

## **Introduction:**

The Disney classic movie Lion King tells the story of a young lion cub who is being raised as the prince of Pride Rock by his father Mufasa and mother Sarabi. He spends his days learning how to hunt with his father, playing with his friend Nala, and being watched over by Zazu. Unfortunately though, Simba's evil uncle Scar had his eyes on the throne and hatches a plot. After Scar pushes Mufasa from a high ledge in a canyon into a charging stampede of wildebeests, he blames Simba for Mufasa's death and tells Simba to run away, and never come back. Simba is sent away from Pride Rock, the only home he ever knew, and his mother, and his family and his friends to live in a foreign place against his will.

This is what's known as 'exile.' According to technical definitions, exile is removal from one's homeland, either by force or self-exile, without the near-possibility of return. This morning we are going to look at three stories of exile. The story of the people of Israel in the book of Isaiah and the people of Israel in the book of Matthew fit the technical definition of exile. But we are also going to consider 'exile' not just as being removed from one's homeland, but in the broader sense of being a place that one does not want to be. The Skit Guys write *"Exile is a place where people desire for someone to save them. When a person wakes up and wonders if today could possibly get any worse than yesterday, that person may be living in exile."* The third story of exile, then, that we are going to look at is our own story, and how we live in the world that is not how God designed it. And in these three stories of exile we are going to consider the hope offered to us by God and how we can respond to that hope.

**Transition:** First, let's look at the exile in Isaiah, the exile in Matthew, and our exile today.

## **1) Exile:**

### **a. Exile in Isaiah**

The book of Isaiah tells the story of the people of God over a 400 year period through the lens of the 'prophet' as they act unfaithfully through making political alliances with other nations, worshipping other gods, and oppressing the poor and helpless. Because of Israel's continued unfaithfulness, God would allow both the southern and northern kingdoms to fall to the hands of foreign governments, to be taken into exile, and after the fall of Jerusalem they would never again be in control of their own nation.

In Isaiah Chapter, 8, the prophet gives God's words to the people in exile, for what they would experience and why. In **Isaiah 8:20-22**, the prophet says:

"If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. <sup>21</sup> Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. <sup>22</sup> Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness."

Distressed, hungry, angry, cursing, and seeing and experiencing darkness; all trademarks of a people in exile.

### **b. Exile in Matthew**

The exile that the people of God experienced throughout the book of Isaiah continued into Jesus' time. Herod the Great was the King of Judea at the time, appointed by Rome to oversee the state on behalf of the Caesar. He accomplished a lot during the time of his rule, including the rebuilding of the second Jewish temple. He also helped to build many other magnificent structures throughout the city and made attempts to win over his Jewish subjects.

However, this wasn't for benevolent reasons; Herod wanted to demonstrate his greatness and establish his authority over the Jews. He was very fearful of having his rule taken away and kept a close eye of the people's feelings towards him through the use of secret police. It's no surprise then that when word came to him of a 'king of the Jews' being born in his region, he was deeply disturbed. The gospel writer describes this event in Matthew 2:1-3

### **Matthew 2:1-3, 14-18**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." <sup>3</sup> *When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*

The people of Jerusalem knew that they were always at Herod's mercy, and they knew that because of his political paranoia, he would react poorly to this rumor of a Jewish king. Now God was on the side of the people in exile. He warned the

Magi who had told Herod of this King to return home by a different way and not tell Herod what they had seen. And an angel of the Lord warned Mary and Joseph to take the baby Jesus and flee to Egypt.

When Herod discovered that he had been tricked, Matthew tells us in vv. 16: “<sup>16</sup> When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.”

Although Jesus was spared from Herod’s madness, many children and parents were not. This was a people in exile, who like the people in Isaiah, who were not in control of their own lives, who subject to tragedy, and who were experiencing a terrible darkness.

### **c. Exile Today**

The world is in a state of exile even today. Once upon a time, God created the earth to be perfect and planned for humanity to be able to live in peace in this perfect world. Before we could hardly even enjoy a few moments of that peace, sin entered the world, corrupted the world, and we were exiled from the Garden of Eden, separated from God, and made to live in the realities and consequences of this fallen earth. If our ‘homeland’ was meant to be a perfect existence with God, and the world we live in is in exile outside of that peace and perfection, then what are some of the ways that we experience exile today? We experience exile through endless wars, terrorism, resources being hoarded by the wealthy while others starve, malnutrition, sex trafficking, and slavery, mass shootings and never-ending gun violence, racial tensions, religious tensions, and a lack of basic care for those most in need. Locally we are in the middle of an opioid crisis, 2 of our school districts have suffered suicides already in the 2019 school year, domestic violence, hunger, and homelessness. Many here have or are experiencing divorce, job loss, poor physical health, poor mental health, broken relationships, and general disappointments with the way life has turned out.

What exile are you experiencing today? What about the world around you, about your own life, about your own body and/or mind has you saying the most: “This is not how things are supposed to be?”

## **2) Hope:**

Both Isaiah and Jesus tell the story of Hope in Exile because they both tell the story of God rescuing His people from darkness. Interestingly enough, it's even in their names, which are incredibly similar in Hebrew. 'Isaiah' comes from the Hebrew name 'Yesh'yahu' which means "the salvation of YHWH." The name Jesus comes from the Hebrew name "Jeshua" which means 'he saves' or 'he delivers.'

