



Renovaré BOOK CLUB

On Our Way Home

By Tish Harrison Warren

In one week, I am moving back home to Texas. For me, this comes with a mix of emotions—I'm happy to be nearer to family, but sad to leave beloved friends in Pittsburgh. I'm ready to be back in the land of breakfast tacos and good queso, but will miss leaves turning in the fall and snow in the winter. But this move itself—the act of going home and all the complex emotions around that—has made me think again of what it means that none of us are ever quite home yet. All of us in the here and now are exiles and strangers.

I touch on the idea of exile in the book but don't explore it in depth.

2 Kings records the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 598. Nebuchadnezzar takes Jehoiachin captive and carries "all Jerusalem into exile: all the officers and fighting men, and all the skilled workers and artisans - a total of ten thousand. Only the poorest of the land were left..." (2 Kings 24:14).

But the suffering does not end there. After that there is political turmoil and there is a massive famine.

I imagine that the people felt utterly abandoned by God. Left in their own sin and suffering. This seems to be the end of the saga of Israel: its kings overpowered, its religion destroyed, its national identity dismantled, and its land taken away.

But we know that this is not the end of the story. The people of Israel, even throughout the exile, experience God's grace. God preserves his people, and through their suffering they remember who they are. They recall that God is not boxed in by the walls of the temple. Israel will soon discover that the purpose of their election was the salvation of the nations.

Exile is a picture of the "already-not yet" that we all live in. God has redeemed us. He has promised to rescue us and bring us home, for good, when Jesus makes all things new. But in the meantime, we live our daily lives as exiles. The kingdom of God has been established in Christ and yet we continue to experience the effects of the fall.

The story of scripture, Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation can be seen from beginning to end as a story of exile and rescue from exile—what Jen Pollock Michel calls a "home story."

The early church theologian Origen called sin itself an exile. He said that "when ... your soul is troubled by vices and disturbances, you are taken into Babylon. ... Adam was indeed in



Paradise, but the serpent caused his captivity, and brought it about that he was expelled from Jerusalem or Paradise, and entered into this place of tears.” All of humanity is in this place of tears. And we in the church in particular are called people who live, as 1 Peter says, as “sojourners and exiles.” We are people not quite at home in the world.

We feel this tension in every area of our life. In our vocations. There are moments in writing where I glimpse beauty and truth, where I’m “in the zone” and drunk with words. And there are moments where writing feels slightly less fun and far more difficult than moving a piano. In our relationships. There are moments when we glimpse glory and communion, and there are moments when we taste the curse of brokenness and division. In our worship, even. There are moments when God feels as near as our breath, and moments when we can barely mumble a prayer. We know the sublimity of Eden and the horror of the Fall, even in an average week.

Through his church, God has given us practices to endure the already and not yet—to hold grief and pain and vulnerability in one hand and hope and celebration and faith in the other.

In *Prayer in the Night*, I mostly look at how prayer teaches us to walk through this exilic life. But another practice that does this (that I didn’t get to get into as much as I’d like to) in the book is the practice of Communion or the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist.

The Eucharist holds the already and the not yet.

On one hand, this is a meal of sacrifice. This is a meal, in some ways, of death. A body broken. Blood flowing.

This was Jesus’s last meal on earth. And when we take this meal we are participating in his final night on earth, when he wept in the garden, when he sweated blood alone as his friends fell asleep.

We in this meal proclaim that things are not as they are meant to be. And yet, this meal is a taste of a wedding feast, a palpable declaration that God’s love overwhelms every power of Death. It is meal where we remember that we are going home and we receive the presence of Christ even now.

The central practices of the church—our sacraments, baptism, and communion—can only be understood as practices that hold together the tension of relentless human vulnerability and the enduring love of God. They tell us, again and again, generation after generation,



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through our very bodies, that all of human joy and sorrow are caught up into the love of God and, there are made new.

When I hear the songs or eat the food of Texas I remember where I'm from. But even now as my home sits in boxes waiting for the moving van, I recall that I'm going to the house where my parents (and grandparents) lived and that even there, I won't truly be home yet. So we sing the songs of New Creation. We eat the meal of the feast to come. We live together as a church, in the already and not yet. We are homesick. But every day, we are on our way home.