

## World Refugee Day 2023 - Three Reflections on Scripture

*Feel free to reprint as written or use as sermon prompts.*

### **Psalm 137 (NRSVUE)**

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  
what you have done to us!  
Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!

### **Reflection on Psalm 137**

What does *home* mean to you?

Home is at the core of a person's identity. Home is a place of safety, of certainty, of ownership over one's community. It is a place of belonging, of connection, of tradition, of joy. It is to be *rooted*.

What, then, does home mean when you've been forcibly uprooted? How do you feel safe, experience a sense of belonging? How can you sing the song of your heart in a foreign land?

Psalm 137 viscerally describes the grief of being forcibly displaced from home. They're full of anger. They ask: How could we possibly be expected to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

When we work with people who have been forcibly displaced, we know there is grief for their home - the land, the people, the traditions, the songs, the art, their sense of safety, their center of wellbeing and personhood. Home was where they felt God was present. There is anger, maybe even hatred toward those who displaced them. They may express that anger in ways that are socially inappropriate.

The work of accompaniment with those who have been forcibly displaced is to hold space for the many and varied expressions of these feelings. Those who are already rooted in a particular place, who already feel at home in a community can create space for displaced persons to arrive with whatever grief they carry. This is part of rebuilding the sense of home that has been forcibly taken away. Accompaniment looks like nurturing the soil for others to find space for flourishing. Accompaniment looks like building the capacity of those who have been displaced to plant new roots, to find ways to sing the songs of their hearts even in a foreign land.

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### **Jeremiah 29:4-7 (NRSVUE)**

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

### **Reflection on Jeremiah 29:4-7**

These are the prophet's words to a traumatized community forcibly displaced. Though living in exile, Jeremiah encourages them to build new homes, plant gardens, start families - to "seek the welfare of the city." But how is it possible to plant roots in a land disconnected from your culture and tradition?

What would it look like for church communities to cultivate communities where planting new roots is possible, holding space for the complexity of diverse emotion such work accompanies? What would it look like to encourage those who have always felt like they belonged to lay down their power and privilege to welcome the stranger? To go *beyond* welcoming the stranger by empowering uprooted people to use their gifts and passions to seek the welfare of their new home?

### **Luke 24:13-25 (NRSVUE)**

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

### **Reflection on Luke 24:13-25**

The disciples had spent months, years even, following Jesus, listening to him as they traveled down long, dusty roads just like this one. They had given up everything to follow him, driven by the hope that their new lives would be better than the lives they left behind. They had staked their lives on this hope that he would lead them to liberation. They had hoped. And now that hope is gone.

Of course, we're all clued into the punchline: Jesus is alive and walking alongside them! They had no reason to despair. He was there, accompanying them on that long, dusty road back home. They just didn't recognize him.

But even though Jesus *was* there walking alongside them, that doesn't change the reality that Israel is still occupied by the Romans. Luke was written in the shadow of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. Their material circumstances haven't changed. *They had hoped* Jesus would set Israel free. Even if they had recognized him on the road, Jesus' presence doesn't negate the grief of the future they had hoped for.

The disciples occupy a strange emotional space. They know Jesus was crucified. They know his body was laid in a tomb. There are *rumors* that he's alive, but no one has seen him - or at least, no one has recognized him. They're living in the aftermath of crucifixion with just a spark of hope that resurrection is possible. As far as the disciples are concerned, Easter hasn't come yet. They're still living in Holy Saturday.

The day between the crucifixion and the resurrection is technically a single day on the liturgical calendar. But Holy Saturday is also a whole season unto itself. Many of us have grown accustomed to living our lives in Holy Saturday, suspended between crucifixion and resurrection. Living in Holy Saturday is like living somewhere in between death and life. We live in the aftermath of pain and trauma, *hoping* that one day healing and liberation will come.

But what precisely are we to hope for? What does resurrection look like in this context?

The disciples are walking along the road. Jesus joins them and asks, "What are you both talking about?" The disciples respond by asking: "Are you the only *stranger* in Jerusalem who doesn't know about everything that's been going on around here?" The word they use for *stranger* here means *resident foreigner*. They call him a *migrant* a *sojourner*, someone who has planted new roots in a foreign land.

Jesus, who appears to them as a migrant, asks them to tell him more. The disciples assume the role of teacher. They tell him about the crucifixion, their dashed hopes, the stunning turn of events.

But then, in response, Jesus assumes the role of teacher. It's a reversal of power dynamics. The stranger, the migrant, is now teaching the residents.

When they finally reach their destination, Jesus was about to continue ahead. But the disciples invite him into their homes. The disciples assume the role of host. But then, Jesus takes his seat at the table. *He's* the one who takes bread, blesses, breaks, and gives it to the disciples, a job that's normally reserved for the *host*. The power dynamic has shifted again.

And *that's* the moment the disciples recognize him. *That's* the moment when they recognize resurrection in their midst.

In a lot of mainline Christian spaces, we talk about *welcoming* refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants. But to always be the one to *welcome* is to always presume yourself to be the host. To be the host is to have power.

Hospitality *is* important. Jesus wouldn't have been able to assume the role of host had the disciples not first invited them into their home. But if the disciples had interrupted Jesus, had said, *we're* the hosts, *we* break the bread here, then they never would have recognized him. Resurrection wouldn't have broken into their midst.

We may hope that resurrection looks like an overhaul of the immigration system in favor of the creation of a system that's just and dignifying. Instead, resurrection breaks into our Holy Saturdays. Resurrection happens in moments of first, inviting the stranger in, and then, breaking bread with them. These are the moments - tangible acts of love, hospitality, and generosity - where we see evidence of resurrection.

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