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Singers of Hope: Ministry to Exiles

Bruce C. Birch

The ranks of pastoral ministry in local congregations have long been sprinkled with a few pastors who have trained for academic careers by earning PhDs but have nevertheless found themselves drawn to ministry in congregational life. Many of these have been trained in biblical scholarship. In my view, this has been a great gift to the church.

These scholar-pastors have raised the standards of teaching and preaching in the local church. They have mentored and helped train many colleagues in ministry. They have reminded scholarly colleagues that the Bible is first and foremost the church's book, and it only exists as canon because of the faithful witness of the people of God, collecting and passing on the biblical witness through generations of the faithful. Paul Watson is one of these scholar-pastors.

This is not surprising to me. Paul and I completed our doctoral training in Old Testament together at Yale University. We had almost all of the same classes and served together as teaching assistants for gifted professors. We were friends and colleagues, both deeply committed to the life of the church. But it was always evident to me that Paul had the heart of a pastor. Although he began his career serving in several academic posts, I was not surprised to hear that he eventually gravitated to the local church pastorate. I have stayed on an academic career path, but I sought ordination in the United Methodist Church because I wished to see my teaching as ministry, and I have been married to a United Methodist local church pastor for twenty-five years. In many ways, Paul and I have continued to share the twofold conviction that the best pastoring is solidly grounded in biblical understanding, and the best biblical teaching recognizes the Bible as not merely an ancient document but a continuing resource for disciples seeking to live faithfully in our world.

For this issue honoring Paul and his ministry, I want to offer a reflection on ministry in light of images drawn from Israel's experience of the Babylonian exile. There is much in the biblical witness to this experience that can inform ministry in our contemporary context. I can imagine Paul serving as a pastoral voice of hope in the context of his ministry, much as the prophets of the exile did for ancient Israel.

Babylonian Exile as Modern Metaphor

In 587 BCE, a Babylonian army broke through the walls of Jerusalem and destroyed the city. The temple was demolished and its treasures carried away. The Davidic kingship was ended. Most of the residents of Jerusalem were carried away to live in exile in Babylon, where they joined a large number of compatriots carried away ten years earlier. Prophets, particularly Jeremiah, had warned the leaders of Judah that they were on a self-destructive path, but these leaders persisted in self-serving agendas and false optimism: "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer 6.14 NRSV).¹

1. Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version except where otherwise noted.

Until recently, biblical scholarship and preaching in the life of the church have largely ignored the importance of the exilic experience and the postexilic period that followed it. This has been especially true in North America, because we have tended to think of exile in solely geographic terms.² Although there are many places in our world where the plight of displaced refugees is a daily, visible reality, this has not historically been the experience in the US context.

However, exile in the biblical experience is not simply geographic removal from a homeland, perhaps not even primarily so. Exile is loss of the symbols and institutions that give life meaning. The temple is gone; the kingship is gone; the culture is disrupted. The things counted on to give central meaning are no longer present or trustworthy. The people fear that even God may have abandoned them (see Lam 5.20–22). The mood in such times is characterized by grief, anger, and disorientation. People lose hope that the future holds much for them, and they settle for survival. There have been a number of voices in recent years suggesting that our current context has much in common with the exile experience.³ The recent economic crisis, growing political polarization, mass murders in our schools and churches, a growing elderly population—all these and more contribute to situations personal and social in which people feel cut off from “home,” the customary things that give life meaning. There are many in our midst settling for survival and living with their own crises of hope.

A more poetic image for the reality of exile in any generation comes from Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept
 when we remembered Zion.
 On the willows there
 we hung up our lyres.
 For there our captors
 required of us songs,
 our tormentors, mirth, saying,
 “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
 How can we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land? (Ps 137.1–4; my translation)

The implied answer to the final question in these verses is, “We can’t! There is no singing in this place to which we have come in our lives.” That’s what exile is really about—the times when the songs do not come. People in such circumstances merely work to survive; they cannot imagine that God’s songs can be sung there, or perhaps ever again. Every pastor knows that such times come in human lives in every generation, sometimes in individual circumstances, and sometimes in larger cultural realities.