### **a. Hope in Isaiah**

Although Isaiah is not a happy book, there are a few prophecies of hope sprinkled throughout its many pages. One of these, Isaiah 9, tells of the ascension of good King Hezekiah to the throne who would bring the people of Israel back to proper and true worship of God. This comes following the proclamation in Chapter 8 of the darkness that they were going to experience because they refused to follow the Word of God. Isaiah 9:2 gives the hopeful words "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." And how were they going to experience this hope? Vv. 6-7 tell us that a child was born and the government would be placed on his shoulders. Isaiah was talking specifically about the ascension of the Good King Hezekiah into the throne. Hezekiah's father Ahaz had been a part of turning the people away from God and had chosen to ignore the words of God. He had watched the northern Kingdom of Israel fall and still trusted more in other nations, which would eventually lead to Judea being taken out by Babylon. In part because of Ahaz' rule, the people of Judea were experiencing darkness. But now Hezekiah would come into power. He would destroy the idols, reinstate the worship of God, and reestablish following the law. Hezekiah would continue the line of David, and through Him God would once again be in charge of His people.

As it has already been said, the hope for the people of Israel that would come from Hezekiah's reign would only last so long, and only a few centuries later, the southern kingdom of Judah would fall to the Babylonians, and the people would be in permanent exile. In that place, the Israelites needed a permanent hope, which would come through the birth of Jesus, who came from the same royal line and promise of his great++++ grandfather Hezekiah.

### **b. Hope in Jesus**

Although this passage in Isaiah 9 is never directly quoted in the New Testament, it is an incredibly important passage to the church, as we look to it not only pointing to the immediate king Hezekiah during Isaiah's writing, but we also believe it

describes the coming of Jesus'. Let's read through these words again with Christ in mind:

“<sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.”

Isaiah tells us that Jesus is going to establish his throne forever and that it will be marked by justice and righteousness. When Jesus comes into His full reign, all things will be made right and all justice will be carried out.

As this is the first Sunday of the Advent season, advent meaning to await the arrival of an important coming event, we are living in the hope that came through Jesus' birth, life and death. But because we still live in a world in exile, we await with hope for the time when Jesus returns and all of the pains of exile are no more.

It's in the times of deepest distress that we can turn to the words of God's hope, peace, and comfort found in **Isaiah 40**:

In v. 1, God declares comfort over his people, that “her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” Those sins that we regret most, those things we agonize over, have been washed away, and the debt we owe has been paid.

In v. 4 God tells us: “<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.” In our lives in exile, we experience every imaginable kind of terrain, from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows. When Christ comes again, all will be made level, and smooth, and easy.

In v. 11, God is described as a shepherd who gathers us in like lambs.

In vv.28, God will give “strength to the weary” and “power to the weak.” For us who find our hope in God, our strength will be renewed and we “will soar on wings like eagles,” we “will run and not grow weary,” we “will walk and not be faint.” I don’t know about you, but that sounds like great news. That sounds like something to hope for.

### **So What?**

So, how do we receive and respond to this hope in Christ Jesus as a people still living in exile?

**1) Prayer:** Prayer is the most important thing that we can do in our relationship with God. It allows Him to hear what is on our hearts, and it allows us to hear what is on our hearts. When we come into God’s presence through prayer, we can be reminded of His peace with us in the midst of this exile.

### **2) Patience**

Patience is actively awaiting a future that we aren’t certain about when it will come. This is a hard answer, and it may seem trite, but if we look at the story of the Israelites through the Old and New Testament, their exile was marked by periods of both light and darkness, but ultimately they and we are still waiting on the full light of Jesus’ second coming. Through a relationship with God through prayer, and through patience, we can await the time when the light of Christ will overtake the whole world and we will be in exile no more.

### **3) Pro-active Engagement**

As believers, we are called to be the hands and feet of the living hope of Jesus. Although the full light of Christ is yet to come, it is in part here now through God’s Spirit working through God’s people. We have the ability to act as Christ would to each other, to our neighbors, to our neighborhoods, and to our world and be the present living hope of Christ.

NPR’s StoryCorp this week had a story of a mother and daughter who were forced into ‘exile’ after a divorce and were given hope by a community of faith. On the day before the daughter Ashley’s 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, they found themselves homeless, living in a hotel in Dallas. In the years that followed, Ashley’s mother Sandy worked a variety of part time jobs to help pay for their room at the hotel, but eventually they were forced to camp in a tent for three weeks.

Ashley and Sandy lived on a weekly food budget of \$6 and laughed about being able to see Ashley's ribs and spine. They would go to Costco and Sam's Club several times a week and scavenge the samples set out for customers, getting dirty looks from the people who worked there. Ashley said "School was rough. My parents were divorced. I was homeless. Everything just came crashing down. I wanted to die."

Ashley's youth pastor was able to connect her and Sandy to an organization that houses families in converted Sunday schools. That organization, called Family Promise, provided them with a place to stay while Sandy worked and saved money, and while Ashley finished high school.

10 years later, Ashley graduated college and Sandy works on Family Promise's board, helping to provide housing for others in need just as they had been given help when they were in need. Looking back, they said, the situation wasn't only challenging — it was humbling, too. "When everything's taken away from you, what you're left with is ... what really matters," Sandy said. "The people that love us the most," Ashley said.

Ashley and Sandy experienced exile and were given hope by the people of God. If you are experiencing exile today, how can you turn to God for your hope through prayer and patience? How can you look to the birth of Jesus this advent season as a sign of God's ultimate work in a world in exile? And how can you offer hope to those around you also in exile?