

## Narrative Lectionary- Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

November 26, 2017

We've been hearing from the Hebrew prophets over the last several weeks, warning the people of Israel and Judah that exile might be coming. The prophets were saying, God wants more than animal sacrifices and the smell of incense, God want widows and orphans cared for and the courts to demonstrate justice and the poor to stop being crushed.

And the prophets all said, If this doesn't change, punishment is coming. Exile is coming. And lo and behold, in 598BC the Babylonian army sweeps into Jerusalem, and conquers the people. And they transport King Jeconiah and 3,000 of the people from Jerusalem to Babylon. That's what conquering nations did. They removed people from their lands to demoralize them and to obtain labor for their own countries.

And the Jewish exiles in Babylon thought, We're being punished for our sins. We should have listened to the prophets and repented. But if things turn out the way we think they will, we'll get to go home soon. Only one generation of us will be punished. Because that only seems fair, right? So this exile will probably last 10, 15, 20 years, and then we'll get to go home. There were prophets in exile who thought it might be just a couple of years in exile.

But the prophet Jeremiah says, That's not the word of the Lord that I am hearing. Jeremiah had been prophesying since 626BC. By the time the Babylonians conquer Judah in 598 he has been prophesying for 28 years. People knew who he was. The kings knew he was.

Four years later some diplomats from surrounding countries meet in Jerusalem to discuss how to rebel against Babylonia. And God says to Jeremiah, You need to tell them this isn't going to work, because Babylon is my servant at this point. Jeremiah, I want you to give them an object lesson. Put a wooden yoke on your shoulders and go tell these kings, Unless you submit to the yoke that is Babylon, I will punish you by taking all of your people into exile. If you submit to the yoke that is Babylon, you can stay on your land, but you'll be under subjugation.

So Jeremiah puts a yoke on his shoulders and shows up at this political meeting. But another prophet named Hananiah shows up and says, I have another word from God. Hananiah says, Here's what God told *me*. In two years, Babylon will be defeated and all the exiles will come home. And Hananiah symbolizes this by taking the wooden yoke off Jeremiah's shoulders and breaking it. Jeremiah simply walks away.

So that's the setting for our passage today from Jeremiah 29. The first group of exiles has now been transported to Babylon, and Jeremiah writes a letter to these exiles. Here's what Jeremiah says in his letter, to people who think they are coming home soon: "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." (*Jeremiah 29: 4-6*)

God says to the people in exile in Babylon, Don't just put up with your circumstances. Don't just grudgingly wait until things change. You are going to be here for a while. Build houses and live in them. Put up pictures; put knick-knacks on your coffee table. Plant a garden, and eat the produce. Find wives in Babylon, get married, have kids. And if you're older, have your sons and daughters get married.

God says, Don't wait to begin living until you to get back home to Judah. *This* is where I have planted you for a while. Don't decrease there, increase there. Don't shrink in on yourselves, expand beyond yourselves. Multiply, blossom, bear fruit. Don't just survive there; thrive there.

Have you ever felt like you'd been sent into exile? Maybe you were living somewhere that you just couldn't stand. And you thought, I'm just going to endure this place until I get out of here. Maybe you felt like you were in exile because the culture was so difficult for you. You felt like a fish out of water.

Maybe you were working somewhere and thought, This is exile for me. I don't want this job. I don't like these people. Maybe you have been in the exile of illness, either your illness or a loved one's illness. And of course you pray for

healing, and maybe healing in the way you want doesn't come. And you are in circumstances you don't want to be. Maybe you're in a relationship that feels like exile, and it feels like you're just surviving.

You know, when we are in survival mode, we might have a tendency to close in on ourselves and take a passive stance to life. We're just going to get by until life's circumstances change.

But rather than these exiles taking a passive stance to life in Babylon, God says: Bloom where you're planted! Count the active verbs in this passage: *Build* houses...*live* in them...*plant* gardens...*eat* the produce...*take* wives...*have* sons and daughters...*take* wives for your sons...*give* your daughters in marriage...so that they may *bear* sons and daughters...*multiply* there...

God says to the people in exile, I have sent you there; you are going to be there a while; take the initiative and really make a life there.

I love that God blesses the ordinary things in life here: the building of houses, the planting of gardens, the taking in marriage, the bearing of children. That's how we honor God, by faithfully going about our daily lives, with the knowledge that God is revealed in all these activities.

And then God says these words that I believe are even more counter-intuitive: "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." (*Jeremiah 29:7*)

God says, Even though you have been taken someplace you don't want to be, by people that you hate, seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you. Work for good things to happen among your enemies. Seek the welfare of your enemies. And one of the ways I want you to seek their welfare is by praying for them. You know, it is harder to hate somebody when you are praying for them. It is harder to have ill will towards someone when you are praying that God would bless that person. It is harder to hold bitterness in your heart when you are praying for the betterment of that person.

I wonder if you would make a list this week of three people you have a hard time, and just begin to pray for them. Pray for their well-being. Pray for their welfare. Pray that God would bless them. Jeremiah says, Seek the welfare of those among

whom you have been exiled. And ironically, in their welfare you will find your welfare.

And then God says through Jeremiah, Don't listen to the proclamations of people who tell you otherwise. "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." In other words, don't believe the people who tell you, "We'll be back in Jerusalem shortly. Everything will be OK again soon." How long will this exile last? "For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill for you my promise and bring you back to this place."

God says, You are my people, and I have not forgotten about you, but you have some lessons to learn in exile. The time there will not be one generation, not two generations, but three and a half generations, seventy years. Then I will bring you back home. I haven't forgotten you. But I am going to work for your good in these circumstances in which I have placed you.

And then God says these wonderful words: "For 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."

When we feel like we are in exile, in a place we don't want to be, it might feel like God has abandoned us. And yet God says to the people in exile, I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare. I'm going to give you a future with hope.

And then God says: "Then when you call upon me 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. (*Jeremiah 29:13-14*)

God says to seek two things in this passage: seek the welfare of those around you, especially people you don't want to seek the welfare of, and seek God. It reminds us of Jesus' words, when somebody asks what the greatest commandment is. Jesus says, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love

your neighbor as yourself (Mk 12:30-31). God says, Seek me with all your heart, and seek the welfare of your neighbor.

So when we find ourselves somewhere that feels like exile to us, how do we build...and live...and plant...and seek ...and multiply...and increase. We get two clues in this passage: Seek God's presence in that place, in those circumstances, and seek the welfare of those around you. We cannot do this without God's strength, without God's power working in us.

The Amazon River is the greatest river in the world, meaning more water flows through it than the combined waters of the Mississippi and the Nile and the Andes rivers. There is so much water that comes out of the mouth of the Amazon that the current is felt for 200 miles out into the South Atlantic Ocean.

Many years ago there was sailing ship in the South Atlantic. The crew had run out of water, and the sailors were perishing. They came up alongside another ship in that area, and they said, Please, can you spare us some water because our sailors are dying? The sailors on this other ship said, Let down your buckets where you are. And they said, No, you don't understand, we need fresh water to drink. And they said again, Let down your buckets where you are! Finally when they heard it the third time, they understood. They were out in the ocean, perishing of thirst. But they were in the current of the Amazon, with fresh water all around them.

God says to us, Wherever you find yourself, seek me. Seek me in this place where you did not choose to be. Seek me with all your heart. Dip down your bucket and receive from me. I know the plans I have for you, to give you a future with hope. Amen.