Vocation in the Midst of Exiles

In the midst of the non-singers—those rendered voiceless and without hope—the vocation of God’s people, and particularly of the leaders of God’s people, is to give singing lessons! In the midst of the exiles in Babylon, there arose prophetic voices to sing the Lord’s song when the people themselves despaired of such singing. Jeremiah and Ezekiel both turned their messages entirely to hope after Jerusalem fell and the exiles were taken. The anonymous prophet of exile whose words are in Isaiah 40–55 turned his message entirely to hope addressed to despairing exiles: “Comfort, O comfort my people . . .” (Isa 40.1).

2. Some of this disregard is rooted in the residue of early-twentieth-century European scholarship, following the lead of Julius Wellhausen, that saw the prophets prior to exile as the high-water mark of OT religion and the development of religion in what Judaism calls the “Second Temple period” as a degeneration of biblical religion. This view can properly be understood as anti-Semitic, but its influence lives on.

3. See, for example, Bruce C. Birch, “Exile and Return,” chap. 8 in *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 280–320; and Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

These prophets were singers of hope in the midst of non-singers who had lost all hope that God's song could still be sung. I believe they can serve as models for leaders in the church in our own time, particularly for pastors who face preaching each week with the question, "Is there a word of hope from the Lord for us?" What enabled the prophets of the Babylonian exile to sing songs of hope when others could not? The exilic prophet in Isaiah 40–55 offers some clues to the foundations for hope that enabled him to sing the Lord's song in the midst of the non-singers.

Memory and Vision

The first foundation for hope for this exilic prophet lies in the dynamic interrelationship between memory and vision. Far from being captive to the paralysis of the present crisis, the prophet of Isaiah 40–55 based his message of hope on what God had done in the past and what he confidently believed God could do in the future.

Memory

Whatever the challenges of the present for the exiles of any generation, God's story of relationship to us does not begin in that moment, and the prophet drew on that insight to urge his exile listeners to remember what God had done:

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the LORD.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many. (Isa 51.1–2)

The prophet directed the exiles' memory all the way back to the beginning of God's promise to Abraham, the beginning of the specific story of God's people. God's story did not begin with the exiles in their crisis, just as it does not begin with us who read Scripture in our own crises. And this is a source of hope, because it speaks to the ongoing love and faithfulness of God. The prophet of the exile not only mentions Abraham and Sarah but also speaks of the event of exodus deliverance from Egypt (43.15–17), of God's wilderness guidance (40.3–5), of Noah (54.9), and of David (55.3). God's steadfast love (54.10) has never wavered and will redeem Israel from the crisis of Babylonian exile to live in new possibilities through the grace of God.⁴ Memory is a resource for God's people in any age who fear that God has forgotten them in times of crisis.

Memory is certainly an important resource for ministry in our own time. The images of our liturgies, our sermons preached on biblical texts, and the teaching of our Scriptures and traditions are all designed to retell the stories of God's grace that formed and constantly re-form us as the people of God.⁵ But the prophet knew that memory alone was not enough. Too often a single-minded focus on memory leads to nostalgia or escapism. Even the study of Scripture is not an end in itself. To focus on memory alone is to risk becoming what I refer to as a "fossil church," an extremely faithful witness to the past that is

4. It lies beyond the scope of this article to develop fully, but God's steadfast love is not negated by God's judgment. As many prophets warned, God's people are in exile because many, especially Israel's leaders, are guilty of disregard for God's covenant, and exile is understood by this prophet as judgment for sin. But the prophet announces God's forgiveness as a gift redeeming Israel's sin and allowing new beginnings in God's steadfast love (see esp. 43.25; 44.21–22).

5. See Bruce C. Birch, "Memory in Congregational Life," in *Congregations: Their Power to Form and Transform*, ed. C. Ellis Nelson (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 20–42.

incapable of being anything new for the future. The prophet of the exile knew this and placed memory in tension with vision.

