Imagine yourselves as members of God’s chosen people about 2500 yrs ago. You inhabit your tradition vigorously – you are descendants of Abraham who was chosen by God to give birth to a nation: so you have a hugely important role to play in God’s plans for the world. You are elect, marked for a special purpose by the generosity of God’s grace. Your life is defined by the covenant, so you carry special privileges and special responsibility encapsulated in the notion of blessing – a blessing that you know to be promised ultimately to every family upon earth, but for now passes down the bloodline to the children and the children’s children of Abraham. For this reason you’ve always taken the stipulations of the Torah very seriously – living up to the Sinai invitation to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, which is about reflecting nothing less than God’s holiness to God’s world– by shaping your life (whatever it costs) around the law in domestic and ethical and spiritual practices (marriage and food; the alien and the orphan; sacrifice and prayer). It is those practices that mark you out from all other nations, as belonging to God.

But your vocation and your tradition have come to haunt you and taunt you in recent years, given how much you’ve suffered for it. Your land overrun and its landmarks decimated, a tsunami of Babylonian destruction sweeping the whole of society, a racial genocide as your people is systematically eradicated, and in case that wasn’t enough, more pain and insult as the survivors are carted off like cattle to Babylon. It’s the final insult: not just because you people of dignity have become slaves but in the way this symbolizes the undoing of your whole story of salvation - a seeming reversal of the exodus, You are suffering from abandonment – physically, psychologically, spiritually even theologically. Has the God who made promises to you, promises of blessing, reneged on those promises? Is he powerless in the face of foreign gods, or worse still, a fraud? Those prophets who used to preach back in Jerusalem – Isaiah, Jeremiah, those guys - who mentioned something about God’s judgement on his people for failing to live up to their calling, for failing to share God’s blessings with the widow, the orphan, the alien – why didn’t they speak out more clearly? We’ve thought over their words and realize maybe they had a point! But why ever didn’t they warn us more effectively at the time?

And along comes a messenger with a letter. Just at the start of the sixth century BC (about 596), Jeremiah sends the Judean exiles in Babylon a letter from Jerusalem. Imagine the excitement and anticipation that this must have generated within that desperate group! News from home that has travelled hundreds of miles and some months, risked that God-forsaken journey – from a survivor, from a prophet, someone we can trust whose role it is to deliver the very words of God! You’re all ears now - as you gather eagerly to hear the messenger read aloud the letter that brings the Word of the Lord:

[Bishop Anthony Poggo of the diocese of Kajo Keji, South Sudan reads:]

‘Thus says the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, to the whole exiled community that I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and settle down; plant gardens, and eat their fruit. Take wives and have sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there; do not decrease.'
And seek the wellbeing, the \textit{shalom} of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray for it to
the Lord, for with its \textit{shalom} lies your own \textit{shalom}.... For thus says the Lord: When seventy
years have passed in Babylon, I will take note of you and fulfill for you my promise to bring
you back to this place. For I myself know the thoughts that I am thinking concerning you – an
utterance of YHWH – thoughts of \textit{shalom}, wellbeing, and not of evil, to give you a future of
hope” (Jeremiah 29:4-7, 10-11).

‘This is the Word of the Lord’, recites the messenger.

“Thanks be to God,” did I hear you say? But surely this is not the message you exiles were
hoping for: “Settle down in Babylon; make yourselves content. You will live and die in that
place. So seek the welfare of the Babylonians, pray for them, because your welfare is linked
inextricably with theirs.” Imagine what they must have said after hearing that letter from
home: “\textit{This} is prophetic encouragement? What kind of phony hope is this? Jeremiah has sold
out to the Babylonians.” “We always knew he was a Babylonian collaborator,” say some
conspiracy theorists. “We exiles are the true Judeans. We may be stuck in Babylon, but we’ll
make no peace with our captivity. We \textit{may} be here a long time – God forbid – but if so, then
we will live by our seething hatred for every living Babylonian.” “Happy are those who take
their little ones and dash them against the rocks,” someone shouted, and it became a chant, a
spiritual of sorts; you know that enraged song as Psalm 137.

