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Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7, 11

“A New Normal”

Will you pray with me?

God of our many communities, God of our many cultures, our many languages, our many faiths – pour out your spirit on the people gathered here, that we may hear your word anew in our spirits and in our hearts. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all these gathered hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, folks, we’re back in Jeremiah. If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you know it’s our second go-around with Jeremiah recently.

I gave you a lot of history last time – so, if you weren’t in church, hey – that’s on you!

I kid, I kid, we have some visitors after all.

So, the quick and dirty version.

Jeremiah is a prophet – one of the big wig prophets in the Old Testament. He was a prophet in Israel during arguably THE most significant period in history for the Jewish people – the exile years in Babylon.

And two weeks ago, we were in chapter 32, witnessing Jeremiah buying a piece of land from his cousin, while he sits in prison – long story. Basically, Jeremiah buys worthless land in his war-torn country, because God reminded him that at some point in the future – peace and new life would return to Jerusalem.

This week, because the lectionary likes to keep us on our toes, we’ve jumped back a few chapters and met Jeremiah before his land-buying act of prophetic hope.

The next devastation coming is not yet imminent in Jerusalem – instead in this passage, we’re reflecting on destruction that has already come to pass.

Ten years before we meet Jeremiah in prison, Babylon invades for the first time.

And during that first invasion, they carry off all the important people in Jerusalem. The King, the queen mother, the court officials, the government leaders, the priests, the craftsman, the smiths. The entire cast of The Crown basically – it’s a LOT of people.

And all these elites are taken into exile in Babylon. Separated from the Temple – which up until then was the only place to worship God and observe their rituals and holidays.

Separated from their families, their land, the food they like, basically everything they've ever known.

And so, it's no surprise, that as soon as they arrive, they start itching to return home.

Unfortunately, a quick return is not to be.

The text we're reading from today is a letter Jeremiah sends to all the exiles on behalf of God.

You see – there have been some false prophets and priests spreading rumors to the exiles. Telling them what they want to hear. That this exile is just a temporary, 2-year thing. Anyone can live in a place for two years! I lived in Iowa for two years, after all.

But Jeremiah has some bad news – some major bubbles to burst.

“Those false prophets?” he says, “They are lying to you. You're going to be in exile for 70 long years.”

So, get comfortable. settle down. Build some houses, put in gardens, marry and have children. This isn't a short-term lease kind of situation. God's not bringing you back anytime soon, so you better start getting used to your new normal.

Oof.

And even harder to swallow than all of that news, Jeremiah adds this other part,

“Work for that country's welfare. Pray for Babylon's wellbeing.”

Could you imagine? Being told to work for, PRAY for, the wellbeing of the nation that conquered your own? That dragged you into exile?

It's kind of unimaginable.

And yet, it's the word the exiles get. And it's a word that we expect most immigrants to this country – willing or unwilling – to get too.

I often wonder when I read Biblical texts where I am in the story. If I'm the one the text is addressed to.

And it was funny – for most of this week, I figured I was a Babylonian.

I mean, we can say this country is a country of immigrants, but I've never really had that experience. Of being the stranger in a foreign land. At least not how I imagine it must have been for the Jewish exiles.

I haven't had to learn a new language to fit in at school or work. I haven't had to eat different foods, adapt to a different culture, swear loyalty to a country that I wasn't born in.

Heck – no one has ever even asked me to swear loyalty to this country – that's the kind of privilege a citizen gets.

So, when I read this text, I think about all the recent and not-so recent immigrants in our communities. That's who it feels like this letter would be addressed to in our contemporary context.

And I thought a lot about the call God was making to the Babylonians. To welcome the stranger in their midst – to sell them land, to plant gardens side by side, to become neighbors.

I do believe that's one of the calls for us in this text, Bethel. It's a call you've already claimed – an immigrant-welcoming church – but it's one I know we're still learning how to live into.

But here's the other thing I realized while wrestling with the text this week.

