

Counting The Days

2 Kings 25

The Museum of Modern Art in New York recently held a major exhibition called “Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration”.

It ran from September last year to April this year, while the state of New York implemented an evolving range of strategies to manage the Covid pandemic, and while vivid memories of a three-month long “stay-at-home” order still triggered fits of anxiety among the population.

“Marking Time” was actually an exhibition of artworks by prisoners meant to shine a light on the plight of the many, many incarcerated individuals within the US prison system. But the idea of imprisonment means something fresh to people whose freedoms have been curbed. There’s a new level of connection that can be made with these artworks when you’ve experienced the social isolation of a lock-down.

Gilberto Rivera’s prison job was mopping floors. He created his piece “An Institutional Nightmare” after a hostile encounter with a prison guard. It’s a mess of an artwork, consisting of prison documents and a torn-up inmate uniform held together with floor wax.

Another artist, Yaya, created a poster depicting himself painting with a flaming brush. The work is entitled “Art Breaks Chains” and includes the quote, “I was lost. Art broke all my chains”

Marking time. It’s a good name for an exhibition about imprisonment.

When you’re imprisoned, the days of your captivity, or perhaps the days leading up to your release, are the marker of time. The classic image of a prisoner sitting in his or her prison cell scratching days into the cell walls tells us a lot about the world, the story, that this person understands themselves to be in the middle of. They mark the days of their imprisonment because imprisonment is their story.

For some of you here, maybe being stuck at home with young kids felt much the same! I wonder if the isolation some of us experienced mirrored a kind of gaol-like loneliness.

When we were stuck at home, watching church online, creating makeshift office spaces and upgrading our home Wi-Fi systems so that everyone could connect to their respective work, study and social activities on a screen, we were all counting time very

differently. We might not have known what day of the week it was but one way we made sense of the story we were living in was to remind ourselves how long we had been doing this. We'd say things like, "When we started live streaming our services, we never thought it would be for this long." It went from a couple of weeks to a month. We marked 100 days and 6 months. In the end we endured 8 months, 36 weeks or 252 days of not meeting together. At the time, the story of pandemic and isolation was the story we were living in. We almost didn't hear any other story for a long time.

Our kids like to cross off the days on the calendar that hangs near our back door. They can count down to birthdays or holidays.

Working in a school I have learned to mark time in weeks. I'm always acutely aware of how far into a term we are by the week number. Last week was week 9 of a 9-week term for me and I can tell you I counted each one of those weeks. Assessment due dates are measured in weeks. Reporting deadlines are measured in weeks and, of course, the time before your next holiday is measured in weeks.

As people of faith, we defiantly count our time from the coming of Christ. There was a time Before Christ and there is the year of our Lord.

The way we count time says a lot about the story we see ourselves in.

- In December this year Charlotte and I will celebrate 20 years since we were married.
- Ex smoker's count the number of days since their last cigarette and attendees at Alcoholics Anonymous can tell you the number of years, months and days since her last drink.
- Cancer survivors count time from the moment they're given the all-clear.
- A 17-year-old will tell you how many hours he has left to complete in his driving logbook so that he can sit for his licence.
- I have a friend who used to count down the days until his next cruise. That countdown has been on hold for a while.
- It's been a little over five and half years since I last saw my Grandpa and the reunion is on hold for now until the time, I see him again in paradise.

How do you count time? What story do you see yourself living in?

As we come to the end of our time in 2 kings, having traced the history of God's people through the writings of 1 and 2 Samuel, and then 1 and 2 Kings, through stories of conquest and kings and temples, priests and prophets. It's significant that the book finishes with this very question,

How do we count time? What story do we see ourselves living in?

2 Kings 25 is a disorienting chapter. It marks a great disorientation for the people of God.

It reads like an epilogue of sorts.

The end of chapter 24 reads:

“It was because of the Lord’s anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end he thrust them from his presence.”

And that feels pretty final. And I wonder why the author decided to put that statement of clear and decisive judgement – that meaning-making summary - where it is, at the end of chapter 24. And I wonder why the book keeps going and concludes the way it does in chapter 25, with a disorienting description of destruction and loss followed by a gentle snuffing out of the last vestiges of hope.

I wonder why the author decides to describe and not explain in our chapter today. You’ll notice that there’s no moral judgment provided here. Once the concluding statement is made in chapter 24 – that God thrusts his people from his presence - we’re just left with a bleak, blow-by-blow account of what happens, without the kind of sense-making statements we’ve become accustomed to, “He did what was right” or “he did evil” or that certain things happened “in accordance with the word of the LORD” or that, “All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God...” We get none of that here.

Interestingly, the prophet Jeremiah, who lived through and beyond these events chooses to finish his book of prophecy exactly the same way. If you had a Bible in front of you, I’d invite you to open it to Jeremiah chapter 51 and you’d see that it’s almost identical to 2 Kings 25. What is it about these events, recorded in this matter-of-fact way that makes it such a poignant way to end a book? What is it about this chapter that speaks so meaningfully into the experience of exile?

It seems to me that the author is deliberately disorienting us and probing us to ask the very real question, “What story are we in?”

I’ve summarised the events of the chapter in your outlines using the statements:

- No King
- No City
- No Temple
- No Priest
- No land

- No God
- No hope

When you put it like that, you can get a sense of how destructive this moment would have been for the confidence of a people for whom the blessing of living as God's people meant having God's people in God's city. Having the worship of God centred around God's temple and God's priests. Whose very foundation rested on the Promises to Abraham of a people in a land they call home, blessed by God and bringing God's blessing to the world. And as all that is stripped away, piece by piece here, we're left to wonder, is there any hope?

Our story starts with Zedekiah, the last of the royal line of kings to sit on the throne, initiating the last in a series of foolish rebellions against the Babylonian superpower.

Verses 1-7 recount a horrible, 2-year-long siege that King Nebuchadnezzar imposes on the city of Jerusalem. As the city walls are breached the defeated king rides out with the whole army, fleeing into the wilderness. The Babylonians give chase, overtake and capture Zedekiah and take him to King Nebuchadnezzar. The last thing defeated Zedekiah sees, before his eyes are put out, is his sons being put to death. King Zedekiah is taken to Babylon in chains and we never hear of him again. God's people have no king. That's the first disorienting event. Are we meant to remember God's promise to King David from 2 Samuel at this point – that He would establish David's family as kings over God's people forever? The author doesn't seem to rush to provide an answer. God's people have no king.

Verses 8-12 describe the tearing down of the city walls and all the buildings being burned, including the royal palace and the temple of the LORD. Isn't this the city we used to sing songs about? Songs like Psalm 122.

*"I rejoiced with those who said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord."*

*² Our feet are standing
in your gates, Jerusalem.*

*³ Jerusalem is built like a city
that is closely compacted together.*

*⁴ That is where the tribes go up—
the tribes of the Lord—
to praise the name of the Lord
according to the statute given to Israel.*

*⁵ There stand the thrones for judgment,
the thrones of the house of David."*

And here, now, lies the city in ruins, burned and broken down. God's people have no city.

And you'll see in verses 7-17 that it's the destruction of the temple that draws our attention in a very particular way. Right in the centre of the chapter, the destruction and removal of the grand decoration and the instruments of worship from the temple is recounted in strangely specific detail. It feels like the author is deliberately reminding us of the high point of nation's story when Solomon constructed and dedicated this place as the centre of the worship of the one true God in all the world.

In 1 Kings chapter 7, we're told of Hiram, the craftsman who cast two bronze pillars, 18 cubits high with two bronze capitals on top, adorned with pomegranates and interwoven chains. We're told of a circular sea of cast metal measuring 10 cubits in diameter. The sea is decorated with gourds and sits on twelve cast bulls. We're told of 10 movable bronze stands, decorated with cherubim, lions and bulls, each stand supports a basin decorated with wreathes. The whole of 1 Kings chapter 7 is dedicated to celebrating these ornate decorations and these objects of worship. It tells of golden lampstands and tongs, of gold basins, wick trimmers, sprinkling bowls, dishes and censers.

And now, back in 2 Kings 25 we read in verses 13-17

"The Babylonians broke up the bronze pillars, the movable stands and the bronze Sea that were at the temple of the Lord and they carried the bronze to Babylon. ¹⁴ They also took away the pots, shovels, wick trimmers, dishes and all the bronze articles used in the temple service. ¹⁵ The commander of the imperial guard took away the censers and sprinkling bowls—all that were made of pure gold or silver.

¹⁶ The bronze from the two pillars, the Sea and the movable stands, which Solomon had made for the temple of the Lord, was more than could be weighed. ¹⁷ Each pillar was eighteen cubits^[e] high. The bronze capital on top of one pillar was three cubits^[f] high and was decorated with a network and pomegranates of bronze all around. The other pillar, with its network, was similar."

The point is laboured, the pain of this moment is almost too hard to bear but the author holds it out in front of our eyes and forces us to do business with the fact that there is no longer a centre for the worship of the LORD in this world. God's people have no temple.

In verses 18-21 we witness the execution of anyone with influence who's left in the city. Among their number are the chief priest, his assistant and officers of the temple. Who's

going to lead us in the worship of the holy God? Who'll perform the sacrifices for atonement of sin? Who's going to help us celebrate the benevolent faithfulness of God? God's people have no priest.

Verse 21 reads,

"There at Riblah, in the land of Hamath, the king had them executed.

So Judah went into captivity, away from her land."

How can we even start to process this? God's people have no land. How can they even make sense of their stories? The story of Abraham and God's promise of a home for his descendants...the story of Moses and the ever-present hope of the land flowing with milk and honey... God's people have no land.

And you have to ask, is there any hope? Nebuchadnezzar establishes a local governor over the land and leaves the very poorest of the people to keep the vineyards maintained. Maybe we can be content to wait in caretaker mode for a while. But no, it seems we can't even do that. A discontented obscure royal leads a rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar's governor. They kill him and all the people run away to Egypt in fear of the Babylonians.

It's disorienting devastation after disorienting devastation. And what's left? What hope is left?

Of course, there is that final scene back in Babylon, of that king we met back in chapter 24, Jehoiachin, who'd only reigned for 3 months in Jerusalem before being carried off to Babylon. Well, it turns out Jehoiachin had been languishing in a Babylonian prison for thirty-seven years. And finally, there's a little good news. He is let out and is given the privilege of eating at the king's table for the rest of his life. That's kind of nice but doesn't feel like hope.

It feels more like the gentle flickering out of a candle that's burned all the way to the end. There isn't any real light here. The book closes and we're left bereft, lost and reeling. Aren't you even going to remind us why?

Lior Attar is a Jewish-Australian singer-songwriter and, although he is pretty open about his agnosticism, his Jewish heritage informs his song writing musically and lyrically. His

song, "Jerusalem", invites us into a sense of loss and disorientation. I think it might be about losing someone, I'm not really sure, but he uses this metaphor of Jerusalem crumbling to draw us into a deep sense of loss and lostness.

*"Jesse, tell me what it's like
When the earth stops turning?
Where do you go
When stars drop like snow,
And leave you a dark and infinite sky?*

*Can you see the light of day?
Is there a window in there?
Does it hurt when you're alone?
Do you see his lifeless face
Everywhere that you turn?*

*Jesse says Jerusalem has fallen,
What I held eternal just crumbled away
And though my days are a silhouette,
I know that beyond the rubble,
The boundless sea awaits."*

I love what Lior does here, "what I held eternal just crumbled away"

The first poem from the book of Lamentations does something similar, it opens with the lines:

*"How deserted lies the city,
once so full of people!
How like a widow is she,
who once was great among the nations!
She who was queen among the provinces
has now become a slave.*

*⁴ The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to her appointed festivals.
All her gateways are desolate,
her priests groan,
her young women grieve,
and she is in bitter anguish."*

And Jesus speaks of a similar time of destruction, foretelling another downfall of Jerusalem and foreshadowing the final judgement of God. He says in Matthew 24,

“Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

He says,

*“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’*

“Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”

I want to come back to that idea I started with, that the way we count time reveals a lot about the story we understand ourselves to be in.

You’ll notice that there are three ways of counting time in this chapter.

In verse 1, We’re told we’re in the ninth year of Zedekiah’s reign. But we can’t hold on to that way of counting time once he and his descendants disappear from the page. That’s not the story we’re in.

In verse 8, we’re told that we’re in the ninth year of Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon. Is that the story we’re living in? A new, foreign story? Is our frame of reference going to be the story of our adversaries? Are we to give up living the story we thought we were living? The story of a people set apart as the people of the living God? Is the victorious Nebuchadnezzar going to rewrite our story as a Babylonian story?

No. Our storyteller doesn’t leave us there. There’s one more way we might frame our story. In verse 27, we’re told it’s the thirty-seventh year of the exile. And, I think, for all the end of this chapter’s bleak pessimism and resignation, that this is a moment of defiant storytelling that helps make sense of the disorientation all around. We’re not the victorious people of God, living the life God promised. but we’re not the subjects of some ancient history lesson either. We’re living in an uncomfortable reality, we’re not at home and we’re marking time. Yes, it may have been 37 years – it may have been a lot longer - but we’re counting those years as years of exile. Years of waiting. It might be dark but it’s not defeat. You wouldn’t count the years if you’d given up.

And so, we're left with this question. What story are we living in? It might not be a story of kings and cities and temples and priests. It might not be a story that's as tangible as those concrete symbols of God's intentions for us. But, you know, our stories have always been about more than those symbolic structures – as meaningful as they are. Our stories are always about more than buildings and dynasties.

You might be forgiven for thinking that hope has dissipated like the smoke that rises from the ashes of God's city. I think the chapter has deliberately disoriented us to force us to ask hard questions about how we understand our story. It's left us asking, what is this, 'exile' we find ourselves in. What is this story we find ourselves in. Because it turns out this whole story we've been reading was written to exiles. The whole time, the implied reader sits in exile, counting the days of exile.

It's here that it's worth pausing to ask, if it's not ultimately about the city and the kings and the temple, what is it about? Maybe, like a good murder mystery, we need to reread the book to find the clues we might have missed the first time. And if we do start to reread these exilic texts again, I think we'll find that the essence of hope isn't the national structures but the God who sends poverty and wealth, who humbles and exalts, who raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap. Who brings death and makes alive. A God of resurrection. You'll see a lord here who is to be worshipped in spirit and truth. A God who is able, in the midst of the darkest of days - as the sky turns black and temple curtain is torn in two – to pave the way for new life.

If we reread this story, we'll find reason to hope.

Because 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings aren't ultimately about the kings and the city and the temple – all the things we find dismantled and smouldering in the last chapter, they're about God. And these stories are a message to exiles about God. It's a message to us about God and the a kind of hope that doesn't turn away from the darkness but sees God's persistent presence and his perpetual intention to bless. That sees the God who works miracles – The God who, even in the deepest darkness, can do a work of resurrection.

And it's worth asking how the story of exile speaks into our Christian stories. Because this this text is for us as much is it was for God's people then, who needed to know the God of resurrection.

Of course, we, his people, aren't thrust from God's presence the way Israel was. But Jesus was. And, in Jesus' own words, his second coming will be an experience of mourning for many.

But if we re-read this text – Samuel and Kings – we’ll find that God is the God of resurrection for those who approach him in their need with the humility of open hands.

And I’m going to finish our time today by reading Hannah’s prayer of thankfulness, from way back at the start of the story, in 1 Samuel chapter 2. You’ll remember Hannah as the barren wife of an obscure Ephraimite who asked God for a child and whose request God answered in the affirmative.

As I read Hannah’s prayer of thanks, I want you to listen for resonance with the story of the exile. I want you to listen for resonance with Jesus’ story and for resonance with your story. And I want you to reflect, what story are you living in the middle of?

“My heart rejoices in the Lord;
in the Lord my horn^[a] is lifted high.
My mouth boasts over my enemies,
for I delight in your deliverance.

²“There is no one holy like the Lord;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

³“Do not keep talking so proudly
or let your mouth speak such arrogance,
for the Lord is a God who knows,
and by him deeds are weighed.

⁴“The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

⁵Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry are hungry no more.
She who was barren has borne seven children,
but she who has had many sons pines away.

⁶“The Lord brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.

⁷The Lord sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.

⁸He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;

he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor.

“For the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s;
on them he has set the world.

⁹ He will guard the feet of his faithful servants,
but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.

“It is not by strength that one prevails;
¹⁰ those who oppose the Lord will be broken.

The Most High will thunder from heaven;
the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

“He will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed.””