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Sent to Babylon or Jerusalem?

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10:16)

It is no secret that I like history and enjoy teaching it whenever I have the chance. So let's begin with a little history of Israel. Sounds exciting, doesn't it? O.K.—I will keep it to 350 words. Count them if you want.

It begins with Abraham. He is the father of Isaac, who is the father of Jacob, who is the father of twelve sons that form the nation of Israel. Eventually they end up in Egypt in slavery for a few hundred years. Miraculously, they escape. At Mt. Sinai they are given moral teachings and laws that have never been touched by any other society. After 40 years, they enter some of the most controversial land on the planet—back then and now. It is the crossroads for anyone going anywhere. They fought off one enemy after another. No fancy governing structure, they raised up one judge after another to save the day when they were in chaos. Finally, they recognize that they need something more unifying and so they look for a king. Eventually, one king—David—leads them to establish a holy city and a temple that would be the envy of everyone. The temple became the center of their life. It replaced the portable tent of meeting. Their identity and faith were shaped in this culture and city of faith.

As the years pass, the family of Israel begins to fight—actually, continues to fight—with each other. This leads to two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. North and South. Two kingdoms, two kings. Not only is there division among the tribes, but they continue

to mess with idols, and their hearts drift from God. Prophets are sent to warn them, “Shape up or ship out.” They don't listen. One kingdom is overpowered and taken away. You would think the other would learn, but nope. In 587 the armies of Nebuchadnezzar overpower them and take them away to Babylon. The temple is leveled. The kings are gone. The leaders and priests are led away in chains. There is not much left. Their land is taken away from them. Everything that was familiar to them is gone. They are exiles in a foreign land. Their faith is not the only one of the land.

That is about it. Much of the Old Testament revolves around that story. Prophets are sent to warn them and to offer them hope. Others, like Daniel who lived during this time of exile, are shining stars in the midst of a pagan culture.

375 words—O.K., blame the extra 25 on all that fighting of the two kingdoms.

I wanted to review that history for this reason: Much of Israel's life and history are spent living in Babylon more than in Jerusalem. They spend more of their time in an “unchurched” city and culture than they do in a “churched” one.

That is what it is like for many of us. The history of our Lutheran church is that it began in Germany in a churched culture. The church was at the center of town and was at the center of life. This is the way it was for many of us growing up right here in America. Back in the 50's and the 60's, the church held

a position of influence in society. The church was at the center of American life. Not any more. It is not “Jerusalem” that we are living in. We are in “Babylon.” If America was once a Christian nation, it is no longer. I was raised learning how to relate to Catholics and Presbyterians and Methodists. The world I now live in calls me to give an account of my faith to the Muslim, the atheist, the New-Ager and my friend who believes that all roads lead to heaven. That is the mission field we live in these days.

I was raised in a time when if someone said, “Thus says God,” most people would perk up and listen like it were E. F. Hutton. The world I now live in rejects any and all absolute truths. It is not politically correct. How do I respond to that culture?

On a congregational level—how do we engage with a culture that embraces those things that are “unclean” to us? How do we relate to other Christians who do not share the same articles of faith as to what our church teaches and confesses?

Living in Babylon is confusing. Living in Babylon is uncomfortable. Jesus understood this when He sent out the disciples. He said,

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves”
(Matthew 10:16).

Living in Babylon has an advantage. It offers us the opportunity to be salt and light in a way that Jerusalem does not. Let’s not run away from this too fast. In fact, let’s find a way to engage with it.

If you want to gain some insight on how to live in Babylon, take some time to read Daniel. There are few in the Bible that I know who shine like he does. As the Church of the twenty-first century is sent into Babylon, there is much we can learn from him. Consider these verses in Scripture:

“Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new

names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way” (Daniel 1:6-8).

Daniel and his friends were given good jobs in the king’s palace. Daniel, however, refused to defile himself with the things of the world, including the new name given to him. His friends take on Babylonian names that we are quite familiar with: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Daniel would not bite on that. He kept to his own name. He would not bend or compromise. That is what it takes when you live in Babylon and not Jerusalem.

The next verse is found in Daniel 1:21: *“And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.”* As pagan and ungodly as the culture might have been, Daniel remained in the public sphere. He was at home in the public place, engaging the world as the place to do God’s work. The apostolic Church of the twenty-first century does not necessarily need more workers in the church but more missionaries to engage the world in the market place.

The third verse is in Daniel 9:3: *“So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting and in sackcloth and ashes.”*

Daniel did this regularly through the day. He understood that *“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (Ephesians 6:12).

The enemy is not the person you work with or the selfish powers that might be in control. The enemy is Satan himself, and so we must be constantly in prayer if we are to remain strong while living in Babylon.

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your

hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:17).

Daniel’s heart and mind had already decided to whom he was committed, no matter what. No one or nothing else would grab hold of his allegiance and loyalty. When you are living in Babylon, it is important to remember that your life is lived out before an audience of One.

Daniel did well in Babylon because he was spiritually bilingual and bifocal. He knew the language of two kingdoms—that of Nebuchadnezzar and that of the King of Kings. Apostolic Christians and apostolic churches of the twenty-first century need to be bilingual as well if we are going to be salt and light.

Daniel was also bifocal in vision. He saw things clearly both near and far away. He understood that the things around him were temporary. He understood that many of those things could take him off course and so he willingly refused to defile himself with their use. He wanted to be in the world but not of it. He also saw things far off. He knew that there was only one King he needed to bow before and to whom he would one day give

an account of his life. Therefore, he had no desire to bow the knee or his heart before anyone else.

It is often reported that Luther said he had only two days on his calendar—“today” and “that day.” He wanted to invest today toward that day—the Day of Judgment. Why worry about tomorrow or yesterday? Only two days really matter: “today” and “that day.” For many of us, “that day” was settled long ago. On the Cross, when our judgment fell on Christ, “that day” is no longer to be feared. But what of those who have no relationship with Christ? How can we spend “today” for “that day” on their behalf?

We are not living in Jerusalem anymore. But, that is not all bad. Living in Babylon gives us the opportunity to shine in a most important way.

“Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:3).

Prayer: Father, as I go into a world that is more like Babylon than Jerusalem, help me to live with two days on my calendar—“today” and “that day.” Help me to invest today toward helping others to be prepared for that day. In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

Challenge: Daniel had set times to pray each day. In the next 24 hours, set aside three specific times to pray in quiet and solitude.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 10

From the Book of Concord: ““The coming of God’s kingdom to us’ takes place in two ways: first, it comes here, in time, through the Word and faith, and second, in eternity, it comes through the final revelation. Now, we ask for both of these things: that it may come to those who are not yet in it and that, by daily growth here and in eternal life hereafter, it may come to us who have attained it. All this is nothing more than to say: ‘Dear Father, we ask you first to give us your Word, so that the gospel may be properly preached throughout the world and then that it may also be received in faith and may work and dwell in us, so that your kingdom may pervade among us through the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit and the devil’s kingdom may be destroyed so that he may have no right or power over us until finally his kingdom is utterly eradicated and sin, death, and hell wiped out, that we may live forever in perfect righteousness and blessedness”’ (The Large Catechism, The Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, p. 447.53-54).