Sure – maybe if we laid this exact context onto our present moment, I'd have a lot more in common with a Babylonian than with a Jewish exile.

But that doesn't mean I've never been in exile. Or that I won't experience it in my lifetime.

So many of us have experienced exile. From our communities, from our churches, at work, in our schools, in our country.

This week with National Coming Out Day being celebrated – I remembered how many people are in exile from their own families.

Exile is that feeling of having all we've known, all we've turned to for security and comfort, having that pulled out from under us.

And it's hard to adjust – we so often, want things to just simply return to how they were before.

Being a stranger in a foreign land is not always literal. It is a feeling of disconnection, of being an outsider, of suddenly finding yourself, ourselves, struggling to adapt to our new normal.

All of us have experienced and will experience this kind of pain. It's part of the suffering of our human existence – and its part of the growth process when we're headed towards new life.

The letter Jeremiah writes is to an immigrant community. It's to a minority group, struggling to find community, to find a way of life in a foreign land.

You'll notice that nowhere in the letter are the exiles encouraged to forget their faith, forget their God, forget the land of their birth, or even forget their language.

They are encouraged to set down roots, but not to forget where they came from.

This letter, is written for them.

But it's written for us too. All of us have experienced exile – the disruption of our normal lives, a forced adjustment to a new normal.

Adjusting to a new normal is made a lot easier if someone makes you feel welcome, makes you feel seen, makes you feel loved along the way.

We are commanded to love God and neighbor – most especially the stranger in our midst.

Some of you – those who notice details, I know who you are – may have noticed there's a fourth reading listed I never got around to reading.

A single verse – a little bit tacked right onto the end. Well, it's sort of serving as the final bit tacked onto my sermon too.

Jeremiah 29:11 is one of those verses that gets the John 3:16 treatment. It's one of those verses where everyone thinks the message is just so clear that it's all you need to know. The whole Bible summed up in a single verse. Don't bother reading on.

This verse gets printed on t-shirts, journals, water bottles – trust me, I was given the water bottle. Recently. And that's all well and good. It's a beautiful verse, full of hope and promise. I treasure that water bottle.

But It's never that simple. Because no single verse can ever, should ever, be divorced from its context.

Jeremiah 29:11 from the NRSV (just to give you a more traditional version of it) reads:

“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.”

When this single verse is given to an individual, it's divorced from its actual context in Jeremiah.

This verse is part of the letter Jeremiah sent to the exiles in Babylon. This verse is addressed to a community – a people – a nation – it is NOT addressed to an individual.

That context is important. Because we live in a nation, a culture, a religion even, that likes to hold up the individual above all else.

Individual salvation, individual worth, individual strength.

But God never intended these words for an individual. God intended them for a community.

Because God knows and Jeremiah knows, that some of the individuals reading this letter, will not live to see the hoped-for future, God promises. Some of these individuals will spend their whole lives in Babylon, just trying to make a life.

And it will be their grandchildren, their great-grandchildren, and many descendants down the line who experience the plans of God and become the reality that their ancestors dreamed of and prayed for.

“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.”

God has plans for us. For Bethel, for White Salmon, for the vast multitudes of communities spread all around the world.

But God’s plan is not for me alone. I may not even live to see God’s plan to fruition – because God’s plan for me is wrapped up in God’s plan for you.

When you thrive, I thrive. When you survive, when the plants and animals survive, I too, survive. Our fates, our futures are wrapped up with one another.

God’s letter, God’s word, is addressed to us all. “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord.”

For surely I know. God knows what the future will hold.

So, what do we do – mere mortals – without the ability to predict the future?

Well, we plant gardens. And we plant ourselves at the Gates of Hope. Trusting that the plans God has for us – for our welfare, for a future with hope – will come to fruition.

So, let us take our place, Bethel, at the Gates of Hope – beckoning, welcoming, urging others to join us there, sharing in the future God sees for us all. Amen.