

Church of the Crossroads  
Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
October 14, 2007  
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ENGAGING THE EMPIRE

Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7  
Psalm 137

We are fast becoming a church in exile. It's not only that we find ourselves out-of-favor and on the periphery of the religious, cultural, and political life of America; it's also that the time has come when we may be told that we cannot carry on our ministry and mission as the Gospel has called us to do.

Some months ago you may have heard of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California, which had been under investigation by the IRS and was facing potential fines and/or revocation of its tax-exempt status because of a guest sermon that George Regas, the church's rector emeritus, delivered just before the 2004 presidential election. In the sermon, the rector strongly criticized the war in Iraq but did not suggest how the church members ought to vote. In the sermon, he even said that both President Bush and John Kerry were good Christians. The IRS saw fit to investigate the church anyway. Just two weeks ago, the IRS informed the church that it will not be sanctioned for the anti-war sermon. Church leaders are now asking for an apology for the investigation they believe may have been politically motivated.

Now comes an even more serious story. This past week, Margaret Brown received a letter from Samia Khoury, a Palestinian who spoke here in Hawai'i a year or so ago. Samia in her letter forwarded a letter she just received from a friend, a U.S. Christian. The friend had been involved in her church's support of a school, Rawdat El-Zuhu, in which Samia Khoury has been deeply involved. I want to read you the letter sent by the U.S. Christian friend to Samia.

Dear Samia,

I got a call this week from the church staff saying that the churches cannot communicate anymore or send money to Palestinian organizations. That makes me very sad, but the Homeland Security is tracking all money and communications with Palestinians. I have

to ask you to not forward anything political to me, but we can certainly communicate as friends.

It makes me sad as the church was advised by the accountant that it was very important to change to another project. Also, there is a man in the church who is very frustrated, because he wants to help and can't understand why suddenly committees say no when he suggests helping.

I certainly am not going to give up my friendship with you. We want to hear about your family and communicate about ours, and hopefully things will calm down and we can hold another fundraiser for the school. But for now, we'll pray for movement for real peace and opportunity for you. We do not forget you. Love

Samia Kouhry says that she will respect her friend's request, but how in the world can she refrain from keeping away from politics in her letters? Her whole life and the life of her family is so deeply affected by the political situation in Palestine-Israel that she cannot write anything significant to her friend, and that is painful.

This morning, I am suggesting that when the voices and actions of a Christian congregation in the U.S. are stifled in this way, whether or not the threat is real, then the church is indeed experiencing an exile, an exile that comes when communities of faith find themselves living in the midst of an empire.

It is the situation we face that has led Walter Brueggemann to suggest that we need to pay attention to the prophetic and poetic literature that arose during Israel's exile to Babylon in the sixth century BCE. For in this literature, we may hear a word that is directed to us who belong to Christian communities who are trying to be faithful in this time and in this place, who have come to know themselves as communities in exile.

This morning, we heard two passages that come from the exile: a lament in the form of a psalm, and a letter. First, let us consider Psalm 137. This psalm is not unlike the Kalaupapa Song the choir sang this morning. That too is a psalm of exile.

Psalm 137 is perhaps the most difficult psalm in the entire Psalter to hear. Can you imagine a psalm ending with these words?

O city of Babylon, you devastator!  
 Happy shall they be who pay you  
 back what you have done to us.

Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
 and dash them against the rock!

Now, there is an example of unmitigated anger for you, revealing how deep the pain and anguish must have been for those who were sent into exile. I recall Walter Brueggemann saying here at Church of the Crossroads how important it was for the exiles to voice their hatred and their anger, but that we also need to know that there is no recorded instance where it is reported that the exiles put their words into action. They left all such vengeance up to God, something we have not yet learned how to do.

The disturbing words with which the psalm ends are preceded by a lament that has become the material for many composers of church music:

By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down  
 and we wept when we remembered Zion.

And so we hung up our harps,  
 there upon the willows.

For there our captors asked us for songs,  
 and our tormentors asked for mirth,  
 saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing God’s song in a foreign land?  
 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand  
 wither!

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I  
 do not remember you,  
 if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

This is one authentic response to exile: lament, followed by anger. Such a community who cannot do anything but remember Jerusalem will most likely withdraw from the city of their captors and become a little community unto themselves. They will do their best to hold themselves and their community together, as together with sadness they recall what used to be and is no more.

I think this is an option for communities of faith in our day, and many congregations are indeed responding in this way. They are withdrawing from involvement in the political life of the community. They shy away from issues of social justice and international peace and concentrate instead on issues of private morality. They never speak of the war in Iraq as a moral issue. They are afraid and, like the church community Samia Khoury writes about, they withdraw from the call of the Gospel to serve the least of the brothers and sisters, especially if they happen to be Palestinian.

That is one response to exile, and it is a response we witness in many U.S. churches today. Let's stay away from controversial issues. Let's stay away from political action. Let's just try to keep ourselves together.

An alternative response is represented by the letter the prophet Jeremiah sent to the exiles in Babylon. In part, the letter reads:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. 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. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. Jer 29:4–7

First, we need to know that the exiles have been told that their exile will be a long one—seventy years. They need to make a home in Babylon. They must not withdraw from the world and culture surrounding them; they must not isolate themselves; instead, they must seek the welfare of the city in which they dwell. They must engage the empire that has defeated them. For in the welfare (shalom) of the city in which they dwell, they will find their welfare, their shalom.

And so it is for us. We cannot let our exile status engender defeatism or apathy within us. We need to continue to witness to the Gospel, and the peace and justice of God's realm. We need to engage the empire in which we live. We need to do what the exiles of Kalaupapa did: they built a dwelling place in the desolate land in which they found themselves, and in that place they found life and healing.

Ours is a daunting task. For what do we really know? We are not social policy experts. We cannot presume to have a plan for the nation in which we find ourselves. We are just a small community trying to be faithful.

Well, the good news is that we do not have to tell the government what it must do to get out of Iraq. We do not have to be experts on health care funding. We do not have to give the State of Hawai‘i a step-by-step plan so that it can address the need for affordable housing.

I am reminded of the exchange between William Sloane Coffin and Henry Kissinger during the Vietnam War. Coffin was attacking U.S. government policy about the war and Kissinger said to him something along these lines: “If you’re so smart, why don’t you tell us what to do in Vietnam.” And Coffin, in his usual gruff manner, said, “Mr. Secretary, my job is to say to you, ‘Let justice roll down like mighty waters.’ Your job is to get the plumbing in place.”<sup>1</sup>

Just because we find ourselves in exile, just because the powers that be would like us much better if we were to forget all that “peace and justice business,” and choose instead to be silent, and never speak a discouraging word, and just attend to each other’s needs and serve those in need close to home (things, by the way, we surely must do)—yes, just because we find ourselves in exile, we cannot give in. We dare not neglect the ministry and mission of the Gospel as we have come to understand them. Even as we maintain our distinctiveness as a community of faith, we dare not withdraw from the city, the nation, the empire, and separate ourselves from the world. Instead, with courage and with boldness, we must enter the fray and continue our witness for justice and for peace, and seek the welfare, the shalom, of the city in which we find ourselves, for in the welfare of the city, we will find our welfare. God help us so to do. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in Walter Brueggemann, *Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006. 200.