

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
September 26, 2021
Jeremiah 29:1, 4–14

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

We take a look, for one more week, at the words of the prophets spoken to the people in exile. This week contains one of those verses that may be a favorite for many. It is a well-liked verse because it offers promise. It offers hope. It offers, seemingly, a bright and beautiful future. It offers a good word for people who are desperate to hear some good news. Listen for a word from God.

“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: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take 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. ⁷But 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. ⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do

not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

¹⁰For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.”

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

As I mentioned at the beginning, this verse is a favorite for many. This was true for both my mother and my father-in-law, and they could not have been more different from one another. They loved this verse, although they understood it very differently and were very different people. Still, it resonated with both of them.

But like many individual verses of scripture, when you only look at it from the one verse, you don't get the full picture. When you look at it in a fuller context, it changes a little. We do this all the time, taking verses out of context and finding inspiration, hope, promise...

The great love chapter from 1 Corinthians 13, that ends with “Now faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love...” we hear so often at weddings to extol the virtues of love is Paul's admonishment to a community that was fighting about who was more important.

Where two or three are gathered, most often used as a lovely sentiment that it only takes a few people for God to be among us, is about how to handle arguments, and if you can't settle a dispute.

We sometimes use scripture without knowing the full context, or maybe we know the full context, but we lift up a particular verse out of context because it has a needed sentiment.

The context of this letter is to people who are in exile. To a people who have been in exile awhile. Jeremiah is most likely writing to the second generation of leaders that have been in exile. That is, those who were sent into exile as adolescents and young adults, and who are now the next generation of leaders. Jeremiah's exhortations seem to be very much aimed at not the parents who make up the old guard leadership, but the younger folks who would be getting married and building houses. They've been at this exile thing for a while, and it looks like it might linger for a while.

The word of God through Jeremiah to the exiles was to plan on staying in Babylon for the foreseeable future. They are to build homes, settle down, get married, have children, and watch their children get married.

This isn't about a prosperous immediate future. This is a word of God to a people adjusting for the long-term to painful circumstances. This is a word of God to people whose world has been turned upside down and is likely not to get back to normal for quite some time.

Blessing for the exiles comes in the form of adjusting to, rather than escaping from their present situation. Perplexed, the exiles may have wondered, "This is not supposed to happen. Aren't we God's chosen people? Didn't God promise David that an heir would always sit on the throne? Didn't God promise Moses that our enemies would be God's enemies? Where is the throne? Where is God?"

Eventually the exiles would have to wrestle with theological questions about God. For now, it's a matter of survival. How is one supposed to survive in a strange land? Jeremiah's advice that the exile would last seventy years and that they should go on living would be the last thing the exiles wanted to hear. Blessing would come, but not in the way people had hoped. Blessing meant coming to terms with the present.

This was not the word the people wanted to hear. There were other prophets. There were other calls for hope and restoration. Hananiah, a prophet mentioned in the previous chapter of Jeremiah, told the people that this exile would only be a short two-year stay.

I would imagine, the people would much rather hear that message, a brief interruption, a brief inconvenience of two years, over against the word that this hardship would last for decades.

Jeremiah's message would not be welcomed. Who would want to stay in exile, miles away from home, for generations? Who would want to be commanded to bless the oppressors because one's welfare is connected to theirs? Who would want to be told to make the best of a bad situation?

He could have been like the other prophets; he could have spoken a more hopeful word. He could have made promises of a short exile. He could have proclaimed the second coming of Moses, liberation from Babylonian captivity, a second Exodus to a promised land.

Instead, he says. Hunker down. You are staying awhile. Make the best of a bad situation. And not only that but seek the welfare of your enemies in this foreign land, because whether you like it or not, your future is tied up with their future.

Jeremiah says, "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." The fate of everyone is inextricably bound up together.

The welfare of one is the welfare of all... even the people we don't like, even the people who won't wear a mask, even people who call this exile a hoax. Jeremiah's word to the people in exile was innovative and challenging.

It does not rely on the promise of the house of David, found in the temple in Jerusalem. It does not rely on former traditions and rituals. It seeks a different path forward. Jeremiah's letter is groundbreaking, earth-shattering, and a reminder that no circumstance is beyond God's purview.

