

## **Exile and Opportunity**

### **Jeremiah 29:4-14**

Our reading this morning is from the prophet Jeremiah, from chapter 29 which is called “the letter to the exiles.” God instructs Jeremiah to write a letter to the Israelites who have been deported to Babylon, and it’s important for us to put this passage in context.

This letter is sent shortly after the exile. And what is the exile? Glad you asked! In 587 BC the Babylonian army came and attacked and destroyed Jerusalem. The book of Lamentations is Jeremiah’s lament over the destroyed city.

Before this, Israel had just come out of a time of great prosperity and growth, under king David, then his son Solomon. It was a time of wealth and prosperity, of military might and of Israel’s political borders being expanded, and therefore there was peace within those borders. We might say this was the Camelot era of Israel’s history. And as sometimes happens during a time of prosperity, as a result of it, God’s people became proud, and they became complacent in their faith. They had ceased to “do justly, love mercy, and walk

humbly with their God” as the prophet Micah put it. They trusted in their wealth and in power instead of God, and they neglected the poor.

The prophets before Jeremiah, and Jeremiah himself challenged God’s people about their spiritual and social complacency, and their prosperity gospel thinking, and warned them that a rival empire would come and conquer them unless they turned their hearts back to God. Well, they didn’t believe Jeremiah or any of the other prophets, and sure enough, the Babylonians came and conquered them in 587.

The Babylonians’ method of conquering was to take the influential, strong, upper crust of the people and deport them 700 miles to the east in Babylon; and they left the weak and powerless people in Jerusalem—because they would be easy to control. Jeremiah was left behind in Jerusalem, which tells you what they thought of him.

So, think about this: here are God’s chosen people, who were redeemed out of slavery in Egypt by God’s mighty actions, such as the plagues on the Egyptians and the parting the Red Sea, providing food and water in the wilderness, among other things; who were given a promised land, which they eventually settled in and developed as their own, to become a great and

prosperous nation. Now, that promised land has been conquered and taken from them—or, rather, the people are taken from it, as it's being occupied by a foreign enemy. And they find themselves in exile—many of them 700 miles away in Babylon, some of them in exile in their own home land, amidst the rubble and destruction of their crown city. That's the *historical* context.

Let's look at the other context here, for a moment: the context of *exile*.

Because exile is something we all experience in one form or another personally during our lives, and it's something we are all experiencing right now at *this* unique time in history. We haven't been invaded and conquered by a rival empire, but we *have* been invaded in a way by a virus that has put us in our own unique form of exile.

Author and pastor Eugene Peterson has a wonderful description of exile, from one of his books on discipleship, titled *Run with the Horses*. I think you will find this to be incredibly relevant:

*"Israel's exile was a violent and extreme form of what all of us experience from time to time. Inner experiences of exile take place even if we never move from the street on which we were brought up. We are exiled from the womb and begin life in strange and harsh surroundings. We are exiled from our homes at an early age and find ourselves in the terrifying and demanding world of school. We are exiled from school and have to make our way the best we can in the world of*

*work. We are exiled from our hometowns and have to find our way in new states and cities.*

*These experiences of exile, minor and major, continue through changes in society, changes in government, changes in values, changes in our bodies, our emotions, our families and marriages. We barely get used to one set of circumstances and faces, when we are forced to deal with another. The exile experienced by the Hebrews is a dramatic instance of what we all experience simply by being alive in this world. Repeatedly we find ourselves in circumstances where we are not at home (even if we are physically at home). The essential meaning of exile is that we are where we don't want to be. We are forced to be away from that which is most congenial to us."*

Can anyone relate to this? Relate to an experience of feeling dislocated and dislodged from "home" at some point in your life, in the past? Do we feel this right now? We all experience exile, whether because of normal life changes, or because of massive disruptions and unforeseen events, like an infectious disease.

I know this potentially sounds depressing. But actually, like Israel's exile, it's an opportunity for us to learn and grow and let ourselves be shaped by God and blessed by God in new and wonderful ways. We don't have a choice about the disruption. This is happening *to* us. But we do have a choice about how we respond to it. As someone said to me once, when I was going through a rough patch of events that were out of my control: If you can't get out of it, get into it! You can either learn and grow and adapt, or you can let it do you in, or go into denial.