Abiding hatred for Judah’s Babylonian captors is well represented in the Bible and even in
the book of Jeremiah itself. The book concludes with two long chapters (chs. 50 and 51) of
rage against Babylon, prophetic poetry declaring that Babylon is doomed by God, utterly
dammed and marked for destruction. So what then, do we make of this brief reconciling word
in the middle, where Jeremiah dares to envision a wholly different reality where Babylonians
and Judeans prosper together? How come this radical word of reconciliation is not the final
word in Jeremiah, but finds itself sandwiched in between more sizable hunks of lament and
protest?

Friends, this does not seem very convenient or constructive – not for me as an OT teacher nor
for you in the work of conflict resolution. On the one hand – from where we sit – we may
dwell upon the surprising, shocking, wonderful vision of reconciliation that Jeremiah
articulates – picking it out, as we are wont to do, among the purple passages of Scripture, in
partnership with 2 Cor 5 of course. But in the book of Jeremiah as we have it, we have to
acknowledge that the commitment to abiding hatred of Judah’s worst enemy trumps that
great vision of reconciliation. And just in case you want to confine the problem to the OT, the
book of Revelation celebrates Babylon’s fall all over again, although this time “Babylon” is a
stand-in for Judah’s new Great Enemy, Rome: ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!’
(Revelation 18:2)

What we see in the Bible is what we see in every religious community perhaps, in every
place in the church, and also in our own hearts: a profound tension between a vision of
reconciliation on the one hand, and committed hatred on the other. Evidence would suggest
in plenty, that just as far as the investment of faith can translate into all manner of positive
constructive fruitful commitments, so it may also extend in the negative direction in all kinds
of self-deluding paths of destruction and devastation. Last autumn on a course at Harvard
Business School I learned how much more entrenched are the conflicts and knots that family
businesses get themselves tied up in, relative to non-family businesses where the
commitments are more straightforward. And I have frequently heard the same from
professional mediators: that commercial mediations are a piece of cake compared with the challenges of church and community mediation work…

The crucial thing for us to see this morning – for which I want to acknowledge gratitude to Ellen Davis for helping me to see¹ - is that there are good reasons for both reconciliation and hatred, even good religious reasons for both. That is one reason why the tension is so deep and often seems impossible to resolve. The religious imperative for reconciliation may be obvious enough to us, I suppose: ‘Love your neighbour’. Simple enough to be dismissed as simplistic. Naïve, of course! But hatred of the neighbor near or far may be equally a matter of religious principle – a principle we probably enunciate with greater sophistication - where the operative principle is Divine Justice. Look, from a sixth-century Judean perspective, the strong denunciation of Babylon is an appeal to God’s just judgment on those who wreaked havoc on the holy city of Jerusalem, toppled the eternal throne of David, and exiled the king, along with thousands of skilled workers, teachers, musicians, poets, prophets, priests and community organisers. Why would Judeans not believe that God hated their powerful and vicious enemies who had forced-marched them across the top of the Syrian desert to labor camps in Babylon? And so we have two alternative messages about the Babylonians, both of which seemed to come from God: on the one hand, seek shalom for Babylon; on the other, wicked, godless Babylon will surely be destroyed. It seems that even the prophet Jeremiah was torn between the two messages.

The problem for people of faith has not changed in the 2,600 years since Jeremiah spoke and wrote. We are still torn, in our churches and in our hearts, between the impulse toward reconciliation with our enemies and the conviction that God’s justice must be upheld. Christians are torn between the two every time we fight a war, believing it is just. I dare say that many of us here feel that tension also in intimate situations: how do we relate to someone who is profoundly destructive, in our family, in the church, in the neighborhood? Do we keep reaching out, keep trying to work with her, or at a certain point do we cut our losses and treat him as (in Matthew’s words) “a pagan and a tax-collector” (Matt. 18:17)? Both responses, it seems, are ‘biblical’.

