

Seek the Welfare of the City
2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?' He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean"?' So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.'

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

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: 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 seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil 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.

Last week we heard from the great prophet Isaiah about the great light that is going to come into the darkness. We spoke about walking in darkness and how light changes things.

Isaiah was writing in the late eighth century BC, when the kingdoms of Israel and Judah faced extinction at the hands of the Assyrians. Israel, the northern kingdom, was then conquered by the Assyrians and the people taken off to exile in Assyria, the area around modern-day Kirkuk, Iraq.¹ They were taken off into exile, but the people survived. There is a small Jewish population in that area even today.

A bit more than a hundred years later, in the early sixth century BC, the next great prophet speaks up. Jeremiah is a charismatic preacher and an astonishing wordsmith, but I suspect he does not get invited to a lot of parties. He keeps talking about how God is will let the Hebrew people's enemies conquer Jerusalem. God is then going to rebuild from scratch.

Jeremiah keeps repeating that God has sent him “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”² Now, building and planting sound very nice, but plucking up and pulling down, destroying and overthrowing have to come first, to make room for building and planting. They don't sound like so much fun, if you are on the receiving end.

Then what Jeremiah had been predicting happens. The Babylonian Empire conquer Jerusalem and take back with them to Babylon the royal family, chief priests, and other people

¹ Kirkuk has been identified by archaeologists as being essentially the site of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

² Jeremiah 1:10, among others. This *motif* is repeated in Jeremiah many times.

who would be likely to cause trouble if left alone. Babylon is also in modern-day Iraq, about fifty miles south of Baghdad.³ Interestingly, Jeremiah is not taken back to Babylon. He is left in Jerusalem.

Babylon is the largest, most cosmopolitan city in the world at this time.⁴ The Hebrew people are brought here against their will from their single-ethnic state, and told that they must live here now.

In this confusing context, Jeremiah, who may not be the exiles' favorite person in the world, but whom they have to admit was right, sends them a letter. In this letter, Jeremiah tells the people that they should stop complaining about Babylon. He tells them that they should not listen to the preachers who are telling them that the good old days are coming back any time now. Jeremiah goes further than that: he says that the preachers preaching the imminent return of the good old days are lying, and that God did not send them.

Therefore, Jeremiah says, the people should plan on being here for the long term. They should build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat the food they produce. They should “seek the welfare of the city where [God has] sent them into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf.”

They should become part of the community. They should get married and have children, and allow their children to marry when they come of age. Marriage is amazing in the way it connects families who otherwise might have nothing in common, isn't it? It turns people who might be antagonistic toward each other into family, whether they like it or not. It uses the natural love of two people to expand “family” far beyond where it would otherwise go. That might be part of the purpose of marriage.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylon>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylon>

When the exiles settle down and become part of the community, Jeremiah says, they will find that God has plans for them, plans for welfare and not harm, plans for a future with hope. This particular verse is often quoted out of context to speak about individual people. I even have a keychain somewhere with this verse on it, given to me by someone early in my seminary days. But the “you’s” here are all plural. A more accurate translation might say that, “Surely God knows the plans God has for all y’all, plans for all your welfare and not for harm, to give all y’all a future with hope.” Jeremiah tells the Hebrew people who have been exiled that all is not lost. He tells them that God has plans for them: not just plans for a few individuals, but plans for them as a people. God will restore their fortune and gather them back from all the places where God has driven them.

I got to thinking about this passage this week. There is truth in Scripture, and application to our lives, but sometimes how it applies to a given situation is not obvious. I asked the question, how does this Scripture passage apply to a congregation of mostly white Americans here in Lincoln Village, in the suburbs of Columbus, Ohio, in 2017?

Who is in exile today, who might be on the receiving end of this letter?

Some answers are obvious. Refugees are in exile.

There are refugees all over the world, driven largely out of the Middle East and out of parts of Northern Africa. ISIS is part of the cause; al Qaeda is part of the cause; other problems, like ethnic cleansing in Sudan and chaos in Somalia, predate ISIS and al Qaeda both.