Along those lines (denial) it's important to point out something that happened while the Israelites were in exile:

There were false prophets among them. And the false prophets nurtured the peoples' self-pity and their spiritual complacency. And they told them lies like "Very soon you'll be able to go back to Jerusalem and everything will be just fine. And you'll be able to go back to the way things were. God isn't part of this exile, God doesn't want this for you." All of which wasn't true. The false prophets were putting forth a quick fix mentality, with nothing to back it up.

Everything had just changed and Israel had to face their new reality. But the false prophets were keeping them in denial about what had happened, saying 'It's not so bad; you'll go home soon.' And instead of encouraging the people to take time and take stock to consider how God had acted and was acting, and how the people needed to self-reflect on how they got there, and on how they can respond to God's activity and faithfulness, the false prophets just said, "No big deal; you'll get to go back to 'normal' very soon."

In the midst of this, God brings some instructions and challenge and a hopeful message to the people through the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah 29:4-14:

*“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. For 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, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.*

*For thus says the Lord: only when Babylon’s 70 years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. 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. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I 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.”*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

What does the Lord teach us about times of exile (personal or corporate) and what we can do when we find ourselves in the midst of them? Here are 4 things that I take away from this letter, and I personally found these helpful and encouraging at this time; so, in a way, I’m preaching to myself this morning:

1. Make yourself at home as best you can. Get on with life. You’re going to be in this exile situation for a while, so... build houses, settle down, plant gardens, get married, have babies. In other words, keep living, and,

specifically, keep living toward the future. Face reality, don't fight it.

You're in exile. Now, try to make yourself at home in this new reality as best as you can. Live! And look to the future.

So, step 1 is: deal with reality. Say, "this is where I am." This is my life right now. When we're going through a tough time it's tempting to pull in on ourselves and stop living and just wait things out passively; maybe twiddle our thumbs waiting for and wanting a return to what we were used to. God is encouraging and challenging them here: you can make a life in exile. The Babylonians obviously aren't so horrible that they're not letting you build houses and plant gardens and have families. There is room to live; there is room to grow.

Now, that's easier said than done, and can be especially hard for those for whom change is very disruptive and upsetting. God just brought enormous change and disruption to their lives. But by telling them to plant gardens and build houses and have families, he's helping them return *some* normalcy to their life, even in exile, and helping them begin planning for, and living toward, the future. Make yourself at home where you are in exile. Keep living toward the future, ***even if you don't know what the future looks like right now***. Embrace the disruptions in our lives rather than *fight* them.

2. Choose to be a blessing where you are. God says, seek the welfare of the place where I have put you. The word “welfare” here is the wonderful Hebrew word “shalom.” That wonderful word that means peace, wholeness, well-being, fullness of life. God is saying to them, be a life-giver, even in a place where it feels like life is being taken from you. Choose to be a blessing, even in the midst of your exile. Seek the shalom of where you are.

Writer William Faulkner, who lived and wrote in the south and saw the disastrous results of tornadoes & hurricanes, once said: “Disaster brings out the best or the worst in a person; it will be good for them, or destroy them.” After one series of tornadoes, he witnessed people whose houses had been wrecked rummaging through the rubble to find whatever they could of their possessions, not to keep for themselves but to give away to people who needed them. He noticed that these were the people who not only survived, but thrived afterward. They chose to be a blessing to others in the midst of their exile.

God, through Jeremiah, says: *let this bring out the best in you.* Pray to the Lord on its behalf; as it prospers, you prosper.

Seek the shalom of the place where you are, God says. “In its welfare (its shalom) you will find your welfare (your shalom).” If we choose to be a blessing, blessing will naturally be returned to us. When we create an environment of well-being and life, that environment of well-being and life and peace will feed back to us.

So, we can make our exile experiences growing ones when we: embrace reality by making ourselves at home where we are, and then choose to be a blessing where we are.

### 3. Listen to the right voices.

As we heard, the false prophets were prophesying that the exile would be quickly over. They were promoting false optimism and feel good-ism rather than faith and trust in what *God* was doing. And it’s very important for us to notice, that God takes responsibility for sending them into exile. The letter is sent to the Israelites “whom *I have sent* into exile.” And he repeats that again and again. Did you notice the personal pronoun in the reading? Where God says, “I did this, and now I will do this...”

