



Sermon Transcript

March 22, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption Never Far From Home

Ezekiel 11:1-25

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 22, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Ezekiel 11:1-25

¹The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the east gate of the house of the LORD, which faces east. And behold, at the entrance of the gateway there were twenty-five men. And I saw among them Jaazaniah the son of Azzur, and Pelatiah the son of Benaiah, princes of the people. ² And he said to me, “Son of man, these are the men who devise iniquity and who give wicked counsel in this city; ³who say, ‘The time is not near to build houses. This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat.’ ⁴Therefore prophesy against them; prophesy, O son of man.”

⁵ And the Spirit of the LORD fell upon me, and he said to me, “Say, Thus says the LORD: So you think, O house of Israel. For I know the things that come into your mind. ⁶ You have multiplied your slain in this city and have filled its streets with the slain. ⁷ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Your slain whom you have laid in the midst of it, they are the meat, and this city is the cauldron, but you shall be brought out of the midst of it. ⁸ You have feared the sword, and I will bring the sword upon you, declares the Lord GOD. ⁹ And I will bring you out of the midst of it, and give you into the hands of foreigners, and execute judgments upon you. ¹⁰ You shall fall by the sword. I will judge you at the border of Israel, and you shall know that I am the LORD. ¹¹ This city shall not be your cauldron, nor shall you be the meat in the midst of it. I will judge you at the border of Israel, ¹² and you shall know that I am the LORD. For you have not walked in my statutes nor obeyed my rules, but have acted according to the rules of the nations that are around you.”

¹³ And it came to pass, while I was prophesying, that Pelatiah the son of Benaiah died. Then I fell down on my face and cried out with a loud voice and said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel?”

¹⁴ And the word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁵ “Son of man, your brothers, even your brothers, your kinsmen, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, ‘Go far from the LORD; to us this land is given for a possession.’ ¹⁶ Therefore say, “Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone. ¹⁷ Therefore say, “Thus says the Lord GOD: I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.’ ¹⁸ And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its

abominations. ¹⁹ And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, ²⁰ that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. ²¹ But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds up on their own heads, declares the Lord GOD.”

²² Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. ²³ And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city. ²⁴ And the Spirit lifted me up and brought me in the vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to the exiles. Then the vision that I had seen went up from me. ²⁵ And I told the exiles all the things that the LORD had shown me.

Introduction

“How did we end up here?”

“Is there any hope of going back?”

These are the kinds of questions people living in EXILE tend to ask. “How did we end up living so far away from home?” And, “Do you think there is any hope of ever going back?” The first question acknowledges that there is something wrong with the way things are. “How did we end up here?” The second question wonders if things will ever be right again. “Is there any hope of going back?”

These two questions are appropriate questions for the crisis we find ourselves in with the coronavirus, COVID-19. Now on one hand, you might be tempted to say with some protest, “Exile?” “We have not strayed very far from our homes of late. A little “exile” in a coffee shop sounds attractive at the moment.” But while you may be tethered to your house for the unforeseeable future, you are not really “at home” with what is happening. In some sense, you have been banished to your house, as one living in a kind of an exile from the kind of life we had become accustomed to. And in this forced “exile” fears run deep, and these fears are often fueled by our unlimited access to the news and the uncertainty of our wellbeing. Did you ever think you would see the day when the most precious commodity you could own is toilet paper? Exile is a place where life is turned upside down. Exile is a place where one doesn’t always feel safe. Exile is a place where one is not really “at home” with life as it is, it is the place of the unknown. “How did we end up here?” And then we wonder, “Is there any hope of going back?”

In many ways, these two questions frame our common experience in life. Have you ever looked at the brokenness of your life and wondered, “How did we end up here?” Or, have you ever looked at the brokenness of our world that is on display in so many ways—war, terrorism, crime, immorality, abuse, slander, gossip, inequity, disease, death—and wonder, “How did we end up here?” It is both cosmic and deeply personal.

