

The Time of Your Exile

1 Peter 1:17-23

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Well, we are nearly two months into our period of physical (not social!) distancing.

I was preparing a report for church council last week and was trying to map the timeline of COVID-19's effect on our church thus far.

Our last physical worship service in this church building was March 8. Today is the seventh consecutive Sunday that we have not been able to gather physically for worship.

At times it feels like we've just begun this journey, other times it feels like we've been doing it forever!

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, time feels strange these days. Nothing feels normal or predictable. I feel like I have more unstructured time, on the one hand, but I also feel tired, scattered, restless.

I know I'm not alone in this. I've heard some of you say similar things. This week I read a blog post by writer Dora Dueck (no direct relation, as far as I know, although I'm sure Kevin can illuminate me!).

The post was called "Waiting" and expressed well what I suspect many of us are feeling during these days of pandemic. After acknowledging that during the early days of the virus, she didn't feel like she had much to say, Dueck wrote these words this week:

But eventually one needs to find language for the moments we're in.

Waiting, that's the word. That's the sum of it. No wonder it's hard to read or write with any kind of focus. The kind of waiting you undergo in a waiting room, like maybe the doctor's office, some place where you have an appointment and you pick up a magazine

and browse, listlessly, for you can't concentrate, you're alert to your name being called and everything is running late and it's a watchful waiting laced with anxiety.¹

Yup, that sounds about right. A watchful waiting laced with anxiety.

Every day we kind of drift around with all kinds of questions in our heads: *When will this end? What will "normal" look like? How will this change the world? Will the economy recover? Should we even want things to go back to normal? What does the future hold?*

These kinds of questions can seem to grow heavier and heavier the longer we're forced to sit with them, the longer this drags on.

There's a phrase Peter uses in our Scripture reading this morning that grabbed my attention when I first read it: "the time of your exile."

Peter is not writing to modern people isolated during a pandemic. He's writing to a persecuted church. The churches in Asia Minor that Peter was writing to was likely a group of Gentile converts to what was at the time a new, despised, foreign religion.

The churches would have been comprised of people whose family members and social circles were suspicious about this new religion and how it upended hierarchies and social norms.

These churches likely would have experienced a combination of everything from relatively mild social ostracism to outright persecution.

So, Peter is writing to people whose experience is one dislocation and suffering. He's writing to people who might even feel like their world is falling apart. He's writing to exiles.

The word "exile" is one that I suspect many of us resonate with these days—we are scattered and dispersed, unmoored from much that feels familiar.

We are obviously not exiles in the same sense as those whom Peter was writing to. But even if we are not politically oppressed or marginalized, even if, as Annie said, we are exiled not *from*

¹ <https://doradueck.com/2020/04/23/waiting/>

our homes but *to* our homes, even if our exile takes place in the context of relative comfort and privilege, that feeling of scattered-ness and dislocation is real for us, too.

We miss our lives. We miss what felt familiar and comfortable. We miss predictability. We miss small pleasures that gave texture and shape to our days and weeks.

I'm sure you have your own lists of things you miss in exile. Here's mine.

I miss sports. I miss my Saturday ritual of brewing a pot of coffee and watching soccer matches from Europe. I miss playing hockey and going to the gym.

I miss writing parts of my sermons in coffee shops and hearing the buzz and banter of human activity. I miss the prospect of travel and conferences and just ordinary visiting with family and friends.

And of course, on a more significant level, I miss our church. I miss corporate worship. I miss eating together and visiting after worship. I miss seeing faces and shaking hands.

As much as I know people appreciate the online services that we're doing, and as much as I've enjoyed this opportunity to experience worship in churches across the nation, and as much as I've appreciated the opportunity to learn some things about recording, and as grateful as I am for Zoom, it's not the same.

There is something about a gathered body of followers of Jesus that is impossible to replicate online. I am very much looking forward to the day when we are able to gather together in this building.

Exile—at least as I have been defining it so far—is not fun. It's not something we choose, it's something forced upon us.

But there is an important sense in which exile is a description of what it means to be a Christian. Exile is something that we *do*, in fact, choose by virtue of choosing to follow Jesus.

The New Testament describes us as strangers, foreigners—exiles in the land. We are called out, set apart, out of step with the values and assumptions that drive the broader culture around us.

We march to a different tune than those set by narratives of our culture.

We seek to be people of peace in the context of violence. We seek to choose love instead of the fear that comes so naturally to us.

We extend forgiveness and mercy when it seems foolish to do so. We believe that grace triumphs over judgment (even if we're not always great at living this out!).

We strive to give attention to what is eternal rather than the trivialities and distractions of the moment.

We talk about taking up a cross, about dying to ourselves that we might live fully for God. We look ahead to a true home that awaits us beyond anything we experience here.

All of this makes us odd, apparently out of step, inexplicable even.

We feel simultaneously like this world is our home—the good creation of God for which we were created, and also that it is not our home, at least not as it is presently configured.

We feel like exiles, even if we are profoundly hopeful and grateful ones.

So, the word “exile” describes two realities that we're presently experiencing, one micro and one macro.

1. First, we feel like exiles in our present COVID-19 moment in the sense that much that is familiar has been taken from us. This is an “exile” not of our choosing. And it will pass.
2. More importantly, we are exiles as followers of Jesus in a world where Christ's kingdom has not yet come, on earth as in heaven. This is an “exile” of our choosing. And it won't pass, at least not on this side of eternity. It's an important part of who we are.

In both senses of the word, I think the experience of being “in exile” can have important things to teach us. Exile can be the soil for spiritual growth.

