

**"How Not to Let Life Overwhelm You"**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Marek P. Zabriskie**  
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When I was a teenager my father was the president of a bank holding company in Boston with offices throughout New England. Then one day, the board of directors fired the CEO and my father. We were living in a large house located on the 18<sup>th</sup> fairway of the Weston Golf Club. It was a beautiful home in a lovely town but when you lose your job in a community like Greenwich or Weston, no one knows quite what to do with you or to say. And you turn inwards. You don't want to attend at parties, or see friends and neighbors. Stress mounts.

My parents had to pay tuition to pay for my brother's boarding school. When the school learned that my father had lost his job, they declined to admit me. We sold our house and moved to a smaller one. My father got a sales job to pay the bills until he founded his own firm, which took years to establish. I couldn't appreciate how hard he was working just to provide for our family. Of course, all of this put a strain on my parent's marriage, which cracked and crumbled and eventually ended in divorce.

For almost a decade, our family lived in a period of exile. The trappings were stripped away. The certitudes were gone. The old structures that held our lives together and the clear moral convictions that gave semblance to our lives had vanished, and it brought out the worst in us.

The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann notes that there always seems to be a storm in the Bible. He notes that "the Bible is much more preoccupied with the threat of chaos than it is with sin and guilt, our middle-class fascinations notwithstanding." The Bible focuses on people are being driven into exile. The NRSV sometimes calls it an "adverse wind." Old Testament characters called it "chaos." Theologian Karl Barth called it *Das Nichtige*, the crushing, irresistible force of disorder unleashed in our world. It is a reoccurring place where the disciples, the church and people in everywhere often spend a lengthy period of their lives.

At some point in life we all feel as if we have been exiled from our ordinary life. We suffer from an illness or a heartbreak. Others lose the thread and purpose of their lives. Some get knocked sideways by unexpected events. Others encounter scandal or failure and their success is suddenly stripped away. Such events can destroy our faith in God, in ourselves or in others.

I think of that young, St. Luke's School hockey player, who was hit and injured in a game in Greenwich last week as his father watched from the stands. An ambulance rushed him to the hospital, but tragically he died. It is every family's worst nightmare. One can only imagine the pain that now envelopes this family.

On Thursday, we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany. It was also the one year anniversary of the assault in Washington, when political fanatics incited by fiery speeches stormed our nation's capital. It was a calculated attempt to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power following

a fair, democratic election that was never stolen. The scene that unfolded that day was like a dystopian movie. Americans on both sides feel as if they are living in exile. The old certitudes and familiar structures that united us are shaking or gone. Truth is disregarded. Chaos is ever present, and our democracy is under attack. When the prophet Isaiah faced a similar time, he reassured the Jewish people with these familiar words:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...

He wrote during a time of great instability for in 586 B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and his troops swept south and invaded Israel. They destroyed Jerusalem, sacked the temple, and slaughtered whoever stood in their way. The wealthy, the intellectuals and the craftsmen were taken prisoner and led on a forced march to Babylon. Seven decades passed before they were freed. The Jews have never forgotten this abhorrent time, which they call the Exile.

Yet, in the exile all is not bleak. Things are taken, but gifts are given, and resilient people are made. During the Exile the Jewish people were transformed from individuals into a community. The captives were allowed to practice their religion. Since they had no temple in which to worship, they developed synagogues, like house churches. Wherever you had ten men or a minyan, you could form a synagogue.

Worship in the synagogue revolved around prayers and reading from scripture and someone commented upon the text that was read. This worship still occurs in synagogues today, and it shapes the first part of each Episcopal worship service. The second part, our Liturgy of the Table, echoes the sacrifice that occurred in the Jewish temple and was mirrored in the Last Supper. "Take, eat, this is my body which was given for you." Hence, while much is taken during a time of exile, much is given, if you have eyes and ears to see, listen and receive.

Real healing can occur when you connect your particular pain to humanity's pain. Each time you can shift your focus from your own private suffering to the suffering of humanity, your burden is lightened. It is only when you are broken open that your deepest self can emerge. Suffering removes your protective shell and mask. When you are cast into exile, you don't always come out healed, but you come out different.

Chaos teaches us humility. Inevitably, a call to service is heard. You will move from suffering to wisdom to service. It is in exile and suffering that you often hear the great call issued in your life to become a more authentic, vulnerable, and humble human being.

None of us can avoid suffering, but we can choose how we respond to it. In exile, we lead our lives in what the Greeks called *Kairos* or "God's appointed time." Time moves more slowly, but

it is richer. *Chronos* or clock time is more regimented, each minute ticks by. But *Kairos* is where life ripens, becomes richer, sparer, and ultimately more meaningful.

Writing during the Exile, the Psalmist penned Psalm 137, where his sorrow poured forth,

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered you, O Zion.

As for our harps, we hung them up  
on the trees in the midst of that land.

