

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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Richard Baker

## Sermon: Coming Home Different: Analogous Indwelling

Focus: Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.—Psalm 139: 23-24

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire was ***the sound of the thinnest stillness***. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”—1 Kings 19:11–13

### First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 137

Have you ever noticed that we have two different ways of telling time? They’re related, but they’re different.

The first is by minutes, hours, days, months and years, all of which are based on the rotation of the earth, and its revolution around the sun; the second is by significant, life-defining, or even epoch-defining, events.

My parents belonged to the WWII generation—so for them it was “before the war,” and “after the war.” I can remember as a little boy, playing underneath my Grandma’s kitchen table as they told the old stories “well, that was right after the war, so it must have been—what?—Christmas of 1946 or 1947?”—“Well, it was before Bobby was born, so it must have been 46.” And it’s not just large historical and cultural events, but personal ones, too. I know parents who divide time into “BC” and “AC”—right, “before children” and “after children.”

And of course for us, now, “BC” and “AC” have taken on a new meaning: “Before Covid” and “After Covid.” “Oh that was right before Covid, so it must have been—what?—February of 2020.”

The people of ancient Israel were no different. For them, the defining event was the Babylonians conquering Jerusalem in 587 BCE, when, after a long and dreadful siege, the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, marches into the city, razes its walls, burns large sections of it, and (worse yet) destroys the Temple, Solomon’s temple, the center of their worship, of their lives, the very house of God.

And then, worse still, the Babylonians round up the most prominent of Jerusalem’s surviving citizens—the leaders and the learned, the businesspeople and the skilled artisans, *and* all their families—and deport them to Babylon, more than 1600 miles away, where they remain, worst of all, for some 50 years, in what comes to be known as

the “Babylonian Captivity.” And so the ancient Israelites “BC” and “AC”: “Before Captivity” and “After Captivity.”

The Psalm I’m about to read—Psalm 137 was written *during* the Babylonian Captivity. And yet, through the centuries, it has spoken to all kinds of people in all kinds of situations. People have read themselves into this Psalm because it expresses their own heartsickness—a very human longing for home, for God, and for peace.

*Except* . . . except for the last few verses, and especially the last one, which tragically express sentiments all too prevalent among us human beings. Often, preachers who read this Psalm, stop at verse 6, but I’ll read the whole Psalm. Listen now for God’s Word, Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the LORD’s song  
in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.

Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem’s fall,  
how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!”

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
For what you have done to us!

Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!

Second Scripture Lesson: Nehemiah Chapters 8 and 9 (selected verses)

During their captivity in Babylon, the ancient Israelites did not forget God; nor did God forget them. God's Word came to them through prophets, most notably the prophet Isaiah, a word that promised a return to Jerusalem:

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
A voice cries out:  
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together.

Now, for us, when we read ourselves into those words, they speak of the coming of Jesus, especially in Handel's Messiah. But for the ancient Israelites in Babylon, they were about "AC," that is, life after captivity. That highway in the wilderness?—it will span the 1600+ miles back to Jerusalem.

And when they do get back to Jerusalem, there's work to be done—lots of work: to rebuild the city—its walls and especially the temple. That work is recounted in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. But even more pressing is the work of rebuilding their community. After so many years, so much disruption, so much trauma, who are we as a people, as God's people?

To answer that question, they turned to God's Word as written in the Books of Moses and especially in the Book of Exodus, which recounts the story of the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt, their wanderings in the wilderness for 40 years, and their eventual arrival in the promised land.

To set the scene: the people are all gathered together in the town square, by the gate, and Ezra stands up and reads to them from the Scriptures. And as he does, he invites them—urges them—to read themselves into that story into that story in the form of a prayer. Listen now for God's Word, reading from the book of Nehemiah, Chapters 8 & 9:

All the people gathered together into the square by the gate; They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding.

And Ezra said: “You are the LORD, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you. You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and you have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous.

You saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea. You performed signs and wonders. And you divided the sea before them, so that they passed through the sea on dry land; you led them by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the way in which they should go.

You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known your holy sabbath to them and gave them commandments and statutes and a law through your servant Moses. For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them.

Now therefore, our God—for you are a gracious and merciful God, the great and mighty and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love—do not treat lightly all the hardship that has come upon us.

### Sermon

In Bucket-List Books, we’re reading *Moby-Dick*. It’s a fish story—a big fish story. But I’ve learned a lot from it.