We have many refugees here in the United States, and here in Columbus. Did you know that Columbus, Ohio has the world's second-largest concentration of Somali people outside Somalia?⁵

We are called to love our neighbors and to treat the alien among us like one of our own citizens,⁶ but, looking around this room, I don't see a lot of refugees. This letter was not written to us because we are refugees, far from our homes.

Then I was listening to a podcast,⁷ and one of the podcasters started talking about that the world around him has changed, and he feels stranded. The world he grew up in doesn't exist anymore. He's not sure how to navigate this new world that he lives in now.

People interact differently than they used to. How often should he update his Facebook feed? Sure, he texts, but should he be tweeting? How should he be communicating, if he wants people to listen to what he has to say?

He has to live in this context which he did not choose. He would not have chosen for the world to change, and, if it did, he would not have chosen for it to change in quite the way that it did.

He feels like he is a refugee in a world far from the one that he thinks of as home.

There is a real danger here.

I had a friend in graduate school who was born and grew up in Chicago. I believe that she may have been exaggerating, but she used to claim that she did not learn a word of English until

⁵ The largest is Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota.

⁶ Leviticus 19:34.

⁷ Hat-tip to Rev. Dr. Craig R. Koester at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=939.

she started kindergarten. Everyone around her spoke Polish, so she did, too. Maybe a few words of Latvian, so that she could tell the kids from two streets over to go back home to their own people.

There is a danger of contracting into cultural enclaves that are just as closed as those ethnic enclaves where she grew up. We don't speak Polish, or Latvian, but we speak in church code words and we stay in the limits of the past.

The Session has called a congregational meeting for today, to review the pastor's terms of call. This meeting will be moderated using Roberts' Rules of Order. The worship committee is looking for people willing to serve as acolytes and as liturgists – please sign up in the narthex. Remember, to serve the Lord's Supper, you must be ordained. We can't possibly consider X, because a pastor said we couldn't, twenty years ago. Or, even worse, Presbytery said we couldn't, thirty years ago.

This language and this history makes sense to some of us, but not to others. It creates insiders and outsiders, and it may make us appear irrelevant to the outsiders.

To that Jeremiah says, if you feel like you are in exile, that's okay. God's people have been in exile before. Seek the welfare of the city to which you have been sent in exile.

Don't panic. I'm not saying that you have to post on Facebook every day. You don't have to tweet. You don't even have to know the difference between Etsy and Flickr and Hangouts and Instagram and Kik and LinkedIn and Messenger and Periscope and Pinterest and Quora and Snapchat and Twitter and Vimeo and Vine and Whatsapp and Yelp and Yikyak.⁸

⁸ Brief and basic analogies to explain what some popular different social media apps do: <http://www.bitrebels.com/social/10-ways-to-explain-social-media/>. Note that not all explanations are entirely safe for work.

But we do have to care about people for whom the social media world is part of their lives.

Likewise, we have to care about people who don't know the difference between an elder and an acolyte, between a deacon and a liturgist, between the nave and the narthex.⁹ We have to care about people who don't know what happened here twenty years ago. Most people don't.

But there are a lot of people who don't know that language or that history, who still love God. And they want to help feed hungry people, and get coats to kids who need them, and seek justice for those who don't have it.

Let's start, and this isn't just me and this isn't just you, this is all of us. Let's work harder at reaching out to people who may not look like us or sound like us. That will mean translating some of our church talk into plain English, and it may mean being flexible about ways to accomplish God's goals here.

That's okay. This is the city to which God has sent us. Let's reach out.

AMEN.

⁹ For reference: an elder is an elected and ordained member of the congregation who serves (or has served) on the Session, helping to run the congregation. An acolyte is the person who lights the candles at the beginning of the service. Deacons are elected and ordained leaders in service to those in need. The liturgist is the person who helps the pastor lead the worship service. A given person may be any combination of these. The nave is the raised area in the front of the sanctuary (the large room where we hold worship services), and the narthex is the little lobby outside the sanctuary.