

Series: *Listening When You Don't Want To Hear*

Sunday November 21, 2010

EXILED...BUT NOT STRANDED

Jeremiah 29, Ezekiel 11, Daniel 4

1. Has anyone here **ever** felt displaced? I'll never forget the feeling of moving to Toronto from Punxsutawney, PA. I had experienced moving into totally different settings before—like when we moved from a small coalmining town in the mountains right into a rough part of the inner city. In my 20s, I lived out of a suitcase and slept in a different bed every night for a year. I moved from Pittsburgh to small town Kentucky—has anyone ever seen the movie, ***Deliverance...?***

-But when we moved from **Punxsutawney** to **Toronto** I was totally disoriented. I had sinned—oh yes—but I never had to apply for a **SIN** number! The **real** revelation to me on what a bean-eater I had become took place when Lori and I were invited to a Christmas desert. They told us that the dress was **casual**. In Punxsutawney, **casual** means clean jeans with no holes or tobacco stains. Well, we arrived, 'casual,' with all our kids... I'll say no more, But...***let me tell you a story about a man named 'Jed'...***

- a. There was another guy, Ezekiel, who lived 2500 years ago that I can relate to. He was a priest—and his dad was a priest. But Ezekiel's move wasn't voluntary—like mine. He was hauled off to another land by the foreigners who'd conquered his land. He lost his country, his job, his home, his customs—and in the middle of all this disequilibrium, his wife died. Instead of a change in churches—it was more like his entire religion had been dismantled. And ***that's*** the pain he writes from.

-See, for a priest like him—**everything** was laid out in the prescribed way; how the fires were lit, the bread was baked, the sacrifices were offered. In our terms, Ezekiel was the ultimate company man—and the descendant of 900 years of company men—who **all** did things the same way.

- b. Nebuchadnezzar, the emperor of Babylon didn't just conquer Jerusalem; he hauled it's best leaders 700 miles across the desert to Babylon. That wasn't all; he came back about 15-20 years later and obliterated the temple—the center of the Jewish religion.

-What do you do when everything that has characterized your life and your hopes for the future ceases to exist? When your people, your nation, your temple—and, it would seem, your God—is gone. What's left? Well, I'll **tell** you what's left. Emptiness, disequilibrium,—and, perhaps, despair.

2. Exiles like Ezekiel were brought into Babylon through the ***Ishtar Gate***. Ishtar was the violent goddess of war and sex—kind of the ***heavy metal goddess*** of that day. And it was clear to everyone—***you're in Ishtar's house now! Ishtar has won!***

-And it's **here** that God shows up! Ezekiel writes:

In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. (Ezekiel 1:1 TNIV)

I'm not going to read the entire vision—but it's spectacular; it's like God on multimedia, pyro-technic display in sensurround! The description of Ezekiel's vision goes on and on—and seems to get more and more extravagant. The one thing this prophet seems to focus on in this vision are **wheels—wheels within wheels**.

-Read this part with me:

As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not change direction as the creatures went. Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around. (Ezekiel 1:17-18 TNIV)

Don't you love that?

-Now. Think about it—why do you think there would be this emphasis on **wheels** in this vision? Wheels with **eyes**? If you take this at face value, it sounds like a Picasso painting. But the message is powerful! **God is on the move! Your God is not just in the temple—He's everywhere! Even Ishtar's House!**

3. There's something you need to know about three of major prophets in the Bible; Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel found themselves right in the middle of this wrenching disorientation where **everything** changes. And they all had different perspectives. Ezekiel, part of the priestly class, was at the center of power in Jerusalem when all this went down.

-Jeremiah was more of an outsider who spent years **warning** the leadership about the disaster that was coming. And then he was caught right in the middle of the whole mess—watching people get either slaughtered or starve to death. And he was an eyewitness of the final collapse and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

-Daniel, part of the royal family—probably a descendant of David, was captured and hauled off to Babylon as a young man—probably his early teens. He and three friends become part of a **re-education process** in Nebuchadnezzar's palace. And he writes from the perspective of an advisor to a pagan king.

- a. The burning question for all three of these guys was, "How is God going to fulfill his promise to His people—with no nation and no temple? I mean—if you lose your people, your land, and your Temple—you lose your God!"

-And maybe the question you're asking is, "Why are we talking about the exile, an event that took place 2500 years ago? Well, it's because just about everyone here knows what exile feels like! Exile is not about being moved to another geographic location; it's an experience of the heart. It's the experience of being dislocated. Disorientation.

-**Exile** is when someone close to you dies—and all the things you knew to be true—are no longer true. **Exile** is when you have a child, get married, experience profound success—or lose a job. Exile is when you get a divorce. Exile is when you weren't supposed to go bankrupt—but you did. Exile is when the test results come in—and you have cancer. **Dislocation**.

