

Jeremiah and Fernando, Empire and Exile
Imagine All Saints Sunday, October 9, 2022, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

“Thus says the God of Israel, to all the exiles I deported from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses to live in. Plant gardens and eat what they grow. Marry and raise children. Find spouses for them, that they may bear children. Multiply while you are there. Do not decrease. Rather, seek the peace and the prosperity of the city to which I exiled you. Pray to Yahweh for it, for if it prospers, you will prosper. “

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It's April 9, 1981, I come home from school and turn on the radio in my room.

I am 12 years old, and I'm not really a baseball fan. At that moment I am mostly concerned with the Phoenix Suns, which had just lost an NBA playoff game the night before, and my radio is still tuned to that station. But when I lie down on my bed and turn on the radio, this is what I hear.

Vin Scully's voice says: “So with two out, a full count ... Howe ready to go and listen to this crowd. Most of the folks on their feet now. Valenzuela delivers ... Screwball! Got him swinging! ... What a way to start! Fernando Valenzuela in his first big league start pitches a shutout!”
 (<https://twitter.com/i/events/1248360273011851264>)

There was something about that voice, wasn't there? That amazing voice who knew just when to speak and when to let the roar of the crowd take you away. Who when I closed my eyes and laid back on my bed would make Dodger Stadium come to life in my imagination.

I became a baseball fan that day.
 I became a Dodger fan that day.
 And my childhood had a new soundtrack.
 A new storyteller.

I was 12 years old, and like a lot of 12 year olds, there was nowhere I felt like I really belonged. I would exile myself in my room because it felt like the only place I could be myself ... even if I wasn't quite sure what that meant.

And ... for two or three hours, Vin Scully could tell me a story and I could imagine I was a part of it. A part of something bigger than myself. A place where I belonged.

I began to live for those stories.

Telling bedtime stories wasn't a thing in our house. We pretty much just got sent to bed. But when I did, I would put my radio under my pillow and close my eyes and Vin would tell me a bedtime story. And I could imagine it all. I could just see it.

I could see Bill Russell with his crooked finger slinging the ball across the diamond to Steve Garvey. I could see Davey Lopes inch by inch measuring his lead off first and Tommy Lasorda throwing his arms up in the air arguing with an umpire.

I could see Dusty Baker whipping his bat and launching a hanging curveball into the left field pavilion.

And I could see Fernando. Into his windup, his eyes gazing toward the heavens before launching that dancing screwball toward the plate.

That was the year ... strike interrupted as it was ... of Fernandomania. And I got as caught up in it from my bedroom in Tucson as any kid in LA . My aunt sent me one of those first Fernando Valenzuela posters and I hung it on my wall. I found a Fernando Valenzuela Velcro wallet and it became my prize possession.

I loved the story. This kid coming out of a little town in Mexico, finding his place in the world ... and doing it with joy. It made me imagine that there could be a place for me. That there was a place for me.

That's the power of story. That's the power of imagination. And it's why great preachers, be they Jesus or Vin Scully, are at their heart storytellers.

Telling stories that ground our imaginations in reality while setting them free to dream.
Stories where we imagine our own place.
Stories that bring the past into the present ... and help us imagine amazing futures.

For me, 1981 will always be the story of when I became a baseball fan.
Of falling in love with Vin, Fernando and the Dodgers.
Of a journey that ended with Kenny Landreaux squeezing that last out and the Dodgers finally beating the hated Yankees ... so Chase, I know that was a little bit before your time so I just wanted to make sure you knew that ... the Dodgers beat the Yankees ... in the World Series.

And yet there are stories before that.

Stories those stories are built on.
Stories of displacement and inclusion.
Of estrangement and reconciliation.

Stories that we need to tell if we are going to write new stories together.
Stories we get to tell because they open up new worlds of growth, because they open us up to the richness of possibilities unimagined ... until now.

That the Dodgers are even in Los Angeles is one of those stories of displacement and inclusion. Vin was a part of that one and we know it well.

In 1958, Vin and the Dodgers headed West from Brooklyn and landed here in LA. Now, there was trauma in this displacement because there is always loss in change. Not so much for Walter O'Malley, the Dodgers' owner. For him it was a voluntary displacement. The displacement of the conqueror, not of the conquered.

More like the displacement of those who left Europe for the economic promise of colonization ... and not those whose wealth was colonized and whose bodies were deported.

And yet, we cannot deny that as much as we rejoice that the Dodgers call LA home, there was pain that was caused by this displacement. Billy Crystal ... a Yankees fan ... says it was like the death of a favorite uncle.

It hurts so much to be left behind by someone you love. So many of us know that feeling all too well. Of being left and alone. That is its own kind of displacement and disconnection ... of wondering if we will ever find our place again. Of wondering if we will ever be found again.

The history of the Dodgers and of her two great cities is a story of pain and joy not just on the field but of leaving and finding. Of being abandoned and being welcomed. And that's what makes it our story because we have all been there haven't we? Some of us are there right now. And if you are, you're not alone.

And yet there is another backstory of displacement and inclusion, of empire and exile ... and that story is much less told ... though I know many of you know it well. And some of you have lived and are living this one, too. And you are not alone, either.

When Fernando walked off the mound to that cheering crowd 41 years ago, it was about more than what he had just done standing on that piece of ground. It was about the story of what had happened more than 30 years before on that very spot. The story of what had happened for 40 years before that. On ground that had been sacred long before Koufax and Drysdale called it home.

It is the story of Abrana Arechiga and her daughter, "Lola." And many, many others.

Abrana was born in Zacatecas, Mexico. She was 19 and pregnant when she and her husband fled poverty and the destruction of the Mexican Revolution and crossed the border that generations before had crossed over her family, and made her way to Morenci, Arizona. There, her husband gave his body to the mines for five years until the mines and the ground swallowed it for good.

She met her second husband, Manuel Arechiga, had a daughter named Lola, and they followed a dream not of wealth but of just a life where they could have a place to call their own and raise a family in peace and joy. They followed that dream to Los Angeles, to just a few miles south of here.

They found a place called Palo Verde, cobbled enough money together to buy a small piece of land on Malvina Avenue and for 30 years made that life for themselves. Manuel built their house with his own hands, plank by plank, nail by nail.

It was as if the prophet Jeremiah was talking to them saying:

"Thus says God, to all the exiles deported from Zacatecas to Los Angeles: Build houses to live in. Plant gardens and eat what they grow. Marry and raise children. Find spouses for them, that they may bear children. Multiply while you are there. Do not decrease. Rather, seek the peace and the prosperity of the city to which you have been exiled."

And so, they did. They all did.

The neighborhood came to life around them with families just like theirs. Palo Verde, and the nearby neighborhoods of La Loma and Bishop. The Arechiga family grew and were joined by other family members from Mexico whom the border had crossed generations before.

Manuel built two new houses. They danced when Lola married Pio and moved into their own place in the neighborhood.

Sacred ground.

They wept when Manuel's 8 year old nephew, Mañito, died from injuries from falling down the stairs – there was not sufficient health care available for these families. The wake was held in the living room Manuel had built.

Sacred ground.

Against all odds, they had made Palo Verde their home. They had poured their lives into the land and the land had given them joy and stability and a place of belonging in return.

Sacred ground.

And then another all too familiar story played out. A story as old as the scriptures we read each Sunday. Wealthy people with power realized they could use their power to steal what little wealth poorer people had and destroy the community they had taken decades to build.

And so, they did.

They used a tool that was used all over this country ... the ability of a small group of wealthy businessmen on city councils and zoning commissions to declare an area "blighted" so they could take it and parcel it out to developers.

Sometimes it meant building a freeway, like it did a few blocks from here, where the city displaced 4,000 black and brown residents to build the 210 and cut off the remaining black community from the rest of Pasadena, putting the freeway, as one Black Pasadena resident put it “where the resistance and the power was the weakest.”

(<https://www.coloradoboulevard.net/reparations-for-pasadena-families-displaced-by-the-210-freeway/>)

In this case, it meant taking these vibrant neighborhoods – the sacred ground of Palo Verde, La Loma and Bishop and lying and stealing. Declaring them blighted so developers could build public housing – despite the fact there was already housing there -- and, when that fell apart, using it to lure Walter O’Malley and the Dodgers west from Brooklyn and giving it to him to build Dodger Stadium.

Family after family was pushed off their land, until only Abrana and Lola and a few others in their household remained. They were no longer immigrants. They were natives. This was their home. Not just the house, but Palo Verde, Los Angeles, and the United States. And they stood their ground, refusing to be exiled once more. Refusing to leave this sacred ground.

They fought and they fought and they fought, until the very day .. and some of you are old enough to remember the pictures ... until the very day sheriff’s deputies literally carried Abrana and Lola out of the home their husband and father had built with his own two hands and they watched as moments later a bulldozer reduced it to rubble.

Forty years gone in 10 minutes.

(To learn more go to <https://www.buriedundertheblue.com/> and also read *Stealing Home: Los Angeles, the Dodgers and the Lives Caught In Between* – <https://www.vromansbookstore.com/book/9781541742222>)

So, when I got home from school that day and heard Vin Scully tell the story of Fernando Valenzuela. I only knew part of the story. But I didn’t know, nor did he tell, the whole story. The whole story about what it meant for that 19-year-old kid from Mexico to stand on ground made sacred not just by Drysdale and Koufax but by Manuel and Abrana and Lola and shut out the Astros that Opening Day, to win his first eight starts and lead them to a World Series championship.

