

Sunday March 29, 2020
 Lesson 5: The People of Judah Are Exiled
 Scripture: 2 Kings 25: 8-21

Context:

The wilderness is not just a place. The wilderness can also be an experience, which jars and devastates people. The lesson today takes us to the Old Testament when an entire nation experienced the wilderness. We can still feel the haunting repercussion of the destruction of Israel interfering in experiences today.

A background of the text is important to understanding the story. King Zedekiah is reigning over Judah. Babylon has already established its influence and has been demanding tribute from the land of Judah. There has already been an attempt to rebel against the Babylonians under King Jehoiakim, leading to Judah being warned of their potential fate.¹ Like his brother Jehoiakim, Zedekiah does not exercise the best foreign policy, and his attempt in rebellion is the final straw for the Babylonians.² The people of Judah will face a wilderness they have not seen before.

Before this scripture passage, we have already begun to experience a scene of horror. The start of chapter twenty-five begins with the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, marching on the city of Jerusalem. The people feel the weight of the siege and soon, there is famine within the city walls. After a long siege of Jerusalem, the city has fallen. As the king and his entourage flee the city, they are pursued by the Babylonians. Once they are caught, King Zedekiah faces charges. He is forced to watch as his sons are executed before him, and then his eyes are gouged out and he is led to Babylon in shackles. Yet the worst is yet to come.

An official of Babylon marches into the city of Jerusalem and takes charge. While the destruction of the monarchy is terrible, the destruction of other vital national institutions escalates the destruction of Jerusalem.³ The city walls are torn down and then the temple, the royal palaces, and all the houses are set afire. Amidst the burning, the remaining members of the royal houses and the religious institutions are rounded up to be taken to Babylon. The only ones to remain are the poorest of the poor and the peasants. They are told to stay behind and glean the land.

And yet the chief priests and several members of the royal household are escorted to meet Nebuchadnezzar in his camp at Riblah. They are executed and Nebuchadnezzar leaves to return to Babylon places puppet leaders in Judah. The people of Judah not only go into the wilderness, their own home becomes the wilderness. Those in exile are separated from the land they love and the people behind sit in a city of ruins, their

¹ See 2 Kings 23 for more details; as early as 2 Kings 20 are their mentions of the Babylonians and their influence.

² Richard D. Nelson, "First and Second Kings," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2012), 262.

³ *Ibid.*, 262.

symbols of hope utterly destroyed. All enter a space of lament and mourning.

Application:

At first when I read this passage, I wondered why in the world we needed to read this one after the past two weeks. It is now safe to say the Covid.19 (Corona Virus) is no longer an international threat only to far off places like Italy or China. The Covid.19 virus is here in the United States and we indeed feel like we are in the wilderness.

Yet maybe we need such a passage as this one during this time. The wilderness is not just about the physical landscapes of our lives. The wilderness can come in many forms including seeing the breakdown of the things we love the most in this life.

Some of us are watching as our way of life is threatened. High school seniors are watching as their proms and sports games are being canceled with even graduation looming as a potential casualty of the pandemic. Individuals in both white and blue collar professions are facing unemployment or are already experiencing the fallout of mandatory closures. Churches have been asked to stop meeting temporarily and this may just be the beginning. Vacations have been canceled and people are to practice social distancing, not even hugging the ones they love the most. And we haven't even mentioned the challenges the medical community will face in addition to those who contract the disease.

For us, this is a wilderness experience. Like the Israelites we are facing a first time experience we've never had before. It's scary. It's demoralizing. We want to rush to the scene where we return to normal and everything is as it should be. We want to get back from exile, believing that if we do everything we are supposed to do, this will all be over in a month.

And yet we don't know for certain what will happen. There are no guarantees right now and it doesn't feel good. We feel sad and we are mourning the losses as we find ways to cope. Those are all normal feelings and should be embraced instead of pushed away or rejected.

During this time, we are given the opportunity to reflect on what matters in this life. Just as the Israelites learned in the fall of Jerusalem and the exile which ensued, we are learning about our own values as followers of our Lord. We are learning not to take things for granted like the freedom we've had to travel or to embrace others. We are learning that we might want to do a double take about how we view public worship and what it means when a staple is gone. We might learn about the preciousness of time.

Perhaps we as a church are to look at this time in the wilderness as way to both be grateful and appreciate what we have had. During this time, we are invited to ponder the importance of relationships, resources, and community. What happens when those things have to change or adapt as a result of an invading force such as a virus?

As we go into this time of our own exile, we read this story with a new lens. We are given room to explore suffering and how we mourn. There is the opportunity for us to explore how we understand hope during this time. The coming months might be hard and difficult. Yet we remember the Israelites too went into exile and during their own wilderness period, they were reminded of who they were and whom they belonged to. May we read this passage with new eyes to help us understand our own wilderness and where God is in the midst of the unknown.

When you read this passage, what resonates with your own wilderness

experience(s)? How do you think the people changed in their understanding of mourning and lament? During your own wilderness experiences, what are the ways you are honest with yourself about the gravity of the situation and the challenges you face? How do you experience hope in the wilderness and in the unknown?

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009