-And exile is not just an individual thing—not in the world we're living in now. Did anyone see this issue of **Time** magazine—called, **The Decade From Hell?** It started with the Y2K scare, moved into 9-11—then the Iraq War, the war in Afghanistan, the Boxing Day Tsunami, Katrina—and marched right into the financial collapse of the world market in September of 2008. The institutions that seemed to offer security and hope for the future—have dissolved. In it's wake is this numb sense that everything has changed—and we're not really sure what the new normal is.

- c. Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel—who **all** had their worlds devastated have this one message: God is **bigger!** God is not confused or worried. His plan has **not** been hijacked! Nothing stops God's Mission.

-Each of these prophets give us some insight on what God is up to in times like these. For example, Ezekiel gives us one of the keys to **not** being shattered by the experience of exile. After promising to bring them back home again, the Lord says through him:

I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God. (Ezekiel 11:19-20 TNIV)

-These people's hearts had grown cold and hard—which is why they didn't listen when God warned them about exile. See, when all the scaffolding of religion is in place—which is what Ezekiel was all about—people can go through the motions of serving God—and never engage their hearts. It isn't clear anymore **who** they're really serving—**prosperity—the idol du jour—or the Most High God?**

-When all the props are gone, people are forced to actually **choose** Who they're going to serve. If they want a heart that's real—that's sensitive to God's leadership, the God has to give them a **new spirit**. Then the **heart of stone** can be replaced with a **heart of flesh**.

- d. And what kind of heart you have determines what will happen to you in times of disequilibrium. Extreme pressure—like exile--has a **way** different effect on things that are hard and brittle than on things that are pliable. Let me use a visual that may help you see the difference.

-This is a ceramic bowl that's been fired in a kiln. It's **hard!** Now, can anyone take a wild guess as to what will happen to it when I exert extreme pressure on it—say, with a hammer? [**hit it**]. It's hard—but it's **brittle**.

-Let's try the experiment again—this time with a bowl that has **not** been fired. Apply extreme force [**hit it**—and there's a definite effect, but it **remains intact**. It can be molded—and remolded—and brought back into the shape of a bowl.
-Flexibility/softness is counterintuitive. We think the key to making it in tough times is to just be **tougher** than what we face. That if we **armor-plate** our hearts, we can make it through the pain and confusion of being displaced. The **truth** is that what doesn't bend—breaks! Shatters.

-The gift he received from the Presence of God—was feeling **relocated** instead of **dislocated**. He ends his book with these words: “**And the name of the city from that time on will be: THE LORD IS THERE.**” (Ezekiel 48:35 TNIV)
God dwelling with us—wherever mess we find ourselves in.

4. You see this message in Jeremiah, too. Jeremiah is called the **weeping prophet**. God's call on his life was a tough one—because he often paid for his unpopular message with his comfort—and it almost cost him his life. He watched his warnings go almost completely unheeded—and yet he had to live in the mess created by those who blew him off! As I mentioned, he had to watch as Nebuchadnezzar's forces destroyed his people, his city, and the temple of his God.

-Jeremiah faced something I haven't talked about a whole lot--**False prophets**. False prophets lied to the people and basically told them what they wanted to hear; that God would show up real soon, and that Jerusalem and the temple would be saved and Babylon defeated.

-Who **wouldn't** want to believe that? When the first exiles found themselves in Babylon, the false prophets said, “Don't unpack your suitcases—cause you're going home **real soon!**” When you're in the disequilibrium and pain of exile—that's exactly what you want to hear.

-Included in this response, Jeremiah writes some words you may be familiar with: **For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11 TNIV)** Those are **tremendous** words of comfort and hope! When we sent out announcements that we had adopted our daughter, Selina, that's the verse we quoted. And the message is clear; **all** plans belong to God—and He is at work in **every scenario**.

-Our problem is that sometimes we are arrogant enough to think that we know exactly what God's plans should look like—pretty much like **our** plans. But the **context** of this verse doesn't say that at all.

- a. And Jeremiah tells these people that God's plans were shockingly different than theirs. To a bunch of exiles who didn't want to unpack their suitcases in the new reality of their lives, Jeremiah says:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons

and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper... This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.” (Jeremiah 29:4-7, 10 TNIV)

-That’s quite shocking, isn’t it? God’s words of comfort are *not*, “Hang in. I know you feel dislocated and confused—but if you just hang on—I’ll bring back the good old days!” No, God says, “Settle into the new reality where you find yourself. Work in *that* context. **Seek the prosperity/i.e., the blessing of the city where you find yourself. Unpack your suitcase, plant your garden, move ahead with the expansion of your families—because God is with you—and will use you right there to carry on his plan—his mission!**

-Something else—did anyone notice, in God’s message, *Who* carried them into exile? **This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon...** They thought that it was Nebuchadnezzar who pulled that off—maybe while God wasn’t looking!

