

CASKET EMPTY

Part 5—Exile

Ezekiel 37:11-14

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ October 29, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

11 Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.” (Ezekiel 37:11-14, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

I have an app on my phone that I use for running. For a while now after I run it tells me: *It is about time for a new pair of shoes.* I've been ignoring it for the past 8 months. I'm sure this app is sponsored by a shoe company. If I bought a new pair of shoes every time it told me to, believe it or not, I could have as many as 20 or more pairs of shoes! Most of us have different shoes for different occasions. We wear them to respond to different situations that we encounter along our journey. Even if you are going backpacking and need to pack light, you might bring a pair of flip flops to change into at the campsite.

This Fall, we have been walking through the big picture of the story of Scripture by remembering the helpful acronym: CASKET EMPTY¹. The word Casket takes us on a journey from *Creation* to the promise of *Abraham* to the encounters at *Sinai* to the *Kings* through *Exile* and back to the rebuilding of the *Temple*. For each of these, we hear God speaking out of hundreds of years of the history of God's people. For each of them, we tread on different ground, and we need a different pair of shoes, something that helps us to navigate where God may be leading us next. I can imagine that if the Israelites had *Runkeeper* on their smartphones, that they would have received a notification after wandering through the dessert: *It's about time for a new pair of shoes.* In each situation, God did notify His people for what they would need in the way of a promise, or a covenant, or a warning, or a prophesy about how His Kingdom would move on. Be prepared. Put on this new pair of shoes.

It is no less true for the New Testament represented by the word EMPTY: From *Expectation* to the *Messiah* to the beginning of the church at *Pentecost* to the direction to the church through the *Teachings* of Paul and others, and eventually to the end of the story, the *Yet to Come*.

But let's linger in our Old Testament footwear for a little bit longer, and rewind to EXILE where we find ourselves today. When I discovered that I'd volunteered to spend a Sunday morning in Exile with you all, I

¹ Kiminsky, Carol. *Casket Empty*. 2001.

can't say that I was overjoyed at what it would mean to prepare for a message. But here is what I can tell you: It led me to a place I never would have expected. It's true. I am going to suggest to you this morning, after listening to the larger story of Scripture, that EXILE may not be the worst place to be. In fact, there are words of wisdom hidden in this difficult time in the history of God's people that express a fertile place of incredible hope for those living in darkness. It may be that these words can only be heard with the power intended when we are in exile.

Today we celebrate 500 years since the beginning of the Reformation, a rough patch in the history of the church when Martin Luther, among many others, felt that the church was drying up and losing the hope it once had. There were a number of factors that led the Reformers to break away from the church at the time, but there was hope in some new vision about ways that people could know God's presence in new ways. How do we respond in a time of Exile?

Some credit Martin Luther to say:

"Even if I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world, I would plant an apple tree today."

I am sure that so many good faithful people living in the time of exile thought the end of the world as they knew it could be any day. And I'm sure some of us are feeling like that as well.

Ezekiel is not always that optimistic, but Ezekiel's hopeful words here remind us that those are exactly the times in our lives in the journey of our faith that we need to hear again that God remains with us and *will* fulfill his promises. Our apple tree will continue to grow!

And perhaps, then, we will hear it. A case could be made that we are living in a time of Exile even now as God's people—that God's presence seems to have departed from our land—that we live scattered in a foreign place around cultural influences that make it truly difficult to know what it is to be God's people. There is a dryness, an emptiness, a longing for connection with God that seems consistent with this period for the Israelite people.

Before we take a closer look at our passage for today, I want to suggest that we take a look at another chapter of the Bible from this time period, one from Leviticus. Now, Leviticus is that book of the Bible that once we were able to pronounce it, we would suggest that we use it to read to kids at camp to put them to sleep. But in terms of the larger story, there is gold to be found here. Our passage is fairly short this morning. So my challenge to all of you, and write this down if you need to, to read Leviticus 26. Leviticus 26, in just this one chapter essentially tells the whole story that CASKET EMPTY tells in short story. Although, it shortens it in a way that even I can remember. It begins with great blessing. This is the heart's desire of God, that there would be a *relationship* here to a people with whom he could share an abundance of all good things. "I will give you rains in their seasons. The fields will yield their produce, the trees will yield their fruit."² But then, idolatry. It warns the people that if they follow other gods, which they do—trusting in other things to bless them—which they don't. "I will bring terror on you. Consumption and fever that waste the eyes and cause life to pine away...(like a valley of dry bones)."³ And the blessings disappear, but not without a *reason*. They've turned to other gods. But when the people realize it, they confess, and there is *forgiveness*. Then God remembers the covenant, and though he doesn't have to, God has the *Final Word*. One of eternal *favor* toward his people.

So, much easier to remember is this shorter story, the acronym, BIFF.