The false prophets were not listening to God, but going for the quick fix. And any time we go for a quick fix, or others who are trying to encourage us go for the

quick fix, it usually makes things worse. It keeps us in denial and we lose the opportunity to pay attention to reality, and to learn and grow and be shaped by God in new ways.

This is why God makes it clear that it's going to be 70 years. I'm sure that must have felt like a splash of cold water on the face ("70 years?!? Some of us won't be around in 70 years!"). God is saying to them: there are no quick fixes here. No "just add water and stir" solutions. God wants to change and grow and shape these people into something new and wonderful. And it will take time.

And, it will be a multi-generational effort. I'm sure that's why God told them to be fruitful and multiply in exile. God wanted to regenerate and renew their identity and culture and faith as his people. And that would happen, through babies and children and young adults growing up and rubbing shoulders in tight quarters with older adults who would pass along the faith. And that needed to happen in exile, without the trappings of their comfortable religious surroundings. And, it needed to take a long time.

That's the hard news, but the good part is that the exile *is* bounded. It's 70 years, but 70 years isn't forever. There is an ending point. And that's the good news for us when we're struggling with our exile experiences. The hard part is, it

may not end overnight. It's gonna take as long as it takes (not 70 years in our cases, but usually longer than we like). The good part is: it will pass. The bible says, "And it came to pass." It doesn't say, "and it came to stay."

The admonition here is, don't let anyone give you false hope that everything will return to normal quickly, and thus hurry you or hurry the learning process. Listen to God, the one who truly has your best interest at heart. Take time to wrestle with this reality you are living in. It won't be easier, or faster, but it will be better—for you and for future generations. In fact, it will be amazing when we pray and patiently wait for God to fulfill his promise. Which leads to the final encouragement from this letter to the exiles:

#### 4. Have hope in God's promise. Trust God!

In exile God gives a promise, the famous Jer. 29:11 verse: "for I know the plans I have for you; plans for your welfare (there's that word shalom again!), and not for harm; plans to give you a future, with hope." This wonderful promise about his future plans for them. And what were those plans?... He didn't tell them! God says "I know the plans I have for you..." He didn't say "You know the plans I have for you." Dang it! But I want to know! I like to have things on my schedule, prepare ahead, have things in order.

But it wasn't for them to know the outcome, to have the plan in detail. And often it's not for us to know the outcome. That's the mystery of God's ways. God is saying, Trust me! Rest in me. Let my love for you, and your love for me be enough. Learn to trust me day by day, one day at a time. Don't worry, I do have a plan that will result in good for you, not harm. Pray, and trust. Seek me; search for me. And while you do that, plant your gardens, do good, seek peace, and trust God for the outcome of your exile experience.

Martin Luther: "I don't know what the future holds, but well I know the One who holds the future." The future is in God's hands, and so are we. That's good news. And that's the goal: to know God better, to trust God more. To grow in our relationship with him. Not to know the future in detail, but to know God who promises a hopeful future. And to do it without the usual handholds and supports.

It was in exile that the people of Israel discovered that God is not confined to the temple (to a building), or to their routines. We're kind of learning that right now, aren't we? God had stripped away their comforts and their routines, and was offering them the opportunity to just seek God with all their heart. To have no other possession, really, except God himself. Times of exile for us are often

like that. Times of being stripped of our usual comforts and attachments, and let the Lord himself be sufficient for us.

One last insight (and a very important one): this period in Israel's history, this 70 years, was one of the most creative periods of their history. It was during the exile that synagogues were invented and used for the first time. It was during the exile that they wrote down and copied all of their corporate history and the stories from Moses to the early prophets. It was during the exile that they composed art forms, songs, and psalms, many of which are in the Bible today.

The exile became the crucible out of which came precious and lasting things. In exile they lost the things they *thought* were important, and found what was most important: they found God. They found their faith. And in exile they didn't lose their identity; they actually discovered it.

And it is my hope that every person, and every church, finds a renewed sense of identity after this time of quarantine—maybe we can call it our mini-exile. It will take some time and conversation and discernment, but we have the opportunity to listen to God and find our true identity as God's people. And, to find fresh expressions of our faith, personally and corporately.

Let's remember God's promise to us: God is with us, God is faithful, God always makes a way forward and has a future filled with good things, with hope.

Let's pray together...