So let me tell you, the next time . . . the next time I’m in my mid-20’s in the middle of the 19th-century, in Nantucket, and I’m considering signing on for a whaling voyage, with my new best friend, a tatted-all-over South Sea Islander named, Quequeeq, on a ship named “The Pequod,” whose captain is a mysterious man named Ahab, whom I’ve never laid eyes on, and is rumored to have lost a leg to a huge white whale on his last voyage, and about whom I’ve been warned, by a self-styled prophet named Ezekiel shrieking at me in the street . . . the next time all that happens to me, let me tell you . . . I’m not going anywhere near that ship.

OK, that’s a ham-handed way to read myself into the story. But one way or another we do read ourselves into stories—at least the ones that grab us, that move us. We identify with the characters and their situations and relate to them.

So back to *Moby-Dick*. Our narrator (who asks that we call him Ishmael) makes a point of telling us that all the signs of danger and eventual disaster were all right in front of him before he ever signed on to the Pequod. But he did anyway, choosing to ignore them, explaining them all away, without thinking, without allowing himself to think, willfully. And he says that we human beings are very much prone to this kind of willful

self-deception—what psychologists today call, “confirmation bias.” Hmmm . . . maybe I can relate to Ishmael, after all.

One way or another we do read ourselves into stories . . . In fact, there are stories, classic stories, about characters who read themselves into stories, most notably, the Man of La Mancha, Don Quixote, who has his head full of medieval romances about knights in shining armor on powerful steeds who slay monsters and rescue damsels in distress.

So what does Don Quixote do? He puts a metal washbasin on his head, a pasteboard visor over his eyes, and rides off on his broken-down old nag to tilt with windmills, all the while believing they are—really seeing them as—monsters.

Which is ridiculous of course and has no possible application whatsoever to our lives, unless . . . Well, unless of course like me you spent your teenage years watching James Bond movies. And I mean he was just so cool . . . his cars were so awesome and women!? They just couldn't resist him.

And so there I was wearing my blue and yellow striped rugby shirt white straight-leg Levi “cords,” driving my mother's 1973 orange Chevrolet Nova hatchback trying to get a date: “My name's Baker, Rich Baker.” Sigh . . . Don Quixote wasn't the only one tilting at windmills. One way or another we do read ourselves into stories—the only questions are which ones and whether we do it well or poorly . . . or well, as in my case, ridiculously.

Call it “analogous indwelling”—this process of reading ourselves into stories, in which we get inside the story, and the story gets inside us, in which we come more and more to see the world and ourselves in terms of the story, in which we identify with characters and their situations, drawing analogies between them and us, between their situations and our own—call it, if you will, analogous indwelling.

A more serious example: in our Sunday School class during Lent, we're reading *Silence*, a novel by the 20th-century Japanese author, Shusaku Endo. It's set in 17th-century Japan, when early Japanese converts to Christianity were being brutally persecuted. The story is told through the eyes of Sebastian Rodrigues, a Portuguese Jesuit priest hiding in the mountains of Japan from where he witnesses the torture and the deaths of these converts. Moved, as well as deeply disturbed by what he sees, Rodrigues wonders why God remains unmoved by it—why is God's silent? Hence the novel's title.

But last week, one class member asked: isn't Rodrigues being a little simplistic, even naive, here? What does he expect—God to speak from the clouds in a booming voice? I mean maybe, sometimes . . . But God speaks in other, subtler, ways, too.”

A good question, which led us back to the story of Elijah in the Bible where God speaks not in the wind, not in the earthquake, and not in the fire, but in *the sound of the thinnest*

*stillness*. Which led us to ask how God might be speaking to Rodrigues in the sound of the thinnest stillness without him being aware of it. Which led us to ask how God might be speaking to us in the sound of the thinnest stillness without our being aware of it.

In other words, we were analogously indwelling the Elijah story to analogously indwell the novel, *Silence*, which as complicated as it might sound, was actually quite simple, and a lot of fun.

One way or another we do read ourselves into stories—we identify with the characters and their situations and relate to them—the only questions are which stories and whether we do it well or poorly.

Which brings me back to the story of the ancient Israelites who have returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. Ezra reading to them from the Book of Exodus. Like their ancestors in Egypt before them, these Israelites too had suffered years and years—generations—of hardship, oppression, and heartbreak.

And like those same ancestors they longed to go home (“by the waters of Babylon we wept”), home through the wilderness to the promised land—and like their ancestors in the wilderness they wondered whether they would live to see that promised land.