Blessing.

Idolatry.

² Lev 26.4

³ Lev 26.16

Forgiveness.

Or the *Final Word.*

But in any case, *Freedom.*

And all of this from the time period of the Exile.

So back to our passage for the day. God says to Ezekiel: “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’” What does it mean for the Israelites to be in Exile? Is it feeling like dry bones in the desert? Is it the loss of hope? Those are just symptoms. No, Exile is the *reason* for this condition. It’s to be *cut off completely.*

Exile is the presence of God...*leaving.* They had always known the presence of the Lord. They knew that God’s presence rested in the center of the temple, and that their city, Jerusalem, would be protected from their enemies as a result. And it was protected—up till now. But now, after their rebellion, we discover in an earlier vision of Ezekiel, that God gets up out of the temple, gets into a chariot, and rides away.⁴ God left the temple vulnerable, and eventually destroyed. They had never experienced the non-existence of God. But they would know it now in this period.

Even in difficult times, God’s presence was with his people: clouds and fire and covenants and prophets and the parting of seas. God was there. The people grumbled sometimes, but God remained.

Not now, God was gone. They felt it deep in their Spirits. And the people were like dry bones in a desert without hope.

And so here we are in the aftermath. The people standing around asking, *Where is God?* Have you ever asked this question? Where is God? Then you know what it is like to be in Exile.

It’s a mom in Santa Rosa who lost a child, now picking through the remains of her house.
Where is God?

Or a man in Houston, uninsured, alone, now homeless.
Where is God?

Or a child in Africa who’s one remaining family member, an older sibling, was kidnapped, and taken away to go fight in a civil war.
Where is God?

Or it could be a young person here today who had an incredibly experience meeting God at a camp over the summer, then school pressures, family dynamics, and the buzz of social media drown out the song of God singing through them.
Where is God?

It could be any one of you or it could be me, right? ...as we walked in the doors of church this morning simply because life has taken its toll and it’s been a really long time since we felt God alive in us.
Where is God?

The reasons for feeling distance from our Creator are as many as the number of people that have *ever* felt God’s presence in this world, but no longer do.

⁴ Ezekiel 11

But here is where God broke in for me this week, and breaks in through our passage in Ezekiel...

GOD NEVER LEFT! Please, please, do not miss this! Here is why it is good to be in Exile: The times when we feel the MOST distant from God?...are the times when God is most near to us!

How can I say that? First, there were TWO important reasons God left the temple.

ONE, we broke the covenant, we followed our idols, we refused to trust God. And the promised punishment had to be lived out. God had to get our attention.

But TWO, as God's people, we had to see that God did not live in a particular time or in a particular place. As God left the temple, then this same God could go with faithful people wherever they went as they were scattered to foreign nations, and people could experience God in their private rooms, as they met along the road, and felt him in their hearts. And we see this lived out with specific characters.

Daniel, his three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Ezekiel, Esther, and others. God was with them in a way God never had been before. God's willingness to leave the temple in this way was a positive sign. In the end, God abandoned the temple so that he could be even more presence with his people throughout the world.

Also, it was a preview of what was to come. People thought that God's new home was in heaven. Until He *chose* to leave that place and be incarnated in Jesus, to once again be in the world in a new and powerful way. God's presence leaving heaven became redemption for us all.

On the cross, we claim that Jesus spent three days in hell. Whether hell is a place literally consumed by fire or not we may hopefully never know. But one thing we are sure of, he spent those days apart from the presence of God. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me now?" he cried out. But again God's departure to pay the price for sin, and to conquer the power of death. There was a reason for it.

And then, Jesus departs from the disciples. God's presence vanishes into the clouds, leaving the disciples to once again say, "Where is God?" And God asks them to go out to all nations, out of the church buildings, not into them, and invite people to know this presence of God that is a gift to the whole world.

So if God's presence has left, but can still be found in unlikely places, where do we find it today? Scripture can be really helpful in this:

0. The best way is to find a burning bush! That always works. You know God is there at that point. But it's not likely. But God gave Moses a burning bush why? Because Moses needed an obvious sign so that we wouldn't miss it! And God gives us obvious signs we can't miss in Scripture. These are the burning bushes of where we know we can find God's presence.
1. When we meet together in coffee shops or on the street. Jesus was clear, "Wherever two or more are gathered, there I am with them also." When we meet together outside of these church doors, listen to God together. Talk about what God is doing. God is there with you. Don't miss it.
2. In the One we serve. Again Jesus says, "Whenever serve one of the least of these brothers or sisters, you do it to me." Jesus literally becomes the ones we serve. If you want to feel God's presence, reach out and touch another life. It will happen.
3. When we're making disciples. Now again, Jesus literally says after, in his last words, Go and make disciples...and guess what...I will be with you to the end of the age. There is nothing Jesus wants more than to be a part of others knowing him. He'll be there.
4. On the mountaintop. Now I picked mountain, because that is where Jesus went when he wanted to be alone. That's where God met him in the transfiguration, and daily as he went to be with the Father. If God really is closer than ever during exile, spending regular time with God simply makes us aware of it. God doesn't come because we spend time with him, we just realize it.

