

Wisdom on How to Live in Exile

3rd in the Series Seeking God's Wisdom in the Bible

The Reverend Renée Marie Rico

Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ

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Jeremiah 29: 1-14

Introduction

Today as I write this, we find ourselves living in a kind of exile
in our lives today – from gathering in large groups
from ordinary activities
from family
from eating someone else's food

Initially we thought this situation might be a few weeks, but now it seems that things are going to go on longer, and that raises other questions – about school, and work, about what our community/state/country/world will look like even in just a few months.

At the same time, we are experiencing an awakening on the social justice front as well – as black Americans give voice to injustices that have rolled down into today's institutions and practices. Protests are causing education, and education allows us to grow and see the world from different points of view.

It's a strange time – the euphemism in TV ads seems to be “In these uncertain times...”

So today's text from the prophet Jeremiah is to listen in on a letter being sent to some who are already in exile themselves. Let me quickly set the stage:

- The Hebrews are a long way from the glory days of King David and Solomon. The Kingdom of Israel has already been overrun by the Assyrian empire, leaving only Judah to find its way on its own
- The glory days of an economy that can support everyone having enough has transformed into an economy based on large landowners who export olive oil and other products to neighboring kingdoms and getting rich, with an underclass that has to constantly put family members into debt slavery to survive
- In spite of their treatment of the poor, the religious/civil hierarchy has believed that Yahweh (God) will never forsake Judah because of the promises God made, as long as the temple rituals are followed.
- Hebrew prophets for decades have warned that without social justice the kingdom will fall because God will turn his face on them.

- Now, the elites of the kingdom have been transported by the Babylonian empire to the capital city of Babylon, and the prophet Jeremiah has written them a letter in similar uncertain times.

Build, live, plant and eat

After the salutation, Jeremiah gives three major pieces of direction to those in exile.

1. Build, plant and eat
2. Seek the welfare of the place that you are in
3. Reorient your life to prayer and seeking

The first thing he says is to settle in and *live*. The subtext of this letter is that God is intending for the people to live in exile in Babylon for generations – in verse 10 Jeremiah will say that it will be 70 years. The references to false prophets, suggests, as some in our sermon Bible study noted, that some prophets who had gone into exile may have been telling the leaders that it would be over soon, that things are not as bad as they look.

Jeremiah does not mince words – they have failed God badly as the leadership of Judah, and God has turned away for now. The result is to look to adapt to their current circumstances – not planning and plotting what they will do when they can leave, but instead sinking down into life right there in Babylon. Jeremiah’s words could almost be the Buddhist tag of *Be Here Now*.

I was thinking about how we entered into our time of physical distancing with the coronavirus, and initially it seemed like this would be a weeks long effort and then things would go back to “normal.” I know I thought this. Only after more weeks of it and learning how we would need to adjust did I realize that while this will not last 70 years, it is impacting life for longer than we thought. Witness all the gardens being planted and sourdough bread bakers that are being created. Craft supplies left in closets have been pulled out and we are experiencing a revival of home cooking (not that all of us are happy about doing it 7 days a week).

For the Jews in Babylon, there was a difference in their lives in Babylon – they are going back to lifestyle more typical of King David’s time – they will build their own homes, plant their own gardens, eat food that they have raised. No longer will they rely on an international trade economy for their own comfort. No longer will they be able to establish their own comfort from places of privilege by living on the work of others.

I wonder for us, what changes will become more permanent in our culture – and which might be we choose that will be fairer for everyone?

Seek the welfare of the place where you are

The second piece of advice that Jeremiah gives is to seek the welfare of Babylon. This is an astonishing piece of advice when you consider that the people are in the capitol of the Empire that in the process of destroying their land. They have come not of their own choosing, and yet by finding the welfare of Babylon, their own welfare is more likely. Some of our sermon study folks mentioned the DACA children today as some in our own country who find themselves in a similar position – they didn't choose to be here, they have grown up in this country and it is their own as they have sought the welfare of the US by being contributing members of society.

Seeking the welfare of the place is also recognizing political reality of the Hebrews – they are a small cog in the larger political reality of Empires clashing with one another.

Reorient your life – seek and pray

The third piece of advice that Jeremiah gives is to do some reflection, to seek God and pray. After all, Jeremiah tells them that they had not followed God in social justice in their own land, these are elites who had the best of everything in a trade economy that trampled on the poor.

Now, their spiritual journey will be a long one – that 70 years (which turns into a 49-50 year exile because the Persian Empire comes into control over the Babylonians. Jeremiah offers hope for the exiles in their journey. Our class particularly took note of verse 11:

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 our time of staying home, physical distancing, and refraining from larger gatherings stretches on, we can consider how this time might reshape us as people of God. One person in our Bible study noted that she had been really disoriented by not gathering physically in the sanctuary and having online services instead, but that she has adjusted. (Others of us may still feel disoriented and the loss of sanctuary worship) I wonder what God is doing with our church to expand how we see the ministry occurring in a different way as we go forward – how our ministry might be reaching out to new people.

Let us live into these wonderings.

Let us live in patient waiting and hope for God. Let us live. Amen.