They did. But once they did get back to Jerusalem, it was different: a city in ruins. They had to rebuild the city, its walls and the temple. And they were different—they had come home different: defeat and the years of exile had changed them, shaken them, caused them to doubt who they were and what they were about. But for all that difference, Ezra assures them that God has been with them throughout, and that God is still God:

*You are the LORD, you alone; you made heaven and all the earth and all that is on it. To all, you give life; the host of heaven worships you. You are a gracious and merciful God, great, mighty and awesome, keeping covenant and steadfast love and you do not treat lightly all the hardship that has come upon us.*

So Ezra invites the ancient Israelites to analogously indwell the Exodus story in their **AC**, that is “After Captivity.” And by the way, the ancient Israelites are hardly only ones to have done this. Through the centuries, the Exodus story has been the defining story for innumerable people and peoples, including, the pilgrims and other religious refugees who came to North America in the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as the African-Americans who were enslaved here: “Go down, Moses, go down, Moses, let my people go.”

Like the ancient Israelites returning from Babylon, they too read themselves into the Exodus story and so recognized that whatever might befall them, they too were in the hands of a gracious and merciful God, great, mighty and awesome, keeping covenant and steadfast love.

But please notice: Ezra did NOT say anything about smashing little ones against rocks. God is the gracious and merciful sustainer of life, not the instrument of our destructive desire for vengeance. And so as Ezra speaks to the ancient Israelites in the town square, the last lines of Psalm 137 are—in the sound of the thinnest stillness—that is, in the hearts—silently corrected.

In his book, *Reflections on the Psalms*, C.S. Lewis observes that the psalms are first of all prayers, and as such, they are conversations with God. And in such conversations—in the sound of the thinnest stillness—God often quietly corrects us, re-directs our desires, re-shapes our hearts. Thus as Lewis sees it, what should be bashed against the rock is not our enemies' children, but all things that keep us from God, including our desire for vengeance and our hatred for our enemies.

That's why we need to read those last few verses of Psalm 137: so that our thoughts, too, will be corrected, and our hearts, too, redirected. As the Psalmist also prays: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

And therein lies our hope "Before Covid," "After Covid" or regardless of Covid, namely, that God will search our hearts, test our thoughts, and lead us in the way everlasting. In other words, that God will teach us and guide us as we read ourselves into His stories—as we analogously indwell them—so that we are led in the way everlasting.

This Spring, during the seasons of Lent and Easter, as we come home different, in this, our "AC," it's my hope that we will analogously indwell some of those stories where people come home different: whether it is Jesus coming home to Galilee after being tempted in the wilderness; or the Israelites coming home from Babylon; or Ruth and Naomi coming home from Moab to Bethlehem; or the Prodigal Son coming home to his father; or Mary Magdalene running home to the disciples to tell them the great good news of Jesus' resurrection; or the two disciples skipping and dancing home from Emmaus; or Peter coming home to Jesus on the beach—in any and all of these stories, it's my hope and prayer that will come home different After Covid, that we will see ourselves in these stories and thus be assured that, as different as we are, and everything else is, God is still God.

In a moment, five of our young people will confirm their faith. Confirmands, I wonder whether you will be called "the Covid Generation" the way my parents' generation was called "the World War II generation." I know that may sound awful right now, but maybe not. Maybe one day it will be a term of honor, and **you** will be called the greatest generation because of the courage, perseverance, and wisdom you developed through all of this.

I don't know; I can't say; I can't predict. But I will say this: in your confirmation statements that you gave to Session this past Tuesday night, several of you spoke of

Westminster as your home. One of you wrote, “I have been truly blessed to be part of this community.”

Another wrote: “Westminster makes me feel welcome because I have my church friends . . . I feel safe at Westminster because I can talk freely about my beliefs and I can talk about any of my concerns or struggles with an adult.”

I want to tell you that warmed my heart; and I’m grateful to all the parents and grandparents, teachers and pastors, youth advisors and mentors, and all your friends, who contributed to that. And I want to say that this *is* your home, you’re always welcome here—come home anytime. Wherever your life journeys take you, however different you may become (and that’s a good thing) however different Dayton may be or this church may be, come home here anytime: God is still God—

*You are the LORD, you alone; you made heaven and all the earth and all that is on it. To all, you give life; the host of heaven worships you. You are a gracious and merciful God, great, mighty and awesome, keeping covenant and steadfast love and you do not treat lightly all the hardship that has come upon us.*

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.