The disciples – even Jesus – show evidence of this same sort of tension. Recall the ‘unauthorized’ activity of a suspect exorcist in Mark’s gospel (Mark 9:38-41) who makes the disciples uneasy: should one confront him or co-operate with him? John is all for confrontation (‘Lord, we tried to stop him [from casting out demons in your name], because he was not following us’) while Jesus calls instead for cooperation (‘whoever is not against us is for us’). Yet elsewhere Jesus says precisely the opposite: in Matt 12, again a context of exorcism, Jesus repudiates the Pharisees with the words, ‘Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters’ (Mt 12:30). Now the two contexts are very different – in Matthew Jesus is excluding those who are determined opponents of him, those who deny the manifest work of God in blatantly attributing Jesus’ miracles to the power of Beelzebub. In Mark, the exorcist seems to represent one of Rahner’s ‘anonymous Christians’ – confused perhaps, otherwise fairly harmless. Yet, we find in these two incidents contrasting attitudes to those who are not ‘us’(and both of these incidents, BTW, are included in Luke, suggesting he at least did not find them incompatible). There are situations calling

¹ Much of the Jeremiah 29 material here is inspired by and borrowed from an unpublished sermon by Ellen Davis. For other, published, sermon material of hers, see Getting Involved with God (Cowley: 2001) and Wondrous Depth: Preaching the Old Testament (Westminster/John Knox: 2005).
for hard-lines, and situations calling for open-hearts. Scripture offers warrant to both exclusivists and inclusivists, it would seem. How annoying! It does not seem to do the work for us, in delineating who are indeed the real enemies – the broods of vipers – and who might simply be unexpected friends.

I suggest to you – as with this example of Babylon - that Scripture offers no final resolution to our dilemma. It does not suggest that we can in every case make community with the Babylonian oppressor so we may prosper together. Rather, the bible affirms the tension: it acknowledges that both extremes are real. Now that they are enshrined in Scripture, we may even say valid. Indeed the bible is probably more honest than we are usually ready to be, and we could usefully take note how the extremes of emotion find their articulation. Admittedly, they present initially as human words to God – just like the Psalms, and the book of Job. But in the strange way that Scripture works they have now become God’s word to us, words from God, words of wisdom, instruction, guidance, life.

What is that Word? How do we live well in the tension? I have three brief observations, followed by three simple hallmarks, hallmarks of what I call conflict-resilience. First the observations.

1. First, conflict is normal. Diversity from creation, and conflict from the fall. Indeed, to be expected. A pastor with vast experience of church planting says that every church plant he’s ever known has struggled with conflict at around the 18 month stage. If they can handle it, they survive; and if they can’t, they don’t. So conflict resilience needs to be the goal, not a never-never land of reasoned unanimity.

2. Second, conflict may be normal, but it is not definitive. By that I mean that while conflict may reflect the practical reality, it does not re-shape anything ultimate. So for example, when Israel divides – surely a disaster for one God’s holy people! - there are two kings and two political realities. Yet to all intents and purposes theologically there is still just one people, one covenant, one land, and one everlasting throne. This is the essence of Isaiah’s horror at Ahaz King of Judah when he is found contemplating a liaison with Assyria for the sake of rebuffing King Pekah and the northern Kingdom in Isaiah 7. Ahaz is sharply reminded to stand firm in faith, because all of them are God’s people. A rearrangement of the chairs on earth has not re-shaped the realities in heaven. So let’s not overrate conflict as if it has more ontological significance than it deserves.

3. Third, in relation to conflict, there are lots of protagonists, but no umpires. I see in Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah a phenomenal conflict-resilience. But even in their role as prophets – those whose recognized role it is to relay words from God – note that they are not umpires in the conflict. That’s not because they don’t long for reconciliation, and nor because they cannot stand back. But because they are also inevitably bound up in conflict also. As human, subjective creatures – with views, emotions, histories – we have various dogs in various fights. That is to say, we should not kid ourselves that we can ever ultimately stand back to blow the whistle in irenic neutrality. We have to unlearn a feigned innocence. We are protagonists ourselves, simply with greater and lesser degrees of attempted perspective.
Three habits of highly effective conflict resilience
First lament, second sacrifice, third hope.

1. Where there is conflict, there is **fierce conversation**. All of the stories I thought of exploring for this talk – Moses and the wilderness/Sinai conflicts, Isaiah and King Ahaz, Jeremiah and the exiles, Paul and the Corinthians - the respective leaders are strong on **fierce conversation**. That is to say, they seem to have perfected the art of grasping nettles, of naming trouble. Call it raw guts, or call it a fire in the belly: they have an ability to confront others with the issues colourfully. Think most obviously of Paul - his history of anger and persecution of Christians – from which, after conversion, springs the equally deep passion to preach and practice reconciliation.