-The Babylonian’s had a plan for these transplanted people--to thoroughly assimilate them into their culture. But God had a plan, too. God’s plan—God’s *mission*—was to assimilate the Babylonians into *His* Kingdom! So He stuck his people right in the middle of this nation—to *bless* it; be a light to it! What was going on wasn’t the *Babylonian* plan; it was *His* plan! As tough as it seemed, it would ultimately give them a hope and a future.

- b. Here’s the deal. Remember what Ezekiel revealed—that God was right with them there? God was making His home among them—right there. Their changed hearts would give them the capacity to be flexible; to *love* Him—not just make a religion of Him. And they would feel *his* love. When you’re with someone you love, exile—homesickness doesn’t feel quite so bad, does it? When we moved from Punxsutawney to Toronto, everything was different—including our *house*. But our *home* was still the same. Lori and I had each other; our family had the same history—and the same love.

-The night before Jesus died and launched his disciples into chaos, he said—don’t let your hearts be troubled—and don’t be afraid. Then, a little later: **“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” (John 14:23 TNIV)** That is an *amazing* promise! It echoes what Ezekiel said. We can be *far* from home—but we’re always *at home* with God. And his plan for a hope and a future includes using us *right where we find ourselves!*

5. And that brings us right to Daniel. Imagine that you’re in your teens, that you’ve watched most of your family die—and then are hauled hundreds of miles away from home with a few of your friends. And now you are expected to cooperate with a re-

education process that will make you usable to the nation that destroyed everything familiar and flipped off your god. What would you do?

-I'm **always** fascinated by Daniel. He's bright, diplomatic, offers intelligent alternatives to things that violate his core beliefs—and seems to find the favour of whomever he's with! Daniel doesn't flip people off—he carefully chooses which mountain he's going to die on. Daniel doesn't just survive—he **thrives**—and influences the world of his day!

- a. Daniel's first chance at influence comes when Nebuchadnezzar has a dream that he's desperately frustrated with and troubled by. Daniel sees this as an opportunity for His God to do something great. So, believing that he's there in the Babylonian palace for a purpose—he offers to help. And this was his defining moment.

-What he finds out is that the God of the Universe had given this ruthless king who worshipped Ashtar a vision of all the empires that would come after him. And **then** God would intervene; the ruler of all nations would show up! Can anyone guess **who** that might be? It was a prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ--the Jewish Messiah, Jesus.

- b. And this whole thing placed Daniel in a place of incredible influence as Nebuchadnezzar's chief advisor. Well, Nebuchadnezzar has another dream. This time it's a warning for him—this arrogant, powerful king. In essence, God says, "Unless you humble your pride and change your ways—**you're going down hard!** Daniel has both the grace and the courage warn him:

Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."
(Daniel 4:27 TNIV)

-Want to know who actually wrote those words? Neb!

King Nebuchadnezzar sent this message to the people of every race and nation and language throughout the world: "Peace and prosperity to you! "I want you all to know about the miraculous signs and wonders the Most High God has performed for me..." (Daniel 4:1-2 NLT)

-Who would **ever** think that God would be at work in the heart of a violent, pompous ruler; someone who had exiled God's people, taken over their country and destroyed their temple—who then comes to believe in their God and writes an **entire chapter in their Bible!** How cool is that!?! Something on the order of Osama Bin Laden becoming the next great Christian evangelist!

- c. And Daniel's influence didn't stop there. His name was legendary in Babylon. Get this—he didn't just serve as an advisor to Nebuchadnezzar and his son; Daniel was an advisor to Cyrus—the Persian ruler of the next empire that

conquered Babylon! He was known as the man in whom the ***Spirit of the Holy Gods lives!***

-The prophecy revealed to Daniel about what would happen next until the coming of the Messiah is **so** detailed that some scholars have said, “This **couldn’t** have been written in 500 BC. No one could predict the coming of the Medes and Persians, the Greeks and the Romans in that kind of detail!” But, then, that’s the point isn’t it? God is in control—in charge of. All history. Every person. Every ruler. The people who love you—the people who hate you; the people who help you—the people who try to destroy you.

