

**Sermon: Hope in Exile - Advent 1 November 28, 2021 - Jeremiah 29, 1, 4-14**  
**Rev. Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON**

On the night of Saturday November 10, 1979, CP Rail Train 54 began its journey with a string of freight cars on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in the Northern United States. The train crossed into Canada picking up more cars in Sarnia and Chatham; among those cars were a tank car filled with 90 tons of chlorine, and 39 cars filled with butane and propane. The now 106-car train rolled out of Chatham with its three-man crew, pulled by three locomotives clipping along at 80 kph, on what should have been an uneventful trip to Toronto.

Passing through southwestern Ontario, heat began to build up in an improperly lubricated wheel on the 33rd car. Residents in Milton Ontario living near the train tracks, reported seeing sparks arcing into the sky as Train 54 passed by. Now in the suburbs west of Toronto, the sparking wheel came off, the train left its tracks. Propane tankers overturned and began to burn; an explosion roared 1500m into the sky. The ground shook and the night sky lit up like it was day.

With the possibility of a deadly cloud of chlorine gas spreading through suburban Mississauga, more than 200,000 people were evacuated from their homes, my family included.

On the day after the crash, on Sunday afternoon we were ordered to leave. We went first to downtown Toronto to a house my sister shared with some friends, and then out to the country, to my Aunt's farm near Caledonia.

After a week in exile, we were able to return home again.

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The Biblical scholar Marcus Borg writes that one of the central themes in Scripture is the theme of exile and return.

Maybe that is because exile and return is a common human experience. Exile can be a literal event- where we are forced to physically leave a familiar place. Or exile can be figurative, and our figurative exiles are no less consequential. In life we are forced to leave familiar circumstances to go into an unfamiliar place. Grief, loss, a change in significant relationships, a change in health status, a change in employment, moves us into a new and unfamiliar land, into a new place in life. The world around us changes and we feel in exile from what we have known.

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The reading that Shanti shared with us is a letter written in a time of exile.

It's a word of sober encouragement in a time of displacement. The people of God had been conquered, and as was the practice at the time, the conquered were exiled. There could be no unrest in an empty land.

Israel was forcibly taken to Babylon. And they were there, not for a while but for 70 years. Jeremiah's letter is an encouragement to a people longing for a return to what was.

Now, his news isn't all good. He tells the people that their exile will be long, longer than they would hope. His colleague Hananiah wrote that it would all be over soon. Jeremiah was more realistic.

But Jeremiah does offer a hopeful word; God says through the Prophet '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." However long the exile, God is with you and offers hope. Your exile may not end tomorrow. But the time is coming.

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So, how are we doing in our current exile? The pandemic has put us all in a new place. And do we not long to go home again, back to the way things were in March 2020?

Like Jeremiah's` people, we hope for this all to be over. But its not.... not yet. The Omicron variant and rising case counts in other parts of the world suggest that the way ahead may a few twists and turns, a few more obstacles to overcome.

But have hope. There are signs that the return will come.

It is getting better.

We in Ottawa have 88 percent of our eligible population fully vaccinated, very close to the 90 percent goal that Public Health officials have aimed for...

Children aged 5 and up can now be booked for vaccinations with more than 25,000 appointments being made in our city in the first week of eligibility.

Our seniors have received a 3<sup>rd</sup> dose booster. For those in Long Term Care, days of lockdowns and complete isolation, so hard at the time, are behind us. Georgina can lead worship in seniors' homes again. Personally, I can see my mother in person again.

For younger people, the pandemic hit hard. They have been separated from people and things that bring joy,

My daughter Bronwyn is going to lectures in person, is working in the University center at Queens this fall, helped lead an orientation for second years who could not get together in their first year as campus was closed to students.

In the church our adult bell choirs, our chancel choir, they are practicing. Scout and guide groups are meeting. Quilters and knitters are gathering. Our children's playgroups started up this week. There are children's voices in the building again.

Church meetings sometime happen face to face – the faces are masked but its progress...

And I remember the early days of Covid... here in the sanctuary. Brian and Doreen were in the balcony. Elizabeth and Jenni and I were in the chancel. And that was our 5-person limit. Iain could not sing. Andrew couldn't be here to play.

There were lockdowns when none of us could be here. We were preaching and singing to monitors at home.

And then progress, the limit became 15 and Iain and Andrew and Gavin were here, and we had piano, organ, and violin in our webcasts. And now singing from Iain and Carmen.

And now we have people in the pews. Live music. We baptised baby Sofia in the sanctuary this month after celebrating baptisms outside since March 2020.

Do we remember times of lockdown, when going to get groceries felt like an expedition into a hostile wilderness, when park benches and play structures were blocked off with yellow tape, when families could not gather...?

It is getting better. There is hope.

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When Israel went into exile it was hard. It was also a time of great learning and creativity. They wrote their stories down, created their scriptures, gained a better understanding of who they were and what was most important to them. And maybe we have been learning some things in exile too. About what our priorities should be, about what we value, about what in our March 2020 lives was stressful or restrictive and might be left behind.

As we enter Advent today, as we move into a liturgical time of waiting and hoping, may we know hope, the hope of exiles knowing their return will come.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here,  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

Amen