I read an article this week written by Clarissa Moll. Just eight months ago, she and her children were packing up their campsite to get ready to go Glacier National Park the next morning. While they were packing, two white SUV’s rolled down the gravel driveway and two police chaplains emerged to give her the news that her husband, just 41 years of age—a skilled and conscientious hiker—had fallen to his death while hiking in the Cascade mountains of Washington. Describing her very personal “exile” she writes that as Westerners, we have come to expect—“that little children don’t attend the graves of their daddies, that young women don’t bury their husbands, that parents don’t outlive their children.”¹ And so, she is left asking, “How did we end up here?” This wasn’t the plan when she and her husband married. “Is there any hope of going back?”

We have been making our way through the story of the Bible, and really the story of the Bible is designed to answer these two questions. “How did we get here?” “Is there any hope of going back?” If you go back all the way to the letter “C” - which stands for CREATION - the story begins in the Garden of Eden where man is at home. Man is at “home” with God and everything is good and right. And there is only one condition placed on man in the Garden. They must trust and follow God’s one command. But, they don’t. And so they are banished from the Garden. They are sent into “exile.” “Exile” is a world filled with brokenness and evil and suffering and death. And it leaves humanity asking the question, “Is there any hope of going back to that Garden?”

It is fascinating how the story in Genesis 1-11 parallels the story of Israel. They too were given the gift of a promised land and God himself took up residence with them as his glory settled in the temple and they too were able to stay there under one condition: that they be faithful to the terms of their covenant with God. If you recall, when they were “packed at Mt. Sinai,” - letter “S” - they entered into covenant with God, where blessing and life were promised to them if they loved and worshiped God alone and if they loved their neighbor. But, they didn’t. We have seen that over and over again through our journey looking at the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah. And so now we come to the letter “E” of CASKET EMPTY and like the story of humanity, Israel is now removed from their home and they are in “EXILE.” They are heard asking these questions: “How did we get here?” “Is there any hope of going back?”

If there is any part of Israel's story that relates to where we find ourselves in our journey of faith, it is the "exile." In the New Testament, Peter refers to the church in 1 Peter 1:1 as "*elect exiles*." That is what we are. Like Israel, feeling far away from home, we look around at the hardship of life and wonder to ourselves, "How did we end up here?" And yet, because of Jesus, through eyes of faith, we live with the hope that someday we are going back to what God intended when he created all things. But in the meantime, we are in exile. In the meantime we can learn from Israel how to live as those who are in exile. So what will we learn from Israel this morning about living life in exile?

I hope you learn this morning this lesson about life in exile. **If God is your sanctuary, then you are never really far away from home.** In dealing with the grief over losing her husband and now dealing with what are we all dealing with—the coronavirus—Clarissa Moll found comfort in the safety we find in Jesus. She wrote, "I returned often to Dallas Willard's words that, for those beloved of God, 'This present world is a perfectly safe place for us to be.' The safety Jesus offered would look different from what I expected, but it would never be more secure than anything I could have designed."² That is the lesson we will learn from Ezekiel this morning. To the exiles, God says in Ezekiel 11:16, "*Therefore say, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.'*" **If God is your sanctuary, you are never really far away from home.** That is our hope. That is our peace. That is our security while living life in exile, while living through this crisis.

Ezekiel and Exile

I realize that as soon as I mention the name Ezekiel, most of us have little knowledge of him, even though he is one of the major prophets in the Old Testament. I think our unfamiliarity with Ezekiel is due to the fact that it can be hard to navigate your way through the prophetic books. So I want to introduce Ezekiel to you and tell you a little bit about the book that bears his name. In doing so, it will help you understand Ezekiel 11 and the lesson we need to learn as a people who also are living in exile: **When God is your sanctuary, you are never really far away from home.**

Babylon's conquest of Jerusalem came in waves. The first wave took place in 605 BC when they took captive some of Jerusalem's finest. Among these exiles were names more familiar to many of you: Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. A second wave of attack came eight years later in 597 BC and along with king, Jehoiachin, Ezekiel was taken captive. So when the book of Ezekiel opens up, he is already living in exile.

