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Lent 4 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Exile and Return from Our Babylons”

“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise . . . but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” Or in other words, God is not a cantankerous hothead who’s ready to blow at the drop of a hat! He is, as we have been singing in the Divine Service on Sundays, *“gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”* (Gospel Verse) For consider: In the days of Noah, He gave the world’s population 120 years to repent before liquidating them. He put up with Nineveh’s murderous ways for many a moon before sending Jonah – and then He gave them 40 *more* days to repent before His shoe would drop. He was patient with Jacob’s deceptions, Solomon’s womanizing, and – most amazing of all, the example of divine forbearance – *He’s patient even with the likes of you and me.*

But there is a limit. Not with His *love*, but with His *patience*. There comes a point when our heavenly Father puts every kid’s least favorite proverb into practice, namely: *“Spare the rod, spoil the child.”* Just ask Israel how that paternal rod of discipline feels. For over 200 years, God bombarded His people with prophet after prophet, all preaching variations of the same sermon: repent and return, or God will turn His face away from you. And so from Amos to Isaiah, Hosea to Jeremiah, they all read Israel’s obituary, but were greeted in return by laughter, scorn, or even death. *Yadda, yadda, yadda. We’ve heard this stuff before. The last prophet said the same thing, and you know what, Rev. Chicken Little? The sky hasn’t fallen yet! . . .* Oh, but it did fall. When the Babylonian super-power under King Nebuchadnezzar came down, bulldozed Jerusalem, ground the temple to dust, and hauled off Israel as POWs. They went from the land of milk and honey to the sewers and cesspools of Babylon, their ears, no doubt filled with the echoes of divine words and warnings gone unheeded. And so homeless and hopeless into exile they went.

But no, that’s not quite right. Homeless, yes. Hopeless, no. For just as the Lord had informed Abraham how many years Israel would be stuck in Egypt (Gen 15:13), so He had told Jeremiah how long His people would be forced to call Babylon home-*sour*-home (Jer 25:11-12). It would be 70 years. Plenty of time to take stock in how much they had invested in idolatry, in how they had rebelled, in how they delighted in their sin. For the wages of rebellion is exile . . . but the gift of God is homecoming, in God’s time and in God’s way, and all in grace.

And so, *according to grace*, Persia replaced Babylon as the number one world power. And *according to grace*, Cyrus, king of Persia, issued an edict that all exiled Israelites were free to head home. And *according to grace*, men such as Ezra stepped into Moses' shoes to lead the children of Israel home. For that's the kind of God Israel had. And that's the kind of God you have too. For He is the same yesterday, today, tomorrow, next year, and forever. A God who loves enough to discipline, but always measures it according to His grace and plans for its end. And so He provides Noah with an ark for the salvation of his household. He brings Abraham out of exile. He takes Jacob by the hand and brings him back to his fatherland. He escorts Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. He pulls His people out of the quicksands of Babylon and sets them again on the solid ground of Canaan. And He has done the same for you, no matter what or where your own Babylon may have been.

For what is *your* Babylon? Is your Babylon the land of addiction, captive to all those things that you think you cannot live without? Or maybe your Babylon is the land of pleasure, a captivity to chasing after whatever can put a smile on your face. Or is your Babylon simply the going-through-the-motions life, a captivity covered by the veneer of a smile and well-practiced laugh, but which underneath is emptiness and despair? What in this world has descended upon you and taken you captive? Robbing you of your joy, your life, and making you a POW? Or what Babylons have you seen descend upon others? Does all seem homeless and hopeless?

We have a deliverer. A prophet greater than Moses, greater than Ezra, greater than all who have come before. Who, according to grace, does not leave us in exile, but has planned for its end. In His time, and in His way. And so upon our Babylons, the kingdom of God descends. Not in a spectacular show of power and might, but in a person, a man, come to us to lead us home. A man born of a virgin, hung on a cross, and raised from the dead. A man who is more than just a man, but the very Son of God, who comes to us today in words and water and bread and wine, to set us free. He tears down your prisons and all that seeks to hold you captive, and keeps the enemy at bay. He makes bitter the false pleasures of this world, that we find pleasure and joy only in Him. And He is not content to merely take away your sin and death – He also fills you with His life, that you may be content, no matter what your circumstances. To know that you do really matter to God, and that your life, your job, your marriage, your children, your all, really and truly matter to Him. To know that in all you do, He is active, using what you do, to do good to and for your neighbor.

And so whatever your Babylon, whatever that place of captivity and exile, it cannot keep you captive – you for whom Jesus came, lived, and died. His crucifixion is the sledgehammer

that pounds away at every wall that bars you in. For just as Samson conquered his foes by once tearing the gates of a city from the earth and carrying them high on a hill (Judges 16:3), so has the One greater than Samson done the same, *conquering His foe and ours* by tearing down the gates of hell through His cross. Tearing down the gates of every Babylonian addiction, pleasure, and lifeless life, to deliver you and bring you home. He did not rest until it was done. And He will not rest until it is done for you. All according to grace. According to His plan. In His time and in His way.

And so we live in hope and confidence. Exiles do not last forever. He has taken captivity captive. He is slow to anger, quick to forgive, and always, *always* eager to welcome home. And that's the way He is, well, because that's the way He is with you and for you in Christ Jesus, your Saviour. And He will not change. Not ever. He is the God who is not against you, but on your side. Not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. And so He is working. In you, through you, for you, for others. That you never be homeless, and never hopeless. That you fear no Babylons, no matter how long and deep they seem to be. The One who is in you is greater. And He has conquered them all for you. The kingdom of God has come upon you in Jesus Christ. Welcome home.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.