

iSOULation 4

During 6th century BC. the Israelites experienced the Babylonian exile or Babylonian captivity. The Babylonians had conquered Judah and destroyed the Temple. The majority of the residents who lived through the battle were then moved (700 miles) to a new land, a new culture and a new way of life in Babylon. As a people the Israelites had been through worse than the Babylonian exile they were not enslaved, they were allowed to retain their religion, there is extra biblical evidence of rations of grains and oil distributed by Babylonian to some Israelites, they were permitted to set up their own Yeshivas or schools. That does not sound too dissimilar to our current situation we are creating new school environments, the sale of certain products are being rationed at the grocery store and we aren't free to move out and about as we please.

As they were forced to adapt to life in this new land, amidst other religions they grieved their "normal" way of life. Old Testament professor Donald Gowan writes of the psychological trauma those in exile endured Saying many must have been isolated individuals and "frantic with anxiety" We hear their emotions and their longing for the way life used to be in Psalm 137, "*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, we also wept, when we remembered Zion.*" We are also adapting and grieving. Things have no doubt caused us to weep. As coronavirus continues we have begun to assimilate to a new way of life the culture of Zoom meetings and happy hours, online Mass, and social distancing. We like the Israelites don't love these things they don't feel natural to us, but we are adapting. With these adaptations we experience a loss of the way things were – our Zion so to speak.

Amidst our exile from our normal life we have to acknowledge the things that we have lost and the grief that we are experiencing. The comfort of seeing our friends and family in person, of nights out and of being able to visit the lakefront in the sunny spring weather. We miss these things – they may not be extreme events, but they are a loss to us. This past week as it was announced that students in Illinois would not return to school to finish this academic year I've heard parents grieve on behalf of their children. Reminiscing about their own prom or graduation commenting on how they want their daughter or son to have these special experiences. Or they are sad that their child will miss out on playing sports or being in the school play. I imagine the Israelites in Babylon wanted things for their children too and while they didn't have to battle screen time they did what they could to foster learning, comfort and normalcy within their families. In fact one of the outcomes of the Babylonian exile was that smaller family groups rather than tribes became the emphasis once they were allowed to return to their homeland.

Amidst the Israelites loss of land, Temple and their standard way of life they maintained their religious identity. Adapting and grieving didn't mean giving up who they really were or what they believed in. While we feel the loss of our "Zion" hopefully we feel enough strength and divine support to hang onto what we believe. Sometimes changing

how we do things can feel like a loss, but maybe we can be inspired by the steadfast faith of those in exile. It was hard, they wept, they longed for their old way of life, but even in a foreign land they kept their faith in YHWH and religious piety. In our COVID captivity perhaps we can recapture and affirm our identity as children of God. No matter how far removed or isolated we may feel that has not and cannot be stripped from us.

Eventually the Persians conquered Babylon and the Israelites were allowed to return home. Like we imagine what we will do once we are no longer required to shelter in place and businesses re-open they likely looked forward to the day of their freedom. Imagining what they would do and how they would live their lives. Interestingly enough not everyone returned to Judah. The experience of exile had changed them so some returned to their homeland, some remained where they were and others settled in variety of geographical areas leading to the Jewish Diaspora. Each of us will be changed from our time of sheltering in place. How we return to our way of life will be different for each of us. Some of us will stay where we are, some will not go back to where we came from and others will likely embark out into new territory all of us hopefully realizing the presence of God no matter where this journey takes us.

1. How have you stayed connected to your faith and God during this time?
2. What things have you had to grieve or let go of?
3. What have you done well at adapting to?