- d. The end of Nebuchadnezzar’s original dream was about a kingdom that God would build—that would pulverize to dust all the other kingdoms—and then fill the earth. This pagan king had absolutely no idea that that God who lived in Daniel—who gave him the dream—and who entrusted him with every shred of power he had—would step onto the planet in about 550 years and make it possible for **every** person in every nation to come to Him. And when He did, it’s likely that it was Daniel’s influence that caused magi, wise men, to make the same trip—only the **other** way—crossing 700 miles of desert. And they would show up in Jerusalem, Daniel’s hometown, asking, “Where is this One who has been born the King of the Jews? We saw His star in the East—and we’ve come to worship Him!”

6. We find ourselves in exile, don’t we? The overwhelming message for us is that God is on the move! God is not somewhere else—you know, at some cool church in California—or some happenin’ ministry in Manhattan. That’s not what we think, is it? Our thoughts are more like, “Sorry—but God never made it to the cubicle farm where I live! God has never shown up in the halls of **this** university! You mean, right here—in the back room of this company preparing stuff to ship? I don’t think so!”

-But that’s not the message here. Apparently—**apparently**--God is **right in the middle of the places where we least expect Him!** And He’s not just **there** hanging out; chilling—He has a plan. And if you belong to Him—you’re part of that plan. See, God has His People everywhere!

- a. Maybe you don’t want to hear the message Jeremiah gives—but friends, it’s for you and me! Let me read it again—just so we’re clear.

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce...Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”
(Jeremiah 29:5-7)

-Sometimes the church has been guilty of teaching, “Just hunker down, circle the wagons, keep your nose clean—don’t unpack your suitcase—cause someday soon Jesus will come and scoop you up to the great escape in the sky!” We think, “I **like** that plan! **Beam me up, Scotty!**” We get **tired** of a world that just grinds out more sadness every day.

-I believe as much as anyone that Jesus *is* coming back—and it could be ***anytime!*** But the plan, friends, is the ***Mission of God.*** He’s at work ***everywhere***—in the people and places you’d least expect! And He wants ***everyone*** and ***everything*** back!

-Jesus calling on our lives is to be salt and light. Salt flavours and preserves and creates thirst; light brings clarity and color. The plan is not for us to be just absorbed into and corrupted by the culture—but to live like Daniel—with such distinction that even a pagan king got it, “The Spirit of the Holy Gods lives in him!

- b. Instead of just ***surviving*** exile, God says to these people, “...seek the ***peace and prosperity*** of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (Jeremiah 29:5-7)

-When Jeremiah tells them to seek the peace and prosperity of the city, you need to know that he wasn’t a health and wealth preacher. When he says to pray and work for the peace of the city, the word he used was ***shalom.*** Not just cease fire or peace of mind—but peace with God, with others and with creation. ***Help this city to FLOURISH!***

-And God would say to us, “My goal is ***ultimately*** that my Kingdom, all the goodness and wholeness and peace and grace of it all—would come there to earth! To ***your*** place!” And maybe God would say to me—and to you, “I want you to engage in your work, your business, your culture, the arts, education, care for the poor, technology, how you live with your neighbour, how you handle your finances—in such a way that your community, your city—the place where you find yourself exiled—can flourish as God intends for a city to flourish. And ***then*** when you talk about the Good News of Jesus—it will make sense!

-What if the people who find themselves around us would say, perhaps like those around Daniel, “You know, it’s a funny things about the people who follow this God—I don’t believe in Him. Not for a minute. I don’t hold to their code or their belief system—but ***I’m glad they’re here! Our city would be a darker, poorer, nastier place if they weren’t here!***

- c. You need to know, this morning, that God cares about Toronto—about Markham, Scarborough, Ajax, Pickering, Richmond Hill, Stouffville—and Barrie. God cares about IBM, Wal-Mart and Food Basics. He cares about U of T, Centennial College and Markham-Stouffville Hospital. He cares about the homeless people who congregate at the Roger’s Centre—***and*** the CEOs who sit in the box seats.

-The interesting thing about Toronto is the most people come here to get something. We are the most cosmopolitan city in the world—which means that people come here from places all over the world—all looking to ***take, to get discovered, to get rich, to get free health care, to get a job.***

-What if we were to **give** to it—rather than see what we can get out of it? What if, instead of trying to get people to stop sinning—which is **not our job**—we were able to experience grace—and live **graciously**? What if we were to dream—not about doing something great in some other cool place—but about how we could be salt and light and have a transforming influence where we **already are!**

7. God is on the move! God is with us right in the middle of our exile—our feelings that everything is changing around us—all the awkwardness and pain of disorientation. And He offers a heart of flesh that is warm and sensitive and flexible. And His words of comfort—right in the place where we sometimes find ourselves, confusion, loss, loneliness—are:

For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”
(Jeremiah 29:11 TNIV)