I have recently been thinking about how we might reframe this time, however long it last. It's easy and natural to bemoan all that we've lost in these last seven weeks, to grumble and wring our hands at the state of the world.

I'm good at this. Perhaps you are, too. It's where many conversations tend to drift these days.

But what if we were to try to reframe things? A question I have been thinking about recently is this: **How will I steward this time of exile?**

The language of "stewardship" is important. Everything we experience in life can be stewarded poorly or well. All seasons of our life are given to us to grow in love and holiness, whether they are demanding ones or relatively comfortable ones.

We can fritter away the time in negativity, laziness, distraction, and worry. Or we can ask, "How can I open myself up to being conformed to the image of Christ during this time?"

This choice of how we will steward the time we have been given is given to each one of us. And this is as true of a temporary exile of a pandemic as it is of our entire lives as Christian exiles.

Two things stand out to me in our text from 1 Peter.

1. Live in reverent fear: we have been "ransomed" by the blood of Christ from "the futile ways" of our ancestors" (1 Peter 1:17).

We should remember that "fear" doesn't mean terror or being afraid of God, but of having a sense of awe, of having a sense of the deep mystery of God's purposes and action in Christ. Of being aware that when we approach the mystery of Christ crucified and raised for our salvation we are standing on holy ground.

We don't do reverence like we once did. But it still makes occasional appearances.

I was talking with Joani yesterday about the street side tribute for the boy that was killed in a traffic accident this week (who was the son of a Haul-All employee).

She said that there was all kinds of chatter and conversation along the streets but when the funeral home vehicle carrying the boy appeared on the street it instantly became silent. You could have heard a pin drop, Joani said.

There was a sense of reverence and fearful awe in the face of the pain that this family is experiencing. Joani said it was very moving and I don't doubt this because we so rarely experience this kind of reverence or awe anymore.

Like all comparisons, it falls short of the reverence that is to characterize our approach to God. But perhaps it gives us a small picture.

And what about the “futile ways” Peter says we have been ransomed from? Remember, he’s writing to Gentile converts so he is likely referring to the various pagan religious practices and philosophies floating around the first century Roman world.

Virtually all human wisdom apart from Christ says that we can earn our way to God. We can practice the right rituals, offer the right sacrifices, become wise enough, spiritual enough, moral enough, self-disciplined enough.

Except we can’t. It’s futile. We always fall short. We are bent perpetually inward, unable to save ourselves, unable on our own to live the lives we have been created for.

Christianity proclaims the radical good news that we don’t earn our way to God, that God has ransomed us from darkness and death with the precious blood of Christ.

“Through him,” Peter says, “you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.”

Exile is a time for believing and proclaiming the good news of Easter.

2. Love one another deeply from the heart (1 Peter 1:22).

Exile is also a time to be formed in love. This should not be a surprise because everything in Christianity begins and ends with love

I took a long drive this week to pick up Claire from Saskatchewan and I listened to a podcast about, ironically, solitude.²

The guest was a Buddhist teacher who talked about how one of the chief things that solitude can help us do is to gain a sense of detachment from ourselves and our many desires.

² https://onbeing.org/programs/stephen-batchelor-finding-ease-in-aloneness/?fbclid=IwAR1Nm25zptIJWYglxoEEsDeZGL-6vYtELbsVD_O6H9uNoaglv8DJvjZl8g

He also said that a healthy self can move from being primarily reactive toward a posture of being responsive. That one stuck with me.

We are great at reacting, aren't we? Social media conditions us to react to everything, from the news of the day to our friend's vacation pictures. Thumbs up, laughing face, sad face, whatever.

I play a card game on my phone sometimes and one of the ads that always shows up on the bottom of the screens says, "Join Facebook and start reacting today!" Truer words could hardly be spoken.

We react so easily and naturally. If things are going well for us, we're happy, if not we're sad. If those around us are mostly validating and appreciating us, we're pleasant, if they're not, we're grouchy. If we're reasonably healthy, we're happy, if we're sick, we're miserable. If the news has glimmers of hope, we're optimistic, if the virus numbers keep rising, we're pessimistic.

When we are in "reacting" mode, our emotional temperature is more or less determined by what is happening to us.

And being stuck for days on end with the same people in the same spaces is kind of like a laboratory for reactivity!

To *respond* is to choose how we will be in the world no matter what is happening to us. It is to act from a secure sense of who we are and what we value. And, I would add, a sense of who God is.

As I listened to the podcast, I thought, there is deep wisdom here that maps on to the Christian life.

To be a Christian is to be committed to self-giving love as our default disposition in the world. It will be expressed differently in different contexts, certainly. Sometimes love requires hard conversations or decisions for the good of our neighbour. This isn't a kind of mushy disposition of "niceness."

But love is our central identity because it is God's central identity.

Can we use "the time of our exile" to sink our roots down deep into the love of God, shown most clearly in Christ?

Can we choose to respond in love, no matter what comes our way, because we are secure in the knowledge that we are loved by God?

Can we seek to “love one another deeply from the heart” because “we have born anew through the living and enduring word of God?”

So, “in the time of your exile,”

1. Live in reverent fear at the mystery of God. In Christ, you have been set free from the futility of seeking to climb up to God. In Christ, God has come near and done for you what you cannot do for yourself.
2. Love one another deeply. Seek to respond instead of reacting, secure in the knowledge that love is the deepest truth in the universe and expresses the very nature and purpose of God.

And remember that exile is not forever.

This pandemic will end, and we will get back to what is familiar and good about life together.

And our time of exile as Christians will also one day end, and we will be welcomed home by the God who made us, who loves us, and who calls us his own.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