The story of how the Latino-Hispanic-Chicano community in Los Angeles had been estranged from the Dodgers since their arrival ... and for good reason. That part of the story of why Fernando was on that mound was that the Dodgers had been looking for a Mexican star who could bring that community back to that sacred ground as customers and fans.

And while make no mistake, the Dodgers’ motivation was economic, at the same time, they understood a truth that is at the heart of reconciliation. That when we have been displaced and

exiled, we need not just to be welcomed back on the periphery, but we need to be given a spot at the very center of the community.

We need to take that mound and be celebrated for who we are and what we can do.

We need to be able to see ourselves and have others see us in a position so central and so powerful and so celebratory of who we are that we can begin to feel safe and maybe even begin to trust we will never be displaced and disrespected this way again.

And that's what Fernando began to mean. And it's why we speak not just of Vin Scully as the great Dodger storyteller but Jaime Jarrin and now even Fernando himself as well. And it's why when we go to Dodger Stadium there is as diverse a crowd as any stadium in any sport in any city.. Diversity that represents nearly every part of our wonderfully diverse Los Angeles.

It's not perfect. The Dodgers and the city have still never apologized to the residents of Palo Verde, La Loma and Bishop. There have been no reparations paid. If there is to be true reconciliation those things must happen.

And ... Dodger Stadium is a place where we are imagining a new story of who we can be together as a city. Where even for a few hours what binds us together is greater than what might divide us. It's why we wear Blue this Sunday.

It's all about the stories. Telling not just part of them but, as Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows says and as we are doing with our teams looking at our stained glass windows and the land this church sits on ... telling the whole story so together we can write a new story.

The story of the Dodgers is our story. Not because we are Dodger fans or even because we are Angelinos ... but because our stories are stories of being conqueror and conquered.

Our stories are stories of being abandoned and embraced.

Our stories are stories of being driven away from who and what is precious to us .. and finding new homes where amazing things happen.

God speaks through Jeremiah to the people of Israel ... a people who have experienced all of these things. A people who as their bodies have been stolen and carted far away and told them they needed to act happy about it have cried out, "how can we sing God's songs in a strange land?" Who refused to forget the stories of their homeland, saying "if I forget you, O Jerusalem ... let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you."

And yet God says to them, God said to Manuel and Abrana and Lola, God says to us ... do not be afraid to build and plant, grow and dream. Seek the peace and prosperity of the new city.

Jeremiah reminds the people, Jeremiah reminds us that the stories of the past -- **our** stories are both prologue to the story we are writing and will write .. and stories of who we are and will be again ... the joys that must be celebrated, the wounds that can be tended and the reconciliation that is our destiny if we will but reach out and grasp it.

The people of Israel would return to their land. Again and again. And of course, by then there were other people who had been there for generations and called it home.

Next month, Hosam Naoum, the Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem will be with us and share stories of how thousands of years later the struggles of displacement and domination still have Israel and Palestine struggling to seek the peace and prosperity of a new city.

It is the human story.
And that means it's ours as well.

Individually we have known exile and return. We have, at one time or another, all been rejected and abandoned by parents, friends, spouses, employers, if not entire nations. And we have been welcomed into new homes and new families.

We can tell those stories so that healing can happen.
And we can begin again.
And build.
And grow.
And love.
Together.

As a church, we have known exile and return. I know there are people who used to be sitting in these pews who are no longer here because they feel the church has left them, some because of changes we have made under my leadership ... others are here because they finally feel like their story is being centered after years of estrangement.

We can tell those stories so that healing can happen.
And we can listen to each other and tell a new story ... together.

This morning, some of you have already participated in Imagine All Saints ... our sharing and imagining circles that ask us to imagine how God is calling us to live our values of Radical Inclusion, Courageous Justice, Joyful Spirituality and Ethical Stewardship in the months and years to come.

For the rest of you, after this service there will be another opportunity to participate.

As Vin would say, it's a beautiful day ... pull up a chair for a while.

All Saints, the opportunity before us is the opportunity of Jeremiah, the opportunity of the human family in every generation. It is the opportunity to tell the whole story so we can write a new story. To bring the past into the present so that wounds can be healed not just out there, but in here (the room) and in here (our hearts).

For we are each and all exiles from somewhere looking for a home.

In some ways, we are each that 12 year old wondering if there is a place for us.

And there are stories to be told.

Our stories.

Your stories.

Stories of our past and dreams of our future.

Stories that will help us imagine and know that we can be a part of it.

A part of something bigger than ourselves.

A place where we belong.

Amen.