5. And lastly, God's presence is with you when you are in Exile, possibly more than at any other time. We so often forget the first beatitude:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God."⁵

And so it is that the person in this room that feels the furthest from God, is actually the closest. If Jesus walked into the room, you are the one he would approach and say, I'm coming over to your house to hang out after church. And I'm bringing a few others with me that are also feeling pretty out of this spiritual game.

We have to pay attention to the life of Jesus in this. Because there are some fantastic clues about where we can find God's presence when we are not finding God in the usual places. God's presence can be found.

And what we discover through Ezekiel's prophesy is that God is closer than ever, and God can't *wait* for the people to realize it, repent, and be flooded again with His blessings:

"I will bring you back to the land of Israel....and you will know that I am the Lord, when I open up your graves and bring you up. I will put my spirit in you, and you shall live."

I will put my spirit in you, and you shall live.

At your lowest point with your God, there is so much to celebrate.

With our High School students recently, we talked about anxiety. We talked about the pressures that surround young people, and the factors that make it worse with every generation.

But we also talked about David. In fact, so did we as a part of this series. Anointed but not yet King, he was just a boy. And the Philistines were ANXIETY personified for the Israelites. Daily they grew closer, and threatened the people. But David, just a boy, like only a kid could do, said:

"Won't anyone go out and fight? How dare this Philistine defy the living God!"

David teaches us to speak back to anxiety and say, "How dare you defy the living God!⁶ How dare you challenge Jesus who said, 'Come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest!'"⁷

Our EXILE has told us that God's presence has left for good, and that we can no longer no the richness of being close to God again, the abundance of blessing deep in our gut. Exile says your bones have completely dried up. Your hope is lost. You have been completely disconnected from God.

David taught us to speak back to anxiety.

Ezekiel teaches us that we can speak back to Exile and say, "God will put his spirit within me, and I shall live. God is closer to me now than he's ever been. And I am remembering again specific ways that I can know God is here."

For a tax collector and a prostitute and a leper and a number of others were on the fringes of the crowds when Jesus came through town. They were in Exile. If Jesus really was who he said he was, certainly they were trying to sneak away and hide out. But suddenly, they were the ones that ended up sitting around the table eating with Jesus.

⁵ Matt 5.3

⁶ 1 Sam 17.36

⁷ Matt 11.28

Maybe Exile isn't the worst place we could be. If you read through the entire accounts of this time period, it may not be the most uplifting for the most part. But scattered throughout the stories are promises that God is going to be closer than ever during this time to his people.

Eventually, the temple is restored. But God remains in the hearts of people wherever they are.

And truer than ever is perhaps this familiar Psalm.⁸

Weeping may last for the night (and it may feel like a really long, dark night).

Weeping may last for the night....but joy comes in the morning.

Exile may last for a season, but hope and new life are closer to you than to anyone.

Amen.



Next Step Questions

1. Read Ezekiel 37:11-14 again. This passage may be familiar to you, but is there a phrase or verse in which you are seeing something new? What do you notice about this passage?
2. What kind of a hearing was Ezekiel likely to get from the Israelite people as he came to bring a warning to them? (Ezekiel 3:4-11 gives some clues.)
3. How willing are you to take a close look at your own rebelliousness toward God? For instance, when you hear words of warning in Scripture, do you tend to think they apply more to others' rebelliousness or more to your own?
4. The Israelites are likened to bones in the desert, dried up and without hope. Is there a *reason* that the abundant life from God is now drained from these people?
5. Read Leviticus 26:3-4. How might the Israelites have lived differently to avoid this dry place in which they find themselves? How do the verses that follow (Leviticus 26:5-13) speak to the great blessing that God *intends* for his people?
6. Ezekiel speaks hopeful words about life returning to the people of Israel. How will God bring about this new life? How can we as God's people experience this *redemption* and new life?
7. Take a look at 1 John 2:1-4. How does this seem to parallel the period of exile, the *reason* for their loss of life, and the *redemption* that brings the new life that God offers? What role does Jesus play in this?

⁸ Ps 30.5b

8. How might these very hopeful words of Ezekiel, pointing ultimately to Jesus as our source of redemption, be just the words the world needs to hear at this point in history? What do *you* need to hear in these words? How can our lives, both as individuals and as a congregation, reflect this hopefulness to others?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Is there a way that even our mistakes can
lead us more toward Jesus?