***Living in Exile***

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**October 9, 2016**

The early years of my life were spent on a large family farm near the village of Pokagon, Michigan. Pokagon, which was located between the cities of Niles and Dowagiac, was near a large railroad yard, which was part of the New York Central Railroad. Our farm backed up on the main railroad line leading into the yards.

My ancestors had settled in this area, then the Northwest Territory, in 1818. Being among the area’s first settlers, they lay claim to a large portion of what would become Southwestern Michigan. However, when the United States Public Land Survey surveyed this area in 1829, the government did not recognize the claim and gave my family about 4000 acres of land.

Over the years, this original 4000 acres was broken up as fathers left portions to their sons. Most of the sons eventually sold their portions to others and the original claim grew smaller. At the time of my birth, the family farm was about 1000 acres in size. Living on the farm were my grandparents, my mother and father, and two uncles with their wives.

Upon my grandfather’s death, the farm was left in trust to my father as the first born with the stipulation that if the farm was ever sold the proceeds were to be divided equally among my grandfather’s sons and my grandmother. I was the first born in the next generation of this extended family but was quickly followed by cousins.

I can only describe my early life on the farm as idyllic. There was forest, fields, and a river to explore and time to play with my cousins. The family was tightly knit with the adults caring for the children without regard to whose children they were. As children, we ate and often slept at which ever house we happened to be.

I was probably 7 or 8 years of age before I realized that my parents’ house was somehow uniquely mine. This realization came because the decision had been made to sell the farm. One uncle moved to Niles and another moved to Dowagiac as did my grandmother. My parents and I moved to a community on Barron Lake.

The seeming vastness of the land of my early years was gone, replaced by a half acre plot of land surrounded by other houses. I no longer had the constant companionship of my cousins and was surrounded by strangers. I was a stranger in a strange land. I had been taken into exile and I was devastated.

At the time it seemed that my misery lasted a long time, but in reality within a year I had begun to make new friends and I grew and flourished in my new home. Throughout my life I moved and settled in several places, some by my choice, some by necessity. I never was able to return to my ancestral home which is now a subdivision. However, I have spent 35 years here in this place and am happy.

In the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, we learn that because of the evil done by the people of Judah, God had determined to hand them over to the rule of the Babylonians. In 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar II, king of Babylon captured the city of Jerusalem deposing king Jehoiachin and placed his uncle Zedekiah on the throne. Jehoiachin, his family, and 3000 other Judeans, including a number of high government officials, were taken as captives to Babylon.

The Kingdom of Judah under Zedekiah was made a tributary state of Babylon. It is during this time that Jeremiah’s letter was written to the exiles in Babylon. The letter was written in response to some prophets who were saying that the exile would end in two years and Babylon would be destroyed.

Jerimiah, speaking for God, repudiated these prophecies and in a radical statement advised the exiles to settle in Babylon and learn to live a normal life there. Even though the exiles despised their captivity, their future depended on their acceptance of it. If they would lead normal lives in peace, God would be with them and they would flourish.

Even though the exiles would not find it easy to accept captivity and what they had lost, sorrowing over what was gone would not restore what had been lost. The exiles had no control over the circumstances of their exile. However, they did have control over their thoughts and behaviors.

If they continued to have faith in God and believed in his divine providence, in time God would deliver them from their captivity. In the words of Isaiah, “those who wait for the LORD shall have their strength renewed, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31 NRSV)

Around the world to this day, there are people who experience exile. While some experience exile as the result of violence and warfare, many experience exile in smaller ways that are also disturbing to their lives. Think about your own life. Are their times when you have been taken to places you did not want to be?

Have you experienced a job transfer or the loss of a job which required you to move to a new city? Perhaps you have not had to physically move, but find yourself now in a culture that feels alien. In our modern world, we all are struggling with changes brought about by new technologies, the influx of new cultures brought by immigrants to our country, and changes in accepted cultural norms.

How you respond to these life challenges is important. Do you mourn what has been lost and yearn for its return? History moves on and the past is irretrievable. There is nothing I can do to change who I have been or return to that idyllic farm life of my youth. Yes, I miss the past, but there is nothing I can do to turn the clock back. In the same way you will never be able to reclaim your lost past.

We can refuse to accept where we have been led and become bitter and despondent or, like the Babylonian exiles, we can learn to live in our new place, trusting in God’s redemptive work. If we accept where God has taken us and remain faithful to Him, we may inspire others by our lives. Inspiring others, we may draw them into relation with God and shape a new future.

This can perhaps best be summed up in the words of Andrew Murray, a Dutch Reformed minister of the 19th and early 20th century:

1. He brought me here. It is by His will that I am in this straight place. In that I will rest.
2. He will keep me here in His love and give me grace to behave as His child.
3. He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me lessons He intends me to learn, and working in me the grace He means me to bestow.
4. In his good time, He can bring me out again. How and when He knows.