

Our Old Testament lessons since August have been from the prophet Jeremiah. And things have been pretty dark thus far. We've seen God and Jeremiah calling the people to forsake their worship of false gods, and to return to worshipping only the God of Israel. We've seen God and Jeremiah weeping over the pain and calamity that comes when their nation is defeated by the Babylonians, and when a large number of Jewish people are carried off to live in exile in Babylon. We've heard Jeremiah's laments that the people could have changed, but didn't, could have sought healing, but didn't. And now, the worst-case scenario is playing out—they have been conquered and subjugated by their enemies.

And yet, and yet in the midst of the pain and darkness, we have seen and heard glimmers and flickers of hope. Next week in our lesson, that hope will be expressed in a very full and powerful way.

But this week, we're in between. We're in a middle place between past pain and future healing. We're in the twilight waiting for the dawn. By this time in Jeremiah, many of the Jews are in exile in Babylon. And in our Old Testament lesson, Jeremiah writes them a letter telling them what they should be doing, how they should be living in exile.

Jeremiah offers very practical advice to the Jewish people in exile about how to live in Babylon.

Jeremiah's message to the exiles begins, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon..."

Notice that. "All the exiles whom I have sent into exile."

Yes, human beings have free will. Yes, human beings can do terrible things to each other. Human beings can do nasty things to each other.

In this case, the Babylonians had free will to conquer and subjugate the Jewish nation. The Babylonians killed some and carried off many, many others into exile.

But, Jeremiah reminds us, GOD IS STILL IN CHARGE. God can use even the worst that we do to accomplish his will.

But that doesn't mean things will be easy. The Jews in Babylon were hoping their exile would be over with rather quickly.

There were even some false prophets in Babylon who were preaching armed rebellion. That's an astounding dynamic. They had been totally defeated militarily. Yet they were still wanting to put their faith in further military actions. Apparently, they had ceased to trust in the living God.

So God sends the people this message: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons,

and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease."

That's a strong message when you're experiencing the dark times. Don't expect to go back to the way things were. God is not going to magically make that happen. You're in exile now. Things are different. So deal with it. Don't try to escape from exile. Live in exile. Really live. Carry on with your lives. Build houses. Grow food. Marry. Have children. Have grandchildren. Continue on with life in spite of what has happened. You can't go back. But you CAN go on. It's all about forward momentum. Keep pushing forward as best you can, not denying the exile, but living in the midst of the exile.

The Word of God from Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon is that God will not press some magic reset button and make things go back to the way they were. Things are not going to be over with quickly. They need to settle in for the long haul.

Of course, this might seem to be a bit difficult to relate to. Being held captive. Living in exile. Our context is so different. Do we have any political prisoners in this room? Is anybody here being held captive in the United States against their will?

So how do we relate to Jeremiah's message to the Jews in forced exile?
I would suggest that we experience different types of exile: emotional exile, spiritual exile. And as a people we actually have great difficulty dealing with such exile.

Some people are plunged into emotional exile because of illness, or death, or divorce, or job loss. Others may experience exile because of a loss of a sense of purpose or direction in their lives.

And as a culture we have a basic societal answer for those who are struggling, those who are grieving, those going through difficulty. Here's the wonderfully kind things we often say: "Get over it. Buck up. Put on a brave face. Suck it up buttercup."

Those kinds of statements are fine if you're going through minor difficulties. If someone is down because their team lost a game it's fine to say, "Get over it."

But if you're down because you've experienced a deep loss, a breakup of a relationship, the death of a loved one, the onset of a chronic illness, then that's a whole different matter.

Our culture often tries to rush people through the grief process, probably because we're not comfortable with the dark times.

Somebody observed that most cultures expect bad things to happen and then are pleasantly surprised whenever good things happen. We Americans are fairly optimistic. We expect good things to happen, and when bad things happen, we don't like it. Thus, we try to hurry people through the grieving process. We tell people to stuff those feelings down. And try to keep going like nothing bad has happened.

Jeremiah is suggesting something different. If you've experienced a loss, then you need to grieve. You need to build your house there for a while, you need to live in your grief for a while. Don't try to rush through it. Don't avoid it. Don't push it down. Move forward, yes, but move forward **IN** your grief, not denying your grief. Dwell in the darkness for a while. Life is not all sunshine and rainbows. If you're in the time of shadow, make sure you stay there as long as you need to.

Of course, there is such a thing as clinical depression, where a person is stuck in the darkness without major outside causes. That's a different matter. But in our culture, we're often too quick to try to force people out of the shadows prematurely. Jeremiah suggests to us that we might just need to set up camp and live in the shadowy places at times.

There are profound lessons to be learned in the good times. But there are also profound lessons to be learned in the shadows. If you're in a state of emotional exile, don't run away from it. Rather live in it, learn from it, deal with it. And then, and then, you'll eventually be ready to move on.

The same thing applies to our spiritual lives. There are definitely times of spiritual exile. And Christians often have a tough time dealing with those times of exile.

People experience God in many different ways. But for many Christians there is some sort of sense of God's presence. It may even such a strong sense of presence that it is palpable and visceral. There are times when God may seem especially close.

In such times, prayer seems easy. Worship seems easy. You just seem snuggled in the warm spiritual cocoon of God's love.

But then there are other times. Prayer is a chore rather than a joy. God seems absent. You talk to God and only hear the hollow echo of your own voice. There's no sense of God's presence, only a divine vacuum, a void.

Such a state can be very disconcerting if you're experiencing it. But if you experience it, you're not alone. It's actually a fairly common spiritual phenomenon. So much so that it has a famous name. The great prayer warrior, St. John of the Cross, called this experience of God's absence "The dark night of the soul."

St. John of the Cross is quick to remind us, however that just because we can't feel God's presence, that does not mean that God is not present.

He likens it at one point to a beam of sunlight coming into a room. You don't see the beam of light until it strikes something. But that doesn't mean it isn't there. You just don't perceive that it's there. He also says that the dark night is a difficult and humbling experience, but it's meant to make you spiritually stronger.

So how do you live if you're in a spiritual shadow? Back to Jeremiah again. You stay there as long as God keeps you there. You live in the shadow, and keep pushing forward. You learn what God wants you to learn while you're in the dark night of the soul, but you keep pushing forward.

One of the prime examples several years back was the revelations about the spiritual life of Mother Theresa of Calcutta. Back when she was a young Sister Theresa, she had an incredibly strong sense of God's presence, an ecstatic sense, a stronger sense than most other Christians report. But then, it stopped. She entered a period of dark night. And she stayed there, with only one brief exception, for decades, for the rest of her life. And yet she persevered. She kept serving Christ present in the poorest of the poor. She couldn't viscerally feel God's presence anymore. And yet she lived spiritually where God placed her, and persevered.

Some religious scholars have said that in future centuries, Mother Theresa's work with the poor will most likely be a historical footnote. What she will probably be remembered for in the future is her perseverance, her moving forward in faith even while experiencing a very dark night of the soul.

And that's so important for us. There will be times when it seems like God is distant, or even absent. At those kinds of times it's especially important to remember the Good News. God is there. And God does care. We may not always be able to sense his presence. But invisible does not equal absent. Don't make the mistake of confusing the absence of sensing God with the absence of God himself. They're not the same thing.

Meanwhile, if you are in darkness, if you feel like you're in exile, live where God has placed you. Learn what God wants to teach you in the shadows as well as in the light. Keep pushing forward and persevere. And trust that God will bring you home.