:

- Have you ever found it easy to bow down to a false god? The gods of money, security, success, pleasure, popularity?
- Could you remain faithful to God even if you knew He might not rescue you from the furnace?
- Is your faith an, “Even if” faith?

Prayer: Lord God, forgive us. Unlike the psalmist, when we walk through the shadow of death, we sometimes fear evil.

Unlike Paul, we are not always sure that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Unlike John of Patmos, in the midst of injustice we do not always see a new heaven and a new earth. Forgive again, we pray, our feeble use of the faith you give, and restore to us the hope of trust and the trust of hope. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

~Friday, 11 September 2020 & Saturday, 12 September 2020 -

Daniel’s test in chapter 6 was similar to the 3 friends, but it was also different. In Daniel’s case, some jealous co-workers plotted to get rid him because they believed Daniel was being favored over them. A law was drafted: anyone who worshipped a god other than the king himself was to be put to death.

This injunction against worshipping his own God did not stop Daniel, and so he continued to worship the One God he had always worshipped. There were no temples or synagogues for Daniel to go to, and it appears he could have kept his worship a secret, but that wasn’t what Daniel did. Daniel continued to worship God in the way he always had, seemingly in plain sight for anyone to see.

King Darius did not want to banish Daniel to the now famous lion’s den, but a law was a law and he was bound to it. Just as his friends did when they faced their imminent execution, Daniel did not deny the charges, or try to plead for his life. Instead he placed his hope firmly in God, whom he had refused to stop worshipping – no matter the consequences.

We who have known this story from childhood, know very well that God chose to shut the mouths of the hungry lions, much to the surprise of everyone except Daniel. We also know that those who had tried to manipulate the king into killing Daniel did not fare so well. We need to remember that God would not have been proven any less powerful if Daniel had become a martyr that day. The point was that Daniel had given himself to His Lord, and there was nothing that could change that!



It has been good for us to be together this week as we remember these key biblical figures who found themselves in exile. Let's face it, it will be a long time before our worship and life will find balance again. The music, masks, tension, lack of fellowship, no small groups, no coffee time together – it just isn't how we want it to be, and it will be for a while to come. We are like the Israelites in exile.

But the same God who never abandoned the 4 friends in Babylon, is still present with us. He has never changed. And while things will continue to be difficult and often disappointing, it is still the same God we turn to in worship, whether we are together or alone.

The essence of worship is not just that we are together – that is a gift from God, but it isn't the whole of the matter. The essence of worship is Daniel in his room choosing to pray to God even though there was the possibility of dire consequences for him; the essence of worship is Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refusing to bow down to any God other than the One True God of heaven.

Our exile is real – this isn't what we want and it isn't how it will always be. But God is the same today as He was 3 months ago; and the same as He was 3,000 years ago! And so, whatever the circumstance, whatever the threat, whatever the size of the congregation, whatever the location – we are compelled to worship!

Food for Thought:

- How about your faith?
- Can we say that we would stand up for God even in the face of death?
- If you can, spend a moment putting yourself into the place of Daniel at the mouth of the lion's den, or the 3 friends at the entrance to the furnace. What would you do?
- And is there any way to become faithful followers of God like those 4 young Jewish men?

Prayer: The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you. The Lord turn His face toward you, and give you peace. Amen.

PRAYERS & CONCERNS

- Ms. Kathy Schneider, prayers for healing after medical procedure.
- Ms. Joy Kuhaupt, prayers for healing after surgery.
- Mr. William "Bill" Hornung, prayers for healing after fall and surgery. He has experienced medical setbacks and still requires prayers for himself and Ms. Ginger. Cards of support and encouragement can be mailed to: W193N16339 Lea Fon Circle, Jackson, WI 53037.
- All children, youth, young and older adults that are returning to various forms of educational venues.
- Our highest "good", of course, is becoming more like Jesus (as Paul says in v 29). God can bring good even from this undeniably bad situation—transforming us into the likeness of his Son. Romans 12 v 2, Paul says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Amen.
- Ms. Norma Chitwood has been placed in hospice care.
- Mr. Ted Meilahan, for restoration of strength and mobility after a fall.
- Ms. Doris Mohr, continued healing.
- Mrs. Barb Koehler and Family on the passing of Dr. John Koehler.
- Mrs. Dot Edison and Family on the passing of Mr. Robert Edison. Funeral plans are pending; to be held in Illinois.

- Mrs. Jerri Bowerman and Family on the passing of Mr. James “Jim” Bowerman.
- Ms. Carrie (Anthony) Kuhaupt, on the passing of her father, Mr. Charles “Chuck” P. Pischke.
- Ms. Linda Green – more chemotherapy. (Sister of Ms. Debra Matthies)
- Ms. Nancy Whitson – prayers for healing.
- Mr. Dennis Liepert – prayers for continued healing.
- Mr. Bob Krell – prayers for healing.
- Mr. and Mrs. Roger and Nobi Sacia restoration of strength and healing.
- Mr. Steve Siebenaler – continued healing. (son of Mr. & Mrs. Allan & Janice Liepert-Kempf)
- Those that find their cupboards, wallets, and purses - empty.
- All those that are caring for others.
- 5th Avenue Pastor, Staff, and Laity.
- Wisconsin Annual Conference.
- Our World - Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33
- Those you lift up in the secrets of your hearts:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, Brothers and Sisters. Amen.

"Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid." (John 14:27)

"LET THERE BE PEACE ON EARTH AND LET IT BEGIN WITH ME"

Is your life peaceful? If not, why not? Mahatma Gandhi said, "Outward peace is useless without inner peace." We cannot be at peace with God or with others unless we are first at peace with ourselves. We cannot give what we do not have or experience.

We torment ourselves with endless streams of self-illusory thoughts that cause us to worry, be anxious and fearful about a future which has not yet occurred, or about events that happened in the past that we cannot change or which we refuse to let go of, or matters over which we have little or no control.

The peace the world offers is dependent on the acts of people, groups, nations, or other external conditions or events. Most, if not all of us, have never lived in a time free of war, violence, strife, conflict, or discord affecting us, our loved ones, or others in the world.

The peace we yearn for only Christ can give. Jesus, the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6) and “our peace” (Ephesians 2:14), promises his followers his peace that the world cannot give us (John 14:27). It is the “peace of God that surpasses all understanding and will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

The peace that Christ promises and gives us is peace that flows through our heart, soul, and being and allows us to remain joyous and hopeful regardless

of the painful or chaotic circumstances we may face. It is a spiritual harmony and wholeness brought about through living in right relationship with God who constantly loves us and seeks communion with us and, in turn, calls us to love God, ourselves, one another, and all creation.

How can we open ourselves to experience this inner peace offered by Christ? Like Jesus, we must place our absolute trust in God's ultimate goodness and unconditional love for us regardless of the conditions or circumstances we may experience. Our trust grows and strengthens as we deepen our relationship with God and allow God's grace, through the Spirit, to transform us. Let peace begin with me through Christ's love.

- Reflect on your Experiences.
- What concerns over which you have little or no control do you torment yourself with?
- What can you do to allow Christ to bring peace to your life now?

Love & Peace,

PASTOR CLARISSA