Jeremiah breaks with the other prophets and tells the people that a return to the past is no longer possible. That a new future will need to be forged. He suggests ways forward to survive the suffering of their shattered world, without old support systems, the temple, land, traditional leadership structures.

“Faith in God becomes faith in the universality of God. When Jeremiah says, “Pray to [God],” he is affirming the fact that [God] *can be found even in this distant and foreign land. You can call on [God] even without temple and sacrifice and [God] will answer.* It is vital for you to ask for God with all your heart, then God will be found in a foreign land, in exile, in an unclean land. For God is present everywhere, even at the margins among the broken, the dejected, and the subjugated. This viewpoint is revolutionary, for Jeremiah shows that their religion does not depend on access to power, to the existence of the temple or the offering of sacrifices.”ⁱ

Jeremiah envisioned a beginning to the healing needed, both communal and individual, in the openness and the courage to give up unrealizable hopes and other harmful practices that seemed to offer a false sense of security. Jeremiah says to the exiles, it's time to stop living out of your suitcases.

When I accepted my first call to Illinois, we received a piece of advice we have never forgotten. Our dear friend, the spouse of a pastor, told us to unpack and settle in as fast and as much as possible, even if we didn't think we would be in a location for very long. She told us not to live as if things are temporary, because you never know what might happen. When we first arrived in Illinois, I thought I might serve that particular congregation for three, maybe five years. We were there for 10.

Friends, this is the word for us today. It's not one that I want to deliver. But I think it is one that needs to be heard. We are going to be here for a while longer. This is not a short-term exile. What we once thought was an interruption, is actually a disruption.

Many congregations have been living out of suitcases for the last 18 months or so. We have talked about and said the phrase, "when things return to normal," It's time to stop living out of suitcases and to make roots. This is where we are, and we can live as if this is the new reality.

It's time to settle in. it's time to build a house. It's time to find different traditions and ways of being the church, because the old ways are not available to us...

Who would have envisioned choir rehearsal outside? Or pan, tilt, and zoom cameras? It will still be a while until we see and hear the full choir, inside, with a full congregation. It will be a while longer until we can gather in the fellowship hall, with five generations of people, sharing a meal together. This is not the word I want to give, but it is where we are.

In order to seek the welfare of us as individuals, the welfare of the congregation, the welfare of Bloomington, and the Twin Cities, it's time to settle in for a while longer.

We are still called to build relationships, work toward peace... but it's still going to look different for a while. I long for and lament the old ways, it's easier and familiar. But it is time to unpack the suitcases of our former life and settle in to where we are now. Be open to new structures. Be aware that it will continue to take greater awareness to attend to one another, even in our pandemic fatigue or depressions.

What is a church in exile to do? Jeremiah tells us, *“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”* (Jer. 29:7).

“Welfare” is a translation of the Hebrew word ‘shalom’. Shalom means peace and prosperity, or human flourishing. There is some good news for us here: even in exile, the church itself *can* flourish and can have a positive impact on the surrounding culture. In fact, we are called to this very thing.

For Jeremiah, the key to survival and hope lay in joining God in the “creation of a just and compassionate counterculture, a place of new shapes and social alternatives where violence, exploitation and idolatry do not reign.”

That call has not changed.

The text calls the church into the world to address issues affecting people, especially those on the margins, those that suffer from political, social and cultural insecurity and discrimination. Margins are the space of God's visitation, for God is discernible and present in the margins. We are called to journey from the centers of power to the fringes of society to experience God in new ways and in new forms, because God is present in the disturbing and unsettling questions raised by experiences at the margins.

Social concerns, politics, economics, how power is distributed and shared, these are the realms that concern our theological belief and action.

The call has not changed, just the means by which we do it. We will have to continue to be innovative, creative. Even as we lament the former way of doing things.

Friends, God is not done with us yet, and we will return to some of the former ways, and we will reflect on and retain the new things we have learned along the way.

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

ⁱ Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, <https://politicaltheology.com/seeking-the-peace-and-prosperity-of-the-city-the-politics-of-jeremiah-2914-7/>