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“How Can I Sing God’s Song in a Foreign Land?”: Immigrant Experience as Exile

Most Americans can trace their origins to immigrants. Contemporary migration—internal or international, seasonal or permanent, voluntary or forced, unskilled or professional, legal or illegal—has arisen to an unprecedented scale as to radically change the “face of the earth” (Rosoli & Tomasi, 95–6, 98). Most immigrants tend to be marginalized politically, socially, culturally, linguistically, and demographically. Furthermore, marginalization can cut through inter-generational lines. Parents, sponsored by their children to join them abroad, are bewildered because their children have changed so much and because their grandchildren find them, as grandparents, more of a nuisance than an added source of affection. Marginalization also seems to be hereditary. Second-, third-, even fourth-generation descendants of, especially, non-white immigrants find themselves continually reminded that they do not really “come from here.” Any form of ministry to immigrants needs to take account of all these levels and aspects of marginalization.

When does the immigrant experience become a religious or a theological predicament? How does the biblical theology of Exile assist immigrants in finding a theological language for their soul? Can immigrants, from their marginalized stance, become themselves ministering? If the theologians of liberation have found the redemptive potential of the Exodus, might not the immigrant find a similar potential in the Exile?

NAMING THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

The geography of an immigrant’s soul is marked off by loss of the past, disorientation and uncertainty in the now, and hope for a homecoming in a foreign land. The landscape is shaded by a painful giving up for the sake of a receiving. It is heightened by vulnerability that alternates with numbness. Traversing the place requires a certain open-endedness that leaves one quite insecure. One has to hope for the best despite all difficulties. Immigrants tend to vacillate between a sense of loss and hope, between hope and disorientation, between disorientation and homesickness. They alternate between feeling now here and nowhere. The vacillation is accompanied by the shock of new pressing

demands (new language, advanced communications technology, fast pace of life, ambivalent attitude of/to the host country). They hold on to some source of security (native music, native food, friends of the same ethnic background, cultural religious practices) while at once being fascinated with the best (abundance of material goods) and being disenchanted with the worst aspects (experience of racism and discrimination) of the host country. Immigrants literally live in two worlds: the world of the memory, where the old still resides and powerfully influences their adjustment, and the world of the new that claims attention and mastery. During the day, they inhabit the world of the now. At night, in solitude, in dreams, in pangs of homesickness, they are back in their own country. When immigrants do return to the land of their birth they find, to their dismay, that it is no longer really home either. They have become strangers in their own native land. Immigrants inhabit an in-between world. They find themselves homeless. Without some hope of a homecoming, they run the risk of becoming violently self-destructive or of being closed in upon their own ethnic group or of taking the other extreme of "crossing over to the other side," so that they become "more white than white people."

Crossing over to another culture is never simple. Substantial cognitive, affective, and directive shifts are required (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 4-19, 43). Our internalized sense of reality and order is radically subverted. Our traditional ways of behaving and acting are rendered inappropriate. Therefore, culture shock cuts through our very being. Our trust in Providence, for example, can become mere superstitious, ineffective, non-productive fatalism in a culture that thrives on "You've got to cut it or break." Our fragile sense of self is constantly bruised by another culture's brutal frankness. Our enjoyment of the present moment is misconstrued as lack of foresight and proactiveness. Our need for company and community comes across as suffocating dependency. Respect for authority and the value of obedience are labeled as mere subservience. An instinctive interest in other people's lives and concerns is perceived as intrusion of privacy.

WHENCE ARISES THE RELIGIOUS QUESTION:
"GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU ABANDONED ME?"

The immigrant experience can provoke a faith crisis. How we have experienced God within our native culture becomes inaccessible in the new one. What the new culture provides as vehicles for a religious experience can seem too superficial, too awkward, too foreign, too cold, too distant to touch the soul. We feel empty and emptied, experiencing a void that language cannot name. There is lamentation, more often than not, tearless and voiceless. The immigrant experience, at its deepest level, is an anomic experience (Berger, 21). We lose our emotionally

satisfying ties or dominant orientation in experience or the sense of reality and identity. The fundamental order within which we can "make sense" of life and recognize our identity starts to disintegrate (ibid., 21–2). We are thrown, as it were, into precarious waters. Everything seems to collapse into the void, into chaos. Chaos can be so far-reaching that, as it engulfs us, it also severs us from a sense of God. We sadly learn how culturally and ecclesiastically defined religious practices become inadequate in the face of this rupture. We come upon an impenetrable wall. We begin to suspect that faith might just be in the mind. There might be nothing out there. God is nowhere.

THE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF EXILE

In turning to Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah, immigrants might already be wrestling with a deeply religious need to find a language for the soul. Our immigrant condition has become, more deeply, a religious or theological predicament. The upheavals have shaken the foundations, as it were, so that the more fundamental issue is no longer just economic or political or psychological survival, but also religious. We are in a position of poverty, powerlessness, and abandonment. Theologically, this is where we have to wait for God, where we lament, "God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" "How can I sing God's song in a foreign land?" Yet, it is not the God of the Exodus, the God of many marvelous manifestations, the God of triumphant liberation from Egypt, the God of the Covenant who is called forth, but the silent, hidden, absent God of the Exile.

The biblical theology of Exile grew out of a new poetic imagination as Jerusalem fell to Babylonian captivity in 587 B.C.E. Only the imagination was free to recast the terrible, unalterable fact of devastation and loss. Judah lost everything—land, Temple, kingdom, God. The theologians of Exile had an immediate pastoral responsibility of helping Judah *to enter into exile, to be in exile, and to depart from exile* (Brueggemann, 1). Theology was pastoral theology. It was also liturgical. In the crisis of dismantling and discontinuity, the exilic prophets spoke of new actions of God that were not obvious. These new actions were cast in liturgical language, for it was in the liturgy that Judah kept its past present (ibid., 2–3).

"My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark . . ."
(Jer 8:18-19)

Immigrants may depart from their native country in an Exodus frame of mind but find themselves in Exile. The theological world of Jeremiah is best couched in such words as conflict, threat, loss, resistance, dismantling, combat, disappointment, forlornness, hostility, crisis, danger, pain, rage, dis-ease, disequilibrium, hurt, turmoil, psychic

paralysis. Jeremiah understood that there were no safe places (ibid., 20). And Jeremiah grieved.

As immigrants, we may not theologize over our own grief as a mark of guilt for breaking faith with God. Yet, our grief can be as deep, the changes as overwhelming, the alienation as threatening, the hurt as paralyzing. Jeremiah teaches that unless we acknowledge and weep over the hurt, there will never be a homecoming. When the hurt and the grieving are allowed their say, we also confront the fact that beyond the psychological, practical, linguistic, cultural, social, economic, political upheavals that attend the crossing over to another country, there is the deeper loss of the sense of being anchored in God. God can seem to be absent. And we grieve.

Jeremiah, nevertheless, discerned that God grieved with him as well (ibid., 34). And if there was newness out of grief, it was only because God willed it (ibid., 41). Grief that is handed over to prayer becomes an act of faith. Prior to the utterance of the theological word is a cry, a sob, a lament. The turn to prayer makes a theology of the immigrant experience possible. Entering into and inhabiting Jeremiah's geography of grief enables me to accept suffering. Even if the suffering is not assuaged (Jeremiah can make it worse), at least I will know that my very particular grief has found a spiritual home. Jeremiah was here before me. So was Jesus.

The second act of faith that I, as an immigrant, make upon finding the language for grief in Jeremiah is to trust that God is right there at the heart of grieving. God is grieving with me. I submit myself to grief because by so doing I submit myself to the inscrutable suffering mercy of God. The third act of faith is the silent waiting that, indeed, from the depths of inescapable, ineluctable, inevitable grief, newness can come forth.

"O dry bones, . . . you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord"
(Ezek 37:4-6)

The homecoming that is hoped for is awaited amid disorientation. Even as immigrants can trust that God is so close to be there in the grieving, God remains the totally Other (ibid., 53). Ezekiel's only passion was for the holiness of God. Being a priest, Ezekiel cast God's holiness in priestly idiom, in the idiom of ritual cleanliness and purity, of sacrifice, of worship. Ezekiel's God was the transcendent counterpoint of Jeremiah's immanent God. Between this most holy God and God's people is a great mismatch, an incongruity. God's transcendent holiness prevents them from being too presumptuous in the same measure that God's abiding mercy keeps them from despairing. Before the holiness of God they cannot claim anything for themselves. Theodicy is silenced. The insistence on the glory of God and the freedom of God to

depart from all human constructs—Temple, land, Davidic kingdom, Levitical priesthood—is a way of coming to terms with God's absence. God's absence is the unfamiliar way by which God remains present to God's people.

Disorientation makes immigrants familiar with mismatches and incongruities. Nothing is quite where it should be. Nothing is quite right with oneself. Nothing is quite right with where God is expected to be. As we are hurting we get a heightened sense of utter aloneness. There is no one there to turn everything into a happy ending. Grief is still grief. Homesickness is still homesickness. Inadequacies remain inadequacies. There is no fairy godmother to turn the pumpkin into a shining horse-drawn carriage. There is no magic to dispel at midnight. We go to sleep exhausted from an unabated grief. Then comes sheer surrender to what Is.

Ezekiel's tough message to immigrants is this: there is no place to hide, no security blanket under which to take cover, no stable world in which to find a foothold, no armor of defense, no clever plan at retaliation to even the score. Not even the God you think you know is a source of relief. But it is in this in-between predicament, in this deep sense of alienation and disorientation, that one is finally exposed to the utter transcendence of God, the utter reliability of God to be God beyond our controlling and manipulating expectations. Ezekiel was not just a prophet who uttered words of toughness, but also a prophet who submitted to silence. Ezekiel knew the silence of God as God departed from the Temple. There must be silence because the devastation of God's people was unutterable (*ibid.*, 61–5).

There is no adequate language for disorientation. If there were, disorientation ceases to be. Grief is not the only *humus* for a theology of the immigrant experience; there is silence and the loss for words. The temptation to despair is only stemmed by the act of faith that I, as immigrant, can hand this over to prayer. My silence, my loss for words can flow into the silence of God. The sense of freedom that this act of faith grants comes with the graced realization that I am not God, that I am only my limited, fragile self and God is so much greater and more gracious than I can imagine or even believe God to be. And in God's own good time, for the sake of God's holy name, God will allow me to find my home in God's transcendence. And like Ezekiel, I silently wait. I can accept the darkness without being deadened by it. I can bring this to the perspective of God. In the meantime, in waiting, I will live on. There is no escape anywhere. Day-to-day exigencies that press upon me become a source of salvation. Too much preoccupation with grief can be crippling. Thus, while silently waiting, immigrants will celebrate and have fun. Note the many ethnic restaurants and ethnic-based festivities where immigrants abound. Note who flock to fairs, malls,

and parks on weekends (the wealthy, third-, fourth-generation North Americans have their cottages). There will still be moments of blissful abandonment in ordinary pleasures of human life.

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God” (Isaiah 40:1)

It was the prophet/poet’s task to offer those in exile an alternative reading of exilic reality so that they would think, act, speak, and sing differently (ibid., 95). Second Isaiah reached back into the collective memory of God’s people and, in the light of their present pain, construed for them a vision of homecoming. Babylon was not their true home. Exile was not the last word. There was going to be a homecoming (ibid., 119).

For us immigrants, however, homecoming is neither the return to our land of birth nor the total integration into our land of adoption. We are in-between. It means that while homesickness may still tug our heart, we are also trying to achieve a level of contentment being in a foreign country. It also means that our two senses of home are juxtaposed. This juxtaposition creates the parameters for waiting for a homecoming.

This in-between state heightens the theological insight that one’s home is ultimately in God. “Foxes have holes, and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no place to lie down and rest” (Matt 21:20). If God is our final home, we will always be in exile on earth. Caught in the crises of loss and disorientation, we, as we hand ourselves over to God, undertake the journey of re-membering (as opposed to dis-membering). We believe that this region of in-betweenness, this dark night, is cradled in God’s abiding constancy even if what we only perceive is an uncanny sense of being marginalized. We find rootedness in God’s awesome transcendence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

Anyone involved with facilitating immigrant adjustment to the new country (be this the acquisition or mastery of a new language or job training or house hunting or counseling) will know that if they allow themselves to be vulnerable, the immigrant’s pain will rub off on them. A theological understanding of the immigrant experience will offer those ministering to immigrants a way of situating that vulnerability in God. Before one can even talk about Jeremiah’s grief to an immigrant, one just needs to be there in a silent acknowledgment that that grief is there—unarticulated or masked or even denied. Ministering to immigrants needs to be imbued with this graced capacity to simply be there. This ministry of “being-with” builds a sense of community. To minister is to bring people together. Acts of hospitality—in a church basement, in a school gymnasium, in a home—will convey to immigrants that there are people to turn to, places to go to, people to call. Acts of hospitality give the assurance that somewhere in this

strange, cold country is a place of refuge. One can be surprised as well by the capacity of immigrants to be hospitable. Ethnic food, music, and dance get more easily shared than an immigrant's pain and anxiety. Once a level of comfort or trust is established, a minister can begin or end a conversation with a simple, "Will you allow me to pray with you?" In a Christian environment, one can pick a psalm, the Lamentations, texts from the Gospels. One proclaims the redeeming word without homily or exegesis or the annoying pat-on-the-shoulder comment: "I understand how hard it is for you to be here." One simply offers a biblical language for the unspoken experience.

Ministering to immigrants is a form of midwifery. It involves the task of enabling them to hand their sense of impasse to God. A minister can offer the biblical text as a way of articulating God's inscrutable presence in absence. Ministering to immigrants has a strong kerygmatic dimension. The Word wills to be proclaimed to the one in exile. Attention to the text is an important responsibility, for it is the text that mediates the reality of loss and the power of newness (Brueggemann, 3). Though I cannot hasten to interpret my immigrant experience as Exile, at least I can recognize the theonomous cast of a potential vocation. Being ministered to, I can, in turn, experience the call to minister not from my own strength, but from God's. The transformative potential of the immigrant experience as Exile, though yearned for, cannot be willed. But we can trust that it will come as grace.

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