When we are introduced to Ezekiel, we learn that he is a priest and that it is his 30th birthday. This is more than just biographical information for the back of his “baseball card.” It is significant because when a priest turned 30 years old, they would begin serving in the temple. So here he is, living in exile. Being displaced from the temple, he is kind of out of a job! The book opens up with him sitting on the banks of the canal, probably on the edge of the camp where all the exiles were placed. While he is sitting on the edge of the canal, the heavens were opened up to him and he saw a vision of God.

How do I explain to you what Ezekiel saw? Have you ever seen a “drone” operated by someone holding a remote control? It can move side to side and front ways and back as it hovers. That is what Ezekiel saw in this vision, but it was a “drone” of the throne of God. There were four angles that served as corner legs to a table, their wings were spread out and they touched each other and supported an expanse above it and on this expanse sat a throne and on the throne was likeness of a man, though there was a brilliance and a brightness that surrounded this image. At the end of Ezekiel 1, we see Ezekiel falling to his face and he says, “*Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.*” It was an image of God riding his royal throne. I think Ezekiel was shocked to find the *appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD* showing up in Babylon. This is the glory of the LORD that belonged in the city of Jerusalem and in the temple hovering over the ark of the covenant. God’s presence belonged in Jerusalem. What was the presence of God—the throne of God—doing in Babylon?

To answer this question, we see in Ezekiel 8-11 that Ezekiel becomes like a “drone” and he is picked by the Spirit of God and is virtually transported to Jerusalem—kind of like Scrooge being transported to Christmas past, present and future—Ezekiel was given a virtual tour of what was happening in the temple. To his dismay, the elders of Israel and their people were bowing before idols set up in the courtyard and they were worshiping other gods inside the temple. And so as Ezekiel takes all this in, he begins to see the throne chariot of God’s glory leave the temple, leave the city and going east towards Babylon. That is how our passage ends this morning in Ezekiel 11:22-23. “*Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.*” Carol Kaminski says that “the departure of God’s glory marks the most tragic event in Israel’s history. . . It was the presence of God that made them the people of God.”³

Ezekiel is called by God to tell the people of Israel that there is a third wave of attack that will come from Babylon, but this time the city will be destroyed and so will the temple.

He was also told that no one would listen, but he must proclaim the truth, nonetheless. And so, in 586 BC the city fell and the temple was destroyed. In Ezekiel 33:21, a fugitive escaped that final wave of destruction and came to Ezekiel with the sobering news, *“The city has been struck down.”* The people of Jerusalem, the southern kingdom of Judah were now living in exile. “How did we end up here?” “Is there any hope of going back?”

Ezekiel 11 can be divided in half. The first half of the chapter answers the question, “How did we end up here—in exile?” The second half of the chapter answers the second question, “Is there any hope of going back?” And there is. In fact, the outline of this chapter is the outline of the rest of the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel 12-33 describes God’s judgment of Israel, God’s judgment of the nations and then in chapter 33, you have the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. But then in Ezekiel 34 to 48, there is the promise of hope for a return to what once was. Here Ezekiel offers hope that Israel will be restored, the nations will be restored and all of creation will be restored. Good news “exiles!” There is hope of going back to what once was!

Far From Home

What does it really mean to be “far from home?” We get a picture of what it looks like to be “far from home” in the first part of Ezekiel 11. And here is the irony of the first half of Ezekiel 11. Geographically speaking, the setting is Jerusalem, their “home.” As we mentioned earlier, Ezekiel has been transported to the temple. It says in verse 1, *“The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the east gate of the house of the LORD, which faces east.”* But even though the people were in Jerusalem, they were far from “home” because they were far from God. Here is the sad thing. They didn’t know it.

They thought they were good. They thought they were safe. They thought they were “home.” As Ezekiel is getting this virtual tour of the temple, the Spirit tells him what the leaders of Israel are saying. You can eavesdrop in on their conversation and hear for yourself what they are saying, though apparently the Hebrew appears a little difficult to translate. In verse 3, it says in the ESV, *“The time is not near to build houses.”* Other English translations put it this way, *“is not the time near to build houses.”* In other words, the leaders are acting as though they are not afraid of further attack from Babylon and so they suggest that it is a good time to build houses, invest in the economy and live out your dreams. They say, *“This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat.”* In other words, the meat is in the pot and the pot keeps the meat safe.

But that is not the word that Ezekiel was called to give to the exiles living in Babylon. In

verse 11, God counters the false sense of security that the leaders of Israel had by saying, “*This city shall not be your cauldron, nor shall you be the meat in the midst of it.*” That is another way of saying, “you think you are safe hiding in the walls of Jerusalem, but really, you are dead meat!” Why? Why are they facing God’s judgment? How did we end up here? He goes on to say “*I will judge you at the border of Israel, and you shall know that I am the LORD. For you have not walked in my statutes nor obeyed my rules, but have acted according to the rules of the nations that are around you.*”

At the heart of Jerusalem’s rebellion against God is a misplaced trust and security. They put their trust in the walls of the city. As long as they had the temple, they thought they were safe. But they didn’t see what Ezekiel saw. Ezekiel saw the glory of God leave the temple, leave the city and go towards Babylon. Geographically they were home in Jerusalem. But in reality, they were far from home because they were far from God.

One of the things that this virus is exposing is how far our culture has carried us from God. It is exposing where we find our sense of security. This enemy that we can’t even see with our eyes has attacked the very things that make us feel secure and safe: our health, our finances, our jobs, our government, our entertainment—these things that make us feel like we are “at home” can’t really make us secure.

When Trevin Wax went to the super market to stock up on food, he couldn’t help but notice which aisles were emptied out and which aisles were still full. He said, all the meat and potatoes were gone, but the candy aisle was still full. He observed that there is a lesson in this for all of us. When we are in times of trouble, we need real food to sustain us. He writes, “In times of abundance . . . we create the illusion that we are in control . . . When suffering hits and exposes our weakness—when we encounter the frightening diagnosis, the sudden accident, or the death of a loved one—sweets don’t satisfy. The candy aisle cannot sustain us. And unless our spiritual diet contains something more substantive, we will confront these challenges with spiritual anemia instead of strength . . . John Owen once said, “Christ is the meat, the bread, the food of our souls. Nothing is in him of a higher spiritual nourishment than his love, which we should always desire.”⁴ If your security is in anything else but Christ, you will never be at home and God will seem very far away.

God is Your Sanctuary

The second half of Ezekiel 11 has a measure of irony to it as well. In verse 15 we hear the people who were still living in Jerusalem say about the exiles who were living in Babylon

that they were far from God because they were far from Jerusalem. But God counters this claim with a wonderful promise that explains why Ezekiel saw the glory of God while on the banks of the canal in Babylon. God says in verse 16, *“Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.”* At the end of the day, their “sanctuary” is not a man made temple because if God is not in it, they have nothing. Instead, God himself, has gone with them into captivity and this is just the beginning of what God promises to do for them. Not only is God with them, but he will raise up a Son of David and he will give them a new heart and pour out his Spirit upon them. God is with them. God is their sanctuary. And so in some sense, they are already home because God has not abandoned them.

The idea that God is our sanctuary is a comforting thought to me this morning. I have to admit, I don't particularly enjoy speaking to an empty room. I miss you being here and being the visible demonstration of God's people gathered. But I do draw comfort from the fact that while you are not visible to me, you are visible to God. In Jesus, you have the assurance that God is with you. Do you know what the very last phrase is of the book of Ezekiel? It is the wonderful description of what life will be like when God brings us back to a completely restored creation. He sums it up by saying, *“The LORD is there.”* That is how the book of Ezekiel ends. *“The LORD is there.”* That is God's description of our final home. *“The LORD is there.”* It is basically the same description John gives of the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation, *“the dwelling place of God is with man. He will be with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”*

I can't help but think that while Ezekiel was far away from home, living in exile, removed from the temple where he longed to serve as priest, how comforting it must have been to know that all the way over there in Babylon, God was his sanctuary. God was with him. It doesn't mean he was without his trials and difficulties. It doesn't mean that he didn't long for Jerusalem. But if God was with him, he could be “at home” knowing that he was safe, no matter what happens.

One of the beautiful things about Jesus, the Son of God, is that he stepped into our exile. In fact, in no uncertain terms, he claimed to be the temple, the place where we meet God. Through his death and resurrection we are assured that there is hope of going back to God. Jesus is the way back. And now we are temples of the Holy Spirit and we are never . . . ever . . . ever alone. With Jesus, we are never far from home.

That is what Clarissa Moll has concluded as well. She wrote, “Coronavirus may be a threat to my sense of safety, but it wasn’t the first, and it won’t be the last. I don’t understand how a world where fathers fall to their deaths and diseases course through communities can be a safe place to be. But I choose to believe this is so. Because in the darkest hour I’ve ever experienced and in the days of grief that followed, Jesus has walked with me, his warm and gentle love dispelling my fears. It is not my vigilance but rather Jesus himself who keeps me safe. In this season of illness and panic, he is here too. Whatever comes, for those who know and love him, this world will still be a good place to live.”⁵ I really think that one of the best things we can offer our communities going through this crisis is the calm and the reassuring faith that **God is our sanctuary and therefore we are never far away from home.**

Conclusion

Is God your sanctuary this morning? If he is, **then you are never really far away from home.**” I love the first verse of the first hymn we sang this morning:

O God our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home

God is not just our help in the past. God is not just our future home. He is our present home. He is our eternal home. So be assured of his abiding presence while we live in exile.

“Is there any hope of going back?” You bet! Jesus has secured it through his death and resurrection. It is ours through faith. And even while we live in exile, (with this current crisis) we can taste the promise that God will never leave us or forsake us. So be “at home” as you find your rest in God.

¹Clarissa Moll “The Only Perfectly Safe Place to Be” March 19, 2020, www.thegospelcoalition.org

²Ibid

³Carol Kaminski *CASKET EMPTY Old Testament* (Casket Empty Media,2012) 214 and 219

⁴Trevin Wax “No Meat of Potatoes But The Candy Aisle is Full” March 17, 2020
www.thegospelcoalition.org

⁵Moll

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What is the furthest you have ever been away from home. What was the biggest difference between “there” and home?
2. What are you most concerned about regarding the current crisis we are facing? Spend time praying about your concerns.

Diving Into The Word

3. Watch the Bible Project video on the theme of Exile. How does Israel’s story parallel our story? www.bibleproject.com/explore/exile/
4. Read Ezekiel 11:1-4, 11-13. Where did the people of Jerusalem find their security? Outside of God, what are you tempted to look to for a sense of security? How does the current coronavirus crisis expose where we put our trust?
5. Read Ezekiel 11:14-21. What are the promises of hope in these verses? What role does God play in these verses? What does it mean that God is our sanctuary?
6. Read 1 Peter 1:1-9. What do you learn about living life in exile from this passage? Think about these key phrases: “elect exiles” (1:1) . . . “born again to a living hope” (1:3) . . . “the tested genuineness of your faith” (1:7)

Taking It Home

7. How does the reminder that God is with you help you with the concerns you shared in question #2?
8. Where can you bring a sense of God’s presence and God’s peace this week to those who are anxious?