For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,  
and our oppressors called for mirth:  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”

How shall we sing the Lord’s song  
upon an alien soil.

Then his anger and rage spewed forth,

O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy the one who pays you back  
for what you have done to us!

Happy shall he be who takes your little ones,  
and dashes them against the rock!

There is real hatred in these words as there is real hatred and rage sometimes in us for those who are very different from us. The Jews living in exile wanted to devour their captors. So, Isaiah reminded them that anxiety and revenge were not the answer. He wrote:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...

He reminded his people that God still loved them. They had not been abandoned. For the Jew everything revolves around community, not so much the synagogue. The primary Jewish experience of God is in community. The true center of Jewish life is the Shabbat dinner table, where family and friends gather, light candles, recite prayers, laugh, eat and experience joy.

During the 1950s, roughly 75 percent of Americans trusted their government to do the right thing most of the time. Today, only 25 percent do. In that earlier era, 65 percent of Americans

said that their neighbors were trustworthy. Today, only 32 percent do and only 18 percent of millennials. “What loneliness is more lonely than distrust,” wrote George Eliot in *Middlemarch*.

We live in an age of stress and distrust, where many are unwilling to accept reality. Their minds are fixed. Anger seethes below the surface. If you or someone you know is going through a period of exile, where the old certitudes and familiar structure are missing, chaos abounds and you can easily be transformed into a monster if you are not careful, how do you deal with your anxiety and trials. I offer you three brief tools.

First, seek to remain in control and establish a game plan. There’s a lot of talk in our culture today about oppressors and the oppressed. At some point, it becomes totally unproductive, inauthentic, and immature. You are free to make choices and are a product of the choices that you make. Don’t let any event or person define you or your future. Define yourself. Thus, stay in control. Get a game plan. Work it. Take charge. Get support. Develop a road map to succeed.

Write your fears and worries down on paper. Then divide these things according to what you can control and what you cannot control. Focus then solely on what you can control. Don’t waste your energy on what you cannot alter. Making a list and clarifying what you need to do, and it will keep you from being overwhelmed.

Second, keep balance in your life. Never isolate. Stay in community. Reach out to friends. Let friends care for you. Rely on your emotional intelligence, that voice inside you that says, “I get can through this. I am strong. My future is just beginning.”

Get sunshine. Spend time outdoors. Exercise. Live in your body. Read good books. Fill your mind only with inspiring thoughts. Don’t absorb toxic ideas. Keep a vibrant social life. Get involved in at least one meaningful cause. Attend church every Sunday. Read a short portion of the Bible each day. Live your life for others, while doing things that make your soul come alive. This balance will restore you.

Third and most importantly, pray. It is the ultimate solution to fear and stress. By prayer, I don’t mean that mindless, going-through-the-motions sorts of prayer, babbling-words-without-paying-attention-and-expecting-much-to-occur dialogue. I mean real prayer, prayer from the heart, prayers that often go beyond words and are uttered with your whole being.

Studies show that people who pray regularly and make a constant effort to lead a truly Christian life, live longer, get sick less often, recover faster, and have better marriages. People who attempt spectacular things pray much more than others. Great college and professional athletes pray more than any other segment of our population. Presidents are driven to pray more fervently the longer they occupy the White House. The more we have thrust upon us, the more we realize our own limitations and need for a higher power, a greater force, a God who is in our corner, advising and comforting us as we pray.

Prayer always begins with the recognition of our weakness. When we pray, we must offer up the things that we cannot control or change and ask for grace to live with our own limitations. We give our anxieties and fears to God and ask for the courage to face our trials.

Today, we commemorate the baptism of Jesus. Through baptism you were grafted into Jesus' life. You joined God's family, and nothing can separate you from God's love. Baptism is like a COVID vaccination, and confirmation is like a booster shot. You can be vaccinated and boosted and still get COVID, but it will far less threatening. You will be prepared to fit it.

Likewise, you can be baptized and confirmed and still suffer a great loss or be hurt, but God's Spirit that was imparted to you in baptism and confirmation will guide you forward. You will never be alone. God is within you and all around you. Never forget that God's own dream was shattered when Jesus was crucified Jesus, but God trusted us enough to send Jesus back to us and that made all the difference.

Jesus never commanded an army or held a political office. He knew none of the influential people of his time, never wrote a book or created a great piece of art. Jesus never attended college or ran a business. He was put to death and silenced as a nuisance. His few followers were scattered in despair. And yet this single person had had more impact than any other person in history. The message and inspiration of this Palestinian peasant persists.

It has touched countless lives, like that of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who died on Christmas Day. Tutu was a tiny man. He didn't own a gun, never held a political or military office, but he stood up to the South African racist regime without any tanks or weapons to support him. He merely said, "I come to you armed only with a single weapon: the power of love. Kill me if you will, but I tell you – my brothers and sisters – this love shall prevail, this love shall overcome all your weapons of repression, this love shall triumph. And so it shall. As Isaiah said:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...

Amen.