

Jeremiah 29:1-9

Last Sunday evening, I spent some time with our youth group and spoke about my personal faith journey starting when I was their age, growing up right here in this church. Afterwards, I continued to personally reflect on the many places where I landed during these many years. All of us can probably think of a time and place when you found yourself in a place that didn't feel at all like home. Often times, those situations lead us to feel homesick, recalling persons and places left behind; things that were familiar and comfortable. We long for home!

Here in the scripture from Jeremiah, that is exactly where we find the Israelites who had been exiled to Babylon. The nation of Israel was divided and demoralized. The people were in a foreign land, broken and homesick for their homeland. But among the exiles, we learn through the scriptures that "false" prophets had predicted the imminent doom of Babylon. Of course this gave the Israelites a hope that they would soon return to Judah. But of course those prophecies were unfulfilled because they came from the mouths of sources that were not given a message from God.

And so, the people continue to wait and wonder, "What do we do until this exile is over?" Of course, I was not among those who were waiting in Babylon, but in places where I wasn't sure what the future held, I often reflected on the past – what led to bring me to a particular place. Maybe when the Israelites' release didn't come as quickly as they had anticipated, they too may have thought about Jeremiah's previous warnings to them because they weren't following God's law; they had been neglecting the widows and the orphans; they were exploiting the poor; all signs that their spiritual life had become unhealthy and if that continued, bad things were going to happen. And by the time Jeremiah wrote this letter bad things had already happened, which is why the exiles are up in Babylon. As his writing was read and circulated among them, these broken and displaced people surely recalled the ways that Jeremiah had tried to reach them with the truth. He

had never let them go. And now, from eight hundred miles away, he still looks upon them with an understanding of their feelings. The people of Judah had been forced to leave their homes in Jerusalem and become refugees in Babylon. They were moving from their known traditions to a place that bore no resemblance to their prior life. In Psalm 137 we find words that must have been a reflection of their thoughts:

It says, “By the rivers of Babylon-there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)

People living a long way from home, in a society that did not believe in their God, wondering what they were going to do. God instructs Jeremiah to tell them what He wants them to do and the news is unexpected, to say the least. The nuts and bolts of the message to the people are this:

- Build homes and plan to stay
- Plant gardens and eat what you plant
- Get married, and have kids
- Get your kids married and have grandkids
- Work for the peace and prosperity of Babylon

In other words, don’t dwindle, multiply! There really isn’t anything wrong with any of this is there? God is giving some really good, sound, practical advice. It’s not the advice that’s a problem! The problem is where God says to do it. Right where they are!

You have to think that the hardest thing for the Israelites to swallow when they heard Jeremiah’s letter was “plan to stay and work for the peace and prosperity of Babylon.” What? Work for these pagans? God, you’ve got to be kidding. They worship idols! They do disgusting things! They eat pork! God, we can’t stay here! This doesn’t make sense! These orders sound ridiculous. “God, what are you doing?”

Jeremiah is urging the people to embrace the present as the arena in which God will work; to abandon the false hope of a quick release from captivity and of trying to recreate what was already lost. Jeremiah's words had to shock the exiles. The message from God is saying, "Listen to me. Your old life is dead. Your new life is to be found in Babylon. Deal with it. Settle down. Adjust!"

Wow! That's harsh. These Israelites were biding their time, mourning their loss, waiting to be rescued. Can any of us identify with their situation? Have you ever been faced with the uncertainties and consequences of unintended change in your life – just biding your time until . . . that new job comes along, you pay off a debt, you get married, you recover from a health setback. All the time, you put off or at least seem powerless to change your situation because you are just biding your time.

On the light side, I did read a funny illustration of this situation:

A fortuneteller was gazing into a crystal ball, and talking to a frog who was sitting across from her. The fortuneteller says to the frog, "You are going to meet a beautiful young woman. From the moment she sets eyes on you she will have an insatiable desire to get close to you – you'll fascinate her." The frog excitedly asks, "Where am I, at a singles club?" "No," says the fortuneteller. "You are in biology class."

This should remind us that the first thing we need to do is take a look at our circumstance and perceive our position. God gave the exiled Israelites an answer, an answer for each of us to consider how to live right now, wherever we are, with whatever is going on in our lives. We are being told to deal with present realities. But here's the catch! We are to deal with these realities not within our own frame of reference but from that of the Lord! He knows where we are and He calls us to be His representatives in that place at that time.

Reading verse 4 again "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon". But in verse 1 it says that it was Nebuchadnezzar that had taken the people into exile. So, who really carried the Israelite people into captivity? Of course it was God and Nebuchadnezzar was

just the man He used to carry out His plan. God knew, God allowed, and purposed this for his chosen people. It was His plan.

The next part of God's message is to GET PRODUCTIVE! "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease."

The practical message from Jeremiah is this: Focus on life; don't wait for the perfect place and the perfect timing to take action in whatever circumstance you find yourself. Start living, REALLY LIVING! Healthy human living is much like a plant's. A plant that is alive in a pot is not necessarily healthy. From time to time plants and people need to bloom and produce seeds. So whether your life is picture perfect or has the feeling of exile, God is calling you to keep on living. We are expected to grow and prosper wherever we are and under every situation. Don't wait for what you may perceive as the perfect time and place. It is often said that life is what happens to us while we are making other plans.

The final piece of God's plan for his people is outlined in verse 7 which I will share with you as written in the New Living Translation: "And work for the peace and prosperity of Babylon. Pray to the Lord for that city where you are held captive, for if Babylon has peace, so will you." There are not enough words to explain how prayer fits into any time or place, especially when we find ourselves displaced and like the Israelites, longing for the way things used to be. As I shared with our youth group last Sunday, you have to be ready to react when God's plans don't fit with the ones you have made. Prayer allows us to let God speak to our circumstance and guide us along the path he has prepared for us. Pray for your situation, whatever that may be and be prepared to react to something totally unexpected if that is God's plan. Regardless of what brought us to a particular place, it is our reality and this is where God has placed us. We must live here for now. God has a plan for your life and for mine. And so as not to leave you wondering, how things worked out, here is the part of the scripture we didn't read – verses 10-13.

¹⁰This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹²Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”