But the fiercest conversation of all is saved for God. Think of Moses, tackling God head-on at the incident of the golden calf (Ex.32-34). Note Isaiah pushing back the minute he’s been called and learns the bad news of his people: ‘how long O Lord?’ (Isaiah 6). Note the laments of Jeremiah, pages and pages of them.

Lament is fierce conversation addressed to God – which is to say, the place where nettles are truly grasped. To lament is to name the ruptures of this world so truthfully that we move beyond the point where any explanation or action is adequate. To the space where the only way forward is the desperate anguished cry directly to God. (Talking to a therapist just doesn't cut the ice).

In our world it is those who know suffering who are best at lament. I have been privileged to meet the occasional saint from Rwanda; I have worked alongside many survivors of persecution in South Sudan – these people, through force of circumstance, have learned the business end of prayer. With the Psalmists they badger God freely and persistently: “the poor are being crushed and the wicked are winning... Don’t you see it? In doing so they have found ways to acknowledge agony, to express conflict – and become less afraid of the cost of seeking peace.

Lament is not despair. Nor is it whining. It is a cry, from those deeply disturbed by the way things are, and refusing to be consoled except through God. It is a protest against the world as it is, and declining to accept the brokenness as inevitable. I believe it is the best protection from cynicism you will ever find.

2. But, beware the logic of lament. The logic of lament is our own willingness to **sacrifice**. It is the logic of God not sparing his only Son but giving him up for us all. A similar self-giving-up is evident in Moses, in Isaiah, in Jeremiah. There is no way around the cost of choosing to engage conflict. Surely that is why our natural tendency is to conflict avoidance? Willingness to sacrifice is THE key indicator of view of the world – who is important and who isn’t. And – through my 18 years in vocations and ministry selection – also the single criteria I look for in discerning signs of God’s call. How much are you willing to give, and give up?

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3. Hope

If you have studied the Old Testament you will be aware that whenever the going gets tough for God’s people, a horizon of hope emerges. Most obviously, for example in the book of Isaiah, when the shadows of exile are lengthening, when even the return to Jerusalem does not bring the resolution they so longed for, so a movement of apocalyptic dawns. God does not call beyond our capacity to bear: and part of God’s equipping – the eagles’ wings when we are spent perhaps – is in the capacity for hope, in the birds-eye rising beyond the immediate. The antidote to present crisis is far-sighted vision. The clearer we hold to ultimate outcomes – how the story will end, and who is responsible – the easier to handle uncertainty and complexity and ambiguity.

The hope that sustains the prophets runs deep. I hotly recommend Walter Brueggemann’s latest book on prophetic preaching on this topic. Prophetic preaching is a sustained effort to imagine the world as though God were a real character and the defining agent in the life of the world. It may be hard for Jerusalem or for us to come to terms with God’s underlying governance much of the time but this is the hope that the prophets voice. And keep on voicing, regularly.

It is this hope that equips Jeremiah to be the first, as far as we know, to suggest ‘love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you’ in a volatile, uncertain world. Not only was he writing something completely unprecedented, many of the exiles thought him absurd; so deeply does it shake a two-dimensional world view.

But six centuries later, the last and greatest of the prophets said the very same thing that Jeremiah had said — “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44) — and with that reiteration, echoed in a life of both love and persecution, something changed. What has changed is not that Christians are now disposed to love our enemies and pray for them assiduously, since Jesus said we should. With few exceptions, we feel just the same about our enemies as the Judeans felt about the Babylonians. What has changed is that we can no longer say that seeking their shalom is absurd, a figment of an overheated prophetic imagination, perhaps, or a sell-out to the oppressor. Because now that Jesus has spoken, we know for sure that actively seeking shalom for our enemies is exactly what God expects of us. That is what a “future of hope” (Jer. 29:11) looks like in God’s own white-hot imagination: people praying without ceasing for their enemies, appealing to God for the godless, putting all their hope in God’s ability to craft shalom, well-being, peace, true prosperity out of our own misery, suffering, and profound spiritual poverty. Fulfilling the call to Abraham, to share God’s blessing with the world – knowing it is not in limited supply.

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