

I have the privilege of preaching the first two sermons in our advent series. The story in Daniel last week, and the passage from Ezekiel this week both come from the same context. Life in exile. Exile is a major theme in our scriptures, and it is always a relevant topic for us. There are always people living in exile in our world. The UN Refugee Agency found that at the end of 2024, 123.2 million people were displaced. Displacement numbers have nearly doubled in the last decade.

(<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>) We might know someone who is living in physical exile, or we might find that we are unfortunately contributors to the exile of others. This topic is also relevant, because we can all empathize with exile, as we experience our own mental, spiritual, or emotional exiles. Even if we are not personally, physically displaced, we have our own journeys, and we are in a world where people are constantly exiled.

The plight of God's people in scripture has resonated with humanity throughout time. What was significant about this vision to its original audience, and how might it influence us today?

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### **The Text**

The vision is relatively simple, compared to other visions in the Bible. I am listening to an audiobook about the book of Revelation and this vision seems very tame and understandable compared to what is going on in that book. Ezekiel sees a whole valley of bones that are completely dried up. There is no life left on them. Daniel Hays says that the dryness of the bones is to make. SLIDE "The point that these people are really, really dead." (Hays, 225). The Bible despite all its complexities is very good at communicating hyperbole. Last week the people in the furnace didn't just survive, they super survive, without smelling of smoke or being singed. When Jesus feeds the 5 000 it isn't just an example of abundance, they collect 12 baskets of leftovers- it is super abundance. This follows the same idea. The people God resurrects in this vision are not just dead. They have been dead for so long that they are just bones. Bones so old that they are dried up and sun bleached.

This vision comes with a command for Ezekiel. “Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.”

One of the interesting aspects of this passage is the symbol of breath. The use of the word breath has more complexity in Hebrew. SLIDE “This chapter contains an extended wordplay, for one Hebrew word (ruah) can mean ‘breath’, ‘wind’, or ‘spirit’, and all three meanings are used in this chapter” (Hays, 225). This vision is not just about the breath of a human, or the wind blowing, it is about the very Spirit of God having influence in the world. This vision is a direct response to a three-line lament that has been circling amongst the people

Our bones are dried up,  
and our hope is lost;  
we are cut off completely. (Pfisterer Darr)

God responds to this hopelessness with the vision that he gives to Ezekiel. God’s response is to bring life to these dry bones. Ezekiel prophesies that the four winds will blow, and bring breath to these lifeless beings. The spirit of God responds, and what were once dry bones, are now living, breathing humans. There is finally some discussion about being risen from the grave. What does all of this mean to the exiled people? God responds to their lament by bringing life. But what does “bringing life” even mean?

Is it to mean that if we cry out God will always respond? Does it mean that we will never experience suffering and hardship? Does it literally mean God is going to pull the bones from the dirt and restore them to life? Millard C Lind can perhaps give us an idea. SLIDE

“Modern interpreters generally agree that this vision is not about the literal resurrection of dead bones of Israelites. Instead, it is about the renewal of Israel’s life and return to their home...This vision describes no

mere resuscitation of life which continues on the same previous plane, but a genuine resurrection of life from an old to a different order” (Lind, 296)

The vision is about a renewal of life, and a return from exile. Not so things can be the same, but so they can be different. Christians often read about visions like this one, or hear Jesus talk about eternal life, and we jump right to thinking about a life after we die. It seems that scripture wants to not only consider that, but also think about what it means to live a renewed life now. Faith is not just about the future; it is also about the present. God’s promises are not just for the future; they are also for the present. God is wonderful enough to bring life, into the deadest of situations. Able to resurrect the dryest of bones. God wants to bring renewal into exile.

Some may feel disconnected from this message. I have not experienced an exile like Ezekiel and his people. This text is relevant to those in physical exile, those who have historically experienced exile, and those of us who feel the same feelings that come with exile. When we try to apply ancient scripture to our lives, we have to do a bit of a balancing act. We do not want to totally individualize and spiritualize the original meaning. But we also do not want to be closed off from the opportunity to glean something meaningful. How do these truths help us engage with our personal, spiritual exiles, and global, physical exiles. SLIDE

## **Personal/Spiritual Exile**

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One way we experience exile is in our relationships with one another. We have all had a relationship fall apart. We have all had to leave a friendship behind, and venture into a new territory. Sometimes this is natural and healthy. Other times it is upsetting and difficult. It can be lonely, especially when our falling out is with a group of people. A church community, a workplace, a friend group, a family unit. It can be lonely. Knowing that God breathes life into these moments can be helpful. God can save the deadest of relationships if that is the route we choose. God can also bring us a vibrant, more beautiful life than we could ever imagine if

we make new connections. I think of all the people who have made a vibrant life with their “chosen family” when things fall apart with their biological family. I also think of all the relationships that have been amended throughout time. SLIDE

We also experience feelings of exile from God themselves. A tragedy often leads us wondering “Why would God let that happen”. Suffering makes us feel alone and isolated. It can make us feel like God isn’t listening. Sometimes we have big doubts and questions, and it makes us wonder if we can still have faith at all. But God breathes life into exile. Faith shattering moments often become faith defining moments. Sometimes what we used to know falls apart, and it allows us to challenge harmful beliefs. I think of people who have “deconstructed” parts of their faith, and have a vibrant, meaningful and uplifting faith today. SLIDE

Sometimes we feel like we are in exile because of who we are. Who God made us to be, or what has happened to us. The world has certain expectations of us and many aspects of the world favour certain types of people. People might feel exiled because of their race, gender or sexual orientation. They might feel alone because of the mistakes they have made or the trauma’s they endured. We live in a world that isolates people with mental illness, neurodiverse people, and people with disabilities. Humanity is diverse and beautiful, and unfortunately it is often divided and exclusive. God can bring about life when people feel exiled for who they are, by creating a world of inclusion, accessibility, love and support. We can be part of building that world.

There are countless other trials we work through as humans, and countless stories of God breathing life into difficult circumstances.

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## **The Cycle of Exile**

Exile has unfortunately affected many people throughout time. You can turn on the news, or read a history book, and you will find people groups being oppressed and displaced. I wonder if this is because we get caught up in a cycle of hurt when we experience exile. Many people groups have

experienced persecution at different points in history. This persecution, often leads to displacement. Many of these groups have also displaced people, or at the very least benefitted from the displacement of others. Jewish folks were treated horribly in Europe. They experienced Anti Semitism, and were murdered on a massive scale in the Holocaust. Their fleeing from Antisemitism came at the cost of displacing the Palestinian people. This is just one example, as this happens repeatedly in history. The exiled become the exilers. While it would be easier for me to point the finger and call it a day, to do so would be hypocritical. Many Mennonite ancestors emigrated to Russia in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The land they were given was taken from other groups through Russian military efforts. This meant that “Mennonites settled next to established Muslim communities, who practiced a variety of nomadic, semi-nomadic, and settled lifestyles.” (Aileen Friesen) There were obviously tensions between these groups, and violence occurred. SLIDE

“It is important to interpret Muslim-Mennonite interactions through the lens of settler colonialism to show how the structure of settlement benefited Mennonites at the expense of the local population. It is equally as important to focus on the ways in which both Mennonites and Muslims participated in and instigated violence against each other, as they asserted control over land and property. In case of the Mennonites, this violence, at least initially, was performed by others on their behalf; however, as raids on their villages intensified, some Mennonites chose to participate directly.” (Aileen Friesen)

For these groups, exile brought about death and sadness. Mennonites fled again when we settled here in Canada. Again, the land that we occupy was taken from others through colonialism. So often exile is horrible cycle. A group is exiled, and in finding a new place, others are subjected to exile. Are we doomed to just repeat this cycle? Will exile just bring death, sadness and loss?

I don't think so. I believe that this passage in Ezekiel shows us that life can abound in exile when we follow God. God take the dry bones, and

make life. Colonialism is a skeleton in our closet, but God can, and has breathed life into the darkest situations.

Contributing to the displacement of others is an unfortunate part of our history. Yet, there are also so many stories of bringing life into exile. When people have the courage to pursue love, dry bones are made alive.

For the Mennonites who found themselves living alongside Muslim groups like Kumyks and the Nogais, there are also stories of relationships. The article I read regarding these groups gave this example: SLIDE

“Yet this is not the full story. Amid this chaos, there were moments when the values of friendship, hospitality, and dialogue joined Mennonites with their Muslim neighbors. As the raids on Mennonite villages intensified during 1918, Mennonites not only prayed for God’s mercy, they also approached some of their Muslim neighbors (the Kumyks) living in the villages of Kazi-Yurt and Kostek for help. The Kumyks sent representatives to a meeting held at the Mennonite Brethren Church in the village of Talma (village #3) to discuss the situation.

SLIDE They brought a detachment of the militia, which travelled to the neighbouring Nogai and Taulin villages to confiscate goods stolen from the Mennonites. These militiamen were then billeted in Mennonite villages overnight. When it became apparent that the settlement could not be saved, Mennonites fled to Kazi-Yurt and Kostek where they were welcomed by the local population and extended significant hospitality. Those who could not make it to these villages were helped by Muslim acquaintances to safety through alternative routes.” (Aileen Friesen)

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I think stories like this are important for two reasons. First, it acknowledges that there were in fact wrongdoings. There was violence and animosity between Mennonites and the local groups. There was participation in colonialism. Second, it acknowledges that in this, there were attempts at relationship building. These are nuanced and complex

situations, but kindness, generosity, and relationships challenged the cycle of exile. When faced with exile, we have a choice. Will we bring death and destruction? Or will we allow God to breath life into our times of trouble. Will we end the cycle of exile. The Kumyks who helped Mennonites in a time of need opposed the cycle of exile. The Israeli citizens who risk their livelihood to protest against occupation are trying to end the cycle of exile. The groups in Canada fighting for Indigenous rights are fighting the cycle of exile. We have been displaced. We have displaced others. We have been complicit in the cycle of exile. We have also fought the cycle of exile.

May we each day choose to stand against the cycle of exile. Maybe that is choosing to go to therapy, to try and avoid passing our struggles onto the next generation. Learning about other people's situations so we can better include them and support them. Maybe it is protesting against governments that forcibly take land. Voting for policies that seek justice, and not profits. Being willing to look at the ways we are complicit. The best way to stand against a cycle of exile that has continued for too long, is to love one another, even when it is difficult or scary. Trusting that God can bring life to the dryest of bones. This advent season we anticipate the coming of Jesus. Our saviour who seeks to end the exile we all face. May we brought together by our saviour born in the trough. As we come together we have a new spiritual home in Christ, and a mission to bring life into the most difficult of situations.

## Works Cited

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