

Wicker Park Lutheran

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With today's gospel passage, we start to understand the cosmic proportion of what happened at the nativity. What it meant for Jesus- who was with God at the very creation of the universe- to be born in a fleshy baby human body.

Accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke tell us about the type of world he was born into. A world where two parents had to question their options as they fled a power-hungry emperor. A world where a young unwed mother had to fear for her safety because of societal expectations. A world where barren women like Elizabeth were told they were not as important, that they were valued less.

Scholar Walter Brueggemann describes these types of experiences, times filled with despair and when it is difficult to find hope, as situations of "exile."<sup>1</sup> He says that the world that Jesus was born into was one of exile. Everything was far from what it should be. Everyone was far from any sense of being at home.

I do not know what actual exile is like, but I wonder if we can't all relate to this feeling of not being fully at home and when it's hard to find hope.

A lot of us during the pandemic have experienced what it means to not fully be ourselves or to be able to do the things that we used to do. Or go the places we used to go.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Texts for Preaching, Year B* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2014) Kindle Location 1664.

But if I'm honest with myself, even before the pandemic, there were many times I didn't feel 100% at home with myself. Times that Negative messages picked up by traumatic experiences or the culture at large led me into experiences of exile. Messages like "I don't belong," or "I'm not good enough" made me feel far from others, far from help, far from hope.

Mental health specialist Jamie Marich explains that many of us hold unhealed wounds around core beliefs that are deeply rooted inside ourselves. She says these core beliefs tend to be about five areas- safety, responsibility, value, power, and choice. Perhaps you can relate to one or more of these core beliefs that manifest themselves in messages like: "I'm always in danger, I should have known better, I am worthless," Or perhaps you struggle with messages like, "I cannot succeed, [or] I have no options."<sup>2</sup>

These types of deep-seated messages that come to us at all hours can keep us from taking risks, speaking up, reaching out, forgiving ourselves and others. They keep us in a kind of exile as they don't allow us to be 100% at home in our own bodies and they keep us from imagining new possibilities for ourselves and for the world. They keep us in a type of exile.

Luckily, Christmas shows us that NO exile- either politically forced, culturally-imposed, or self-perpetuated- is too big for God to bring new life to.

John reminds us how God's love did not just stay at a cosmic level, but it came to the most local and intimate level it could.

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<sup>2</sup> Jamie Marich, *Process Not Perfection: Expressive Arts Solutions for Trauma Recovery* (Ohio:Creative Mindfulness Media, 2019), 7.

John says: “The word of God became flesh.” The Greek here could also be understood as literally “tenting” or “tabernacling” – which can refer to when God was with the Israelites as they wandered in the desert and God pitched God’s tent as they moved from place to place.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, when the Word of God becomes flesh, the Word of God makes its **home** among exiled people in the desert AND in first century Palestine when God was born as baby Jesus. God no longer was just a God *beyond* this world- somewhere *out there* in the cosmos-

God made a home on earth and at the same time, God brought *new life* and *new possibilities* into the despair and abandonment of exile experiences. Those who received Jesus, found home in the midst of exile and were gathered into God’s expansive community of love- to be Children of God and to “receive grace upon grace.”<sup>4</sup>

The word of God *becoming* flesh was an act **AGAINST** exile. Again echoing Walter Brueggemann, he says: “**Christmas**, is an act against exile.”<sup>5</sup>

In Jeremiah- God created new life during exile. God gathered the people in who were in THE MOST difficult situations. God called in the blind, the lame, those with child and even *women in labor*. People who never thought they would have a home, find a home again.<sup>6</sup> They find NEW life and possibilities together in God’s community.

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<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, Kindle location 1809.

<sup>4</sup> John 1:16, NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, Kindle Location, 1664.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Kindle location 1674.

Today too, the Word of God continues to make its home in our lives and offer NEW life in the midst of exile experiences. God desires to bring the possibility of healing and of something new in the midst of our unhealed wounds and the negative messaging that comes with them.

Especially this time of year, when everyone is making New Year's Resolutions, It's so easy for that negative messaging to flare up and pressure us to pick out every flaw and imperfection we have.

I'm not saying we should not try to improve, but what if as we seek healing of our wounds - of course using all the spiritual and mental health resources at our disposal – WHAT IF we realize that on *every* stage of the healing journey, Jesus offers us home. He offers us grace upon grace and offers a *community* of love-where all are broken, yet STILL called Children of God.

The God of the cosmos broke through the complexity of the world and can break through the messiness of our psychology and lives too. Home is within reach. Which means that we can live the promise of new possibilities even in the midst of healing. And in the midst of experiences of exile.

In a moment we'll take communion together- where bread and wine are a physical reminder of God's tenting with us. God becoming flesh. Each week, God brings God's universe-sized love and grace, home to us. May receive the "grace upon grace" offered to us here and now.

AMEN.