Vision

The prophet who summoned Israel in time of exile to remember what God had done also proclaimed to those exiles as God's word:

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isa 43.19a)

See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.
Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth! (Isa 42.9–10a)

It was not enough to remember what God had done. The prophet challenged the exiles to dream dreams and see visions of what God would yet do. Remembrance of God's help in the past opens the eyes to see what God is making possible for the future. Exiles in every generation can boldly trust that God's work is not complete, for us or for our world. Even while the people of Jerusalem and Judah are living in bondage in Babylon, the prophet boldly declares that Babylon has no part in the future of God's people (see 45.20–47.15).

But vision needs the grounding of memory. It is memory of God's salvation story that enables recognition of what God is bringing into being as a new future. Vision alone is not enough. Without the grounding of memory, those building the future can become a "chameleon church," captured by fads, movements, or ideologies that are not compatible with what God has done.

What we learn from the prophet of exile in Isaiah 40–55 is that inhabiting the dynamic tension between memory on the one hand and vision on the other can free us from the tyranny of the present, whether we sit by the rivers of Babylon or struggle in the midst of our own crises of hope. Hope is born of confident trust that what God has done in our past to make salvation possible, God will do again—perhaps in surprising new ways—to make salvation visible for our future. This is worth singing about, and the prophet of the exile models that for every generation of faithful ministry.

God's Enduring Word

There is a second foundation for hope in the preaching of the prophet to Babylonian exiles in Isaiah 40–55—namely, his insight that hope ultimately arises not from the sum total of our own resources as God's people (or even God's pastors) but from our confidence in the reliability of God's word. Consider anew this well-known passage:

A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isa 40.6–8)

In the opening verse of this passage, the prophet seems to be sharing a moment when he felt called to proclaim something to the exiles of his generation, and his response was that he did not know what to say. I believe that the response continues through verse 7 (Hebrew does not have quotation marks); in his declaration that the people are withering just like the grass and flowers of the field, he is expressing his own anguish that he sees nothing around him that endures. How can he proclaim a trustworthy or renewing word to his people if everything around him is crumbling and decaying?

I believe that verse 8 in this passage is God's response to the prophet's anguish: "The grass *does* wither, the flower *does* fade; but the word of our God will stand forever" (italics added). Looking only at the things of this world, the sum of our own resources, we might despair before the challenges of our time and place. But look at the reliability of God's word and there is reason for hopeful proclamation. There are resources beyond our own.

The prophet comes back to this theme powerfully, for exiles in Babylon and for us, toward the end of his preaching:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa 55.10–11)

The prophet understands, and proclaims for every generation of witnesses in ministry to the present, that the giving of hope is not up to us. In every generation, we call attention to and join with what God is doing. God's word is the focus of our ministries of hope and renewal in every context.

These are the foundations of hope for the prophet to the Babylonian exiles, and they remain foundational for our ministries in the present generation. On these foundations the prophet builds a rich message of insight into God's workings that could be profitably explored more fully than this space allows.⁶ My intent has been to explore a set of themes from singing the Lord's song to Babylonian exiles that I am absolutely certain has been present in the ministry of Paul Watson, because these themes were already present when I first crossed his path as we were preparing together for ministries of God's word. No one could have been more confident that the remembered story of what God had done for Israel had something to say to a new generation who seldom knew the Old Testament as well as the New. No one could have trusted more deeply that God had new futures in store for God's people and God's world. No one could have regarded his own resources or the resources of the church with greater humility, trusting that it is God's word that endures and not our own. That a lifetime of ministry has demonstrated these insights in abundance is no surprise to me. I know that the ministry of Paul Watson has touched many lives with the grace of God.

And he would always give the credit to God. I can hear him reading this final beloved passage from the exilic prophet in utter confidence of its truth:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

6. See Bruce C. Birch, *Singing the Lord's Song: Isaiah 40–55*, Abingdon Lay Bible Studies (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981).

He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. (Isa 40.28–31)

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