

This week I've been visiting the homes of shut-ins who live in our parish. I ~~hear their confession if they like,~~ anoint them, and give them communion. They really inspire me. They don't get out much; they can't do the things they used to do; they have to let other people help them with simple tasks--That's a hard way to live if like most of us you're used to being independent. Living indoors all the time is a lot like living in exile.

Exile is not very pleasant. And most of us have feelings like it. We suffer rejection, humiliation, loss, and loneliness. We often feel trapped and helpless by situations beyond our control.

Today's first reading tells the tragic tale of Israel's exile. Here is not just a single person, but a whole nation suffering loss. The story is told in the second book of Chronicles, a book in the Bible that very few people are ever drawn to. But it's a remarkable tale, and one of the most important in the whole Old Testament. For generations, the people of Israel had learned about God, but gradually they grew unfaithful. They imitated the pagans and profaned their own temple. Prophets reminded them of the covenant, but they rejected the prophets. Finally, in the midst of their sin, the Babylonians invaded Israel, captured the people, and destroyed the temple. They carried the people off to exile, away from their own homeland.

The story has a happy ending, but it took time to arrive. Generations later, Cyrus king of Babylon allowed the Israelites to return home and rebuild their temple.

The story tells us about God's covenant with Israel. It really was a permanent covenant. Even though the people broke their end of the deal, God kept his. And out of the blue one day, God working through Cyrus restored Israel home.

We hear the story during Lent because Lent can be for us a time of spiritual exile, a time of prayer, penance, and fasting. It provides a note of hope so that we won't despair when we experience the exiles of life: whenever we wonder, "Why is this thing happening to me?"

The cross of Jesus is the perfect end to the story of exile. Jesus endured the greatest exile of all, death--the end of human life. But God remembered his covenant, and faithfully raised Jesus into new life.

When we suffer exile, we will always have hope of new life. God may come out of the blue and change our sorrow to joy. But many people carry exile a long, long time. In fact, even in the story of Israel, many people died in exile, without ever experiencing the great return. But the message of the cross is that no exile is permanent. God has already conquered death, the great captor, and made it captive to his power. No matter the sorrows of life, the cross proclaims the glorious victory of God over all the exiles of the human heart.