

## Take a knee

(Ezekiel 36:22-32; Phil. 2:5-11)

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Today I want to offer a perspective on our present reality that draws on the experience of ancient Judah in the time of exile. Three of the great OT prophets lived in that time and spoke to that reality, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah; I'm drawing on W. Brueggemann's\* rich immersion in their lives and words to discern how God may be speaking to us today. The theme of Jubilee is not explicit here, but implicit if we choose to pursue it.

Here is the ancient setting: Around 600 B.C. the small nation of Judah is all that is left of God's chosen people, since the northern kingdom, Israel, has been destroyed. Two prophets, contemporaries, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, are convinced that God is about to abandon Judah because of detestable sin at all levels of society, including political and religious leaders—idolatry, sexual immorality, and especially economic corruption. The only hope, they prophesy, is for the nation to submit to the imminent Babylonian conquest. The leaders resist, Jerusalem and the temple are devastated and a large portion of the citizenry are deported to Babylon, including the prophet Ezekiel; Jeremiah manages to stay in Judah.

After this disaster, the two prophets continue to hear the voice of God, and to share prophetic words, directed largely to the exiles in Babylon. But the message has changed. Before the deportation the message was “repent”, “the end is near”, “return to God”, “give up your sin and relinquish your self-righteousness, your presumed control of your destiny”. After the great calamity and relocation to Babylon, the message became “beware of empire, but hope in God”, “God is with you, God is sovereign and God can save”.

So where are we today? Are we at a place just before calamity and exile, trying to defend and prop up our precious, self-built but decaying home, or are we already exiles living in a powerful, seductive empire, yearning for home?

If it's the first case, we are painfully learning just how inadequate is the home we've built for ourselves. Founded on knowledge, control, subtle violence, greed, our home is crumbling. In quite unexpected ways, especially we white folks are being shown our privilege, our false innocence, our complicity, and compulsion to justify ourselves. Apart from our explicit choice, we are tainted by our nation's original sin—genocide, slavery, racism, whiteness. And the prophetic word to us is “relinquish your defensiveness, let it go, change your ways, throw yourself on the mercy of God!”

If, in the second case, we feel like dispirited exiles living in empire, then perhaps the prophetic word is more like this: “Our whole known world is under judgement. Enlightenment has proved deceptive: our superiority, whether moral, technological, military, or economic has turned self-destructive, and it is at an end. The empire itself is crumbling. But beyond—there is something more, there is homecoming, there is Hope!” I fear this sounds glib, too easy.

But something like this is the message of all three great prophets of the Exile: severe judgement, disaster, grief ... and then new possibility, life, hope. Our scripture text today from Ezekiel is a sample of the message of hope, of homecoming, of redistribution and Jubilee. But how will we get there? And when will we get there? In our lifetime? We need such a message of hope, because the journey from calamity to exile to homecoming is precarious and difficult—and it may be long.

Probably to many of us this feels like a momentous time; on top of the pandemic, there is economic disaster, racialized violence, massive protests—and what seems like a remarkable, moral awakening. What’s happening? Is it bad? Is it good? Fear and uncertainty make our present journey arduous and risky. Partly for this reason I have been drawn to the gesture of kneeling.

In other settings I’ve shared how impacted I was by the invitation to kneel for a prayer at the March for Justice in Elkhart some 10 days ago. African American Pastor Edwin Newsome was asked to lead a prayer and he urged March participants to kneel on the plaza; I think nearly everyone did. This felt right partly because it follows the lead of several courageous, socially conscious brothers (Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid) who several years ago on the football field, witnessed to an authority alternative to empire, by kneeling during the national anthem. It also felt right as a prayer gesture of humility and submission to God’s sovereignty.

According to Ezekiel, God promised to restore the People of God, chastened but cleansed, with new heart and spirit, living in a renewed land. Ezekiel was a priest; he stressed the holiness of God, rather than the mercy or faithfulness of God, like Jeremiah and Isaiah. Ezekiel urges on us a sense of awe and gravity before God, before whom kneeling is a posture of sober obedience. And yet, when I read the early Christian hymn that says all will kneel at the name of Jesus, my spirit is somehow lightened because the one in whose name I kneel is one who lived a human life, joyfully obedient, bruised and smitten from the earth—only to be raised to new Life—our Hope and our Jubilee.

\*Brueggemann, Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile