

Stories from Exile
Pastor Mary Koon, October 13, 2019
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Our scripture this morning is part of the pastoral letter that the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the elders, priests, artisans, merchants and prophets in Babylon, after they were taken into captivity from their home in Judah.

Jeremiah tried his best to keep the Israelites in their home country, but he failed. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet, and for good reason – he suffered greatly. He prophesied, not in the court of the king, but in the streets. In speaking God’s words to the people, he was nearly put to death for a sermon he preached in the temple courts, was bound in stocks, and imprisoned. He was left behind when others were taken to Babylon, not important enough to worry about.

In Babylon, far from their home, the Israelites initially experienced the end of the world as they knew it. No government, no temple, no land. God felt so distant. The fall of Judah was the beginning of the Jewish diaspora – (when a people are dispersed from their homelands) people went to Babylon, Egypt and places around the Mediterranean. It was devastating.

Another prophet was advising the Israelites to fight back, to resist – he was predicting that this exile would be short – 2 years or so, and the people would return. But Jeremiah’s letter tells them something different. No, two years will not be it, but rather 70 – symbolic for being a long time, but encompassing more than a couple generations. You are in this for while. You’d better unpack those suitcases.

It is into this space that Jeremiah writes a letter of revolutionary hope. He knows that God is bigger than they imagined and doesn’t reside in one single place. The God they worship isn’t found in halls of power or through religious sacrifice, but among those whose lives are in need.

Jeremiah gives exiles, then and now, some strategies for surviving.

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7: These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. *This is the word of the Lord – Thanks be to God!*

The experience of exile is one of being cast out, sent away, unable to return to the way things were.

Eugene Peterson says that “The essential meaning of exile is that we are where we don’t want to be. We are separated from home . . . It is an experience of dislocation—everything is out of joint; nothing fits together.”

Exile, in one form or another, is part of the human condition. Israel’s exile was an extreme form of what we all experience from time to time. We can find ourselves in a form of exile by divorce, when we make a move from a cherished home to a retirement community, after an accident, illness, family estrangement, or a job loss. There is the exile that happens when one is a refugee or immigrant or in prison.

In conversation with so many of you, I recognize that feeling a kind of exile, as we try to make sense of society that feels upside down. We are experiencing deep political and ideological division, civil conversation is often been replaced with hateful hyperbolic language, and groups of people are in danger of being stripped of human rights.

In these very challenging times, Jeremiah calls us to a holistic practice of life giving and sustaining activities, spiritual practice.

As I read Jeremiah's letter, it called to mind psalm 137 and the need for lament. To process and express feelings. By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.

Jeremiah expressed his feeling to God. Crying out in anger, hurt, and loss, is part of our faith tradition and lets us know that we can trust God with our deepest feelings. And talking about our feelings with people we trust helps us get a handle on big, uncomfortable emotions. As Mr. Rogers (children's television personality and pastor), feelings that are mentionable are manageable.

I believe this is true.

One day, in 2013, as I took an egg from the refrigerator, I had an image of taking that egg and hurling it, along with its 11 crate-mates, into the window of the CEO of the company where my husband Jim had to leave his job over ethical disagreements. I fantasized waiting until night and walking to the building, and egging that big, pretty window reflecting the moon over the still water of Lake Minnetonka.

Jim was not working, after constantly having a job since he was 15 years old– it was a form of exile. He couldn't go back, and our life felt uncomfortable. I was aching and confused. I'd never wanted to hurt anyone or anything in my life. After 31 years working part-time and managing a household, I was loving my full time Oak Grove position, but Jim was taking care of the home. It felt out of joint. This change in job status came with relocation, downsizing, role reversals, saying good-bye to some beloved neighbors and letting go of family furniture that didn't fit our new place.

At times, my feelings were overwhelming, and uncomfortable - even scary. I talked to God, and to my trusted husband and close friends – all who received my words without trying to fix them or me.

Listening to and believing another's experience and feelings is part of our call as followers of Jesus. Expressing our feelings to God and others in safe spaces helps us to begin to make meaning in a new place.

Jeremiah encourages his people to invest where they are. Not to forget, but to shift focus to living in the now. To make the move from why me to what now. God was not all alone back in Jerusalem, but was present and alive with them. And God had a plan for them.

It's incredibly hard to focus on a place you do not want to be, particularly without the support systems that once held you up. But Jeremiah offers a way forward. He says keep on doing those things that sustain and affirm life – plant tomatoes and zucchini and give away the excess, build houses, make love, bear children and raise them into adulthood to do the same.

Little by little, healing can happen. God is found in the everyday going-about-your-business life chores. Small glimpses of grace emerge, insight may strike, and tiny shimmers of hope appear on the horizon.

Then Jeremiah adds a “but”. But, he says, pray for the welfare of the city they find themselves in, for in their welfare is yours. The translation of welfare here is shalom – peace, well-being, wholeness. Eugene Peterson describes Shalom as “The dynamic, vibrating health of a society that pulses with divinely directed purpose and surges with life-transforming love.” We see Shalom embodied in Jesus several hundred years later, and hear his words to pray for our enemies.

Jeremiah and Jesus know that we belong to one another, and we all belong to God. My shalom is inextricably tied up in yours. Our shalom-- as a church, city, nation, is inextricably linked to our world. There is

freedom is discovering this one-ness. It's worth reminding ourselves of this often.

We remind ourselves of this when light a candle this month to remember those whose lives have experienced a form of exile due to domestic violence. As they find shalom, so do we.

We remind ourselves of this as we support Oasis, and pray for Shalom, for their peace is ours.

We remind ourselves this as we pray for the well-being of those with whom we are angry, with whom we disagree...and worse.

If we can practice this when life is not so tough, we have greater muscle memory in challenging times. Our practice as individuals, coming together to practice as communities, spills out into the world, creating havens of hope and change.

I never threw eggs at that window. I never sent the scathing letter to the CEO I composed a thousand times in my head.

I prayed, I talked, I cried. And slowly, those hard practices of praying for those with whom I was angry, of digging in to a new neighborhood, of trying to listen and understand those whose experience of exile were different from mine became gifts that expanded my faith, vocation, and compassion.

When we feel that our world has become a place we do not recognize, may we come together - to listen and believe another's truth to pray for those with whom we disagree vehemently. To listen and believe another's truth. To invest in the everyday work that affirms and sustains life. For God is with us, and in God, our freedom from the bonds that hold us down.

Thanks be to God