

AColyte

Palm Sunday 2020
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College

EXILE

AColyte

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things at Austin College

Rev. John Williams, Ph.D., Editor

900 N. Grand Ave.

Suite 61647

Sherman, TX 75090

903.813.2220

jwilliams@austincollege.edu

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Still in the Chapel
Still Trying to Get My Bearings
Still Thinking about Old Songs
April 2020

*It seems to me
At a time like this
Only silence can say what is real.
And crying
Don't even come close
To the way that I feel.
--Steve Gillette*

*I ain't waitin' on nothin'
I just got nowhere to go.
--Justin Townes Earle*

*To accept reality is to forgive reality for being what it is.
--Richard Rohr*

So I got the email and video from President O'Day saying that "Austin College is **extending remote-only instruction for all classes** through the end of the spring semester" and that "**Commencement will be postponed from its scheduled weekend of May 16-17 to a later date.**"

That news was not surprising.

Given our current circumstances, it's absolutely the right thing for us all to do.

There are no other good options.

But that news made me sad.

Truth be told: I'm just not liking this whole remote thing. I miss y'all.

Meanwhile, this song keeps bubbling up in my mind:

https://youtu.be/dFw_4sPqhEI

Those singers are known as “Sweet Honey in the Rock.” I like listening to them sing together, especially this song.

“By the Waters of Babylon” is actually a song by reggae artist Jimmy Cliff. My family and I heard him sing this song at about 7:30 one morning while we were in Austin at South by Southwest in 2012.

The “Sweet Honey” version is way better than Jimmy Cliff at 7:30am (though, to be fair, while he was clearly not at the top of his game as a performer at 7:30am that morning in Austin, we were probably not at the top of our games as audience members at 7:30am either).

But it’s a great song.

Most of the words come from the first four verses of Psalm 137:

*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 strange land?*

That’s really what President O’Day’s messages this week made me think about – Psalm 137.

It’s not a direct parallel to our current situation.

As far as I know, we have no “tormentors” who “ask for mirth” (although **Patrick Miller** is always asking me to tell him jokes).

No enemy has defeated and humiliated us – other than the damn virus.

But the language of Psalm 137 feels resonant right now.

I think we’re all learning about exile.

+++++

In 586BCE, King Nubuchadnezzar II of Babylon defeated the nation of Judah in battle and removed many of its citizens to Babylon. He packed up the “best and brightest” among them and carted them back to his city between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

[Those would be the “rivers of Babylon” mentioned in Psalm 137, verse 1—ED.]

Psalm 137 was written by those exiles.

They had been removed from their homes.

They missed their routines, their habits, their community, their orderly lives.

They missed the familiar place where they knew what to do and what to expect.

And they weren't sure how they could be who they believed they were supposed to be—in that other weird and uncomfortable place.

They were sad and off balance, distracted and nostalgic.

+++++

There we wept.

Exile sucks.

I know for a fact that some Austin College seniors have literally wept in response to the news that Commencement will not take place on May 17.

Yes, they know that Commencement has been postponed, not canceled.

Yes, they know that they *will* graduate.

But they and their families had made extensive and complicated plans based on the assumption that there would be a Commencement Service in the Clyde Hall Graduation Court on Sunday morning May 17.

They have long dreamed of being *there*,
on *that* day,

with all of the family and friends that they intended to invite
(or had already invited),
and with all the others who would graduate with them.

That's not gonna happen in exactly the way that we all had been planning.

And it makes lots of us sad.

So there's that.

+++++

How could we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

And then there's this new Remote Life.

In the Spring 2020 Semester, Austin College classes are still hard. They're still rigorous. It has never been easy to be an Austin College student. It takes work.

That's kind of the point.

But this semester--in addition to those same rigorous classes that require significant effort and discipline--now there are new worries like maintaining steady Wifi, or finding a place to participate in Zoom classes that's away from loud roommates, or curious pets, or younger siblings.

And of course it's also hard for professors to teach their classes in this new environment.

And it's hard for Student Affairs folks to care for the few students who are on campus and also be responsive to the needs of those who are no longer here.

It's hard to sing those songs in this strange land.

But here we are.

+++++

I've actually been thinking a lot about exile in the last few months.

A long time before any of us had ever heard of the Novel Coronavirus and CoVID-19, I had been using "exile" language in casual conversations around here.

When workers began renovating the sanctuary and Small Chapel in Wynne Chapel last Summer, I moved out of my office and began sharing a desk and office with AC's amazingly gracious and angelically patient Coordinator of Volunteer Services **Andrea Restrepo**.

We had a lot of fun. I enjoyed spending extensive time with Andrea and the talented and dedicated Board members and Work Study students who lead and operate the Service Station on a daily basis.

I learned a lot from them.

I had conversations that I probably would not otherwise have had – with Andrea and several students.

But I missed my stuff.

I missed my space.

I'm proud that we were able to continue weekly Sunday night Communion services all Fall in the Moseley Room.

But I missed the Chapel.

I missed the acoustics that made our Sunday Night singing sound great.

I missed having space to spread out and use our canvas labyrinth.

Over the course of the semester, I found myself referring to the Service Station as my "exile office."

Nobody "tormented" me or "asked me for mirth," but I missed the Chapel.

But I still had to spend a little time and energy figuring out how to do my job in that unusual, and less than ideal, setting.

+++++

In Jeremiah 29:7, God tells the exiled Jews to

*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.*

That's good exile advice.

“Figure it out.”

“Don’t spend so much time and energy lamenting what you’ve lost – or wishing you were where you used to be – that you fail to be useful where you actually are. Don’t miss opportunities to share your gifts there.”

It’s fascinating to me that this advice was recorded and remembered by the exiled Jews in Babylon.

Those ancient words were relevant and instructive for me during my exile months in the Service Station.

I needed to spend less time wishing I could be back in the Chapel and more time figuring out how to do – and enjoy – my job in that new context.

And those words – “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile” – might be relevant for many of us in the coming days and weeks and months.

They are a call to all of us to be who we are where we are – even when we’re exiled.

They remind us that, while this current exile is real and difficult and frustrating, it doesn’t have to be what distinguishes or defines us.

+++++

The November 2018 *AColyte* was essentially a discussion of our reasons for renovating Wynne Chapel, and particularly for removing the pews that had been there since the building’s construction more than 60 years ago.

After extensive references to the movie *The Greatest Showman*, that discussion ended by focusing on instructions to the Israelites in Isaiah chapter 56 about how to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem after they return from their exile.

We don’t need to revisit all of that now.

If you want to, you can read that issue here: <https://www.austincollege.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/AColyte-November-2018.pdf>)

But what’s important now is for us all to remember and recognize that those words in Isaiah 56 were instructions for rebuilding the Temple *when the exiles returned to Jerusalem*.

That exile ended.

Important and significant and historic things happened after the exile.

+++++

This week, I've been listening to the "Justin Townes Earle Radio" playlist on Spotify.

One of the songs that keeps showing up on my speaker is an old tune by Rodney Crowell called "It Ain't Over Yet."

That feels right.

This pandemic,
 this season of separation frustration,
 this exile
 "ain't over yet."

We've got more difficulties in front of us.

We may well have more occasions to "sit down and weep."

It ain't over yet.

+++++

But, do you know what else "ain't over yet"?

Your story "ain't over yet" – no matter where you are in your epic arc and no matter how difficult it seems right now.

It will take more than this exile to stop you.

And it will take more than this exile to stop us.

Our collective story "ain't over yet" either.

We **will** have Commencement.

We **will** gather in the renovated Chapel spaces and dedicate and use them.

We will be together again on this campus.

The things that were truest about us – the things that mattered most about #ROONation – before all this began will still be the things that matter most after this season of exile.

Exiles end.

This one will too.

In the meantime,

- Wash your hands,
- Ask for the help you need.
- Seek the welfare of the place where you are.
- Figure out how your actions during this exile could be good news for those around you.
- And do your best to sing your song in this strange land at this strange time.

Go Roos!

Seriously.

Until Next Time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Missing the Snacks in the Service Station Office,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain