

We are Exiles

Preached on Trinity 23
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ, Vt.
November 15, 2020
Text: Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-14

The letter we heard a few minutes ago from Jeremiah was a letter addressed to exiles from the Kingdom of Judah. These were the Jews who were forcibly deported by King Nebuchadnezzar after he had besieged and finally destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. This exile in Babylon was a hugely significant event in Jewish history and can, without exaggeration, be called a watershed. After this, much of Jewish life and self-understanding changed forever. Like most Middle Eastern peoples, their religious identity had been tied to a homeland and to a Temple. But Nebuchadnezzar had carted the people off of their land and destroyed the Temple. The Jews were forced to seek another way of maintaining their religious identity. The catastrophe of the Exile, therefore, brought about a number of significant changes to the way Judaism was practiced, even up to the present day.

For one thing, the focus shifted from animal sacrifices, requiring a temple, to the study and teaching of the Torah, the Law of Moses. A new class of professional clergy arose called rabbis, who spent their lives studying the Torah and its important commentaries. Another change was the emergence of the synagogue as the place of worship for Jews. Wherever they had been dispersed in the Middle East, they could still come together to sing Psalms and study the Torah in the synagogue.

Judaism also became more a religion of salvation after the Exile. Many of them blamed this disaster on their own impurity. They had betrayed Yahweh by tolerating false gods and allowed their worship and observance to become corrupt. Hence, they sought to be made right before God through their faithful practice of His laws, looking forward to the day when Israelites would be gathered together once more, their society and religion purified, and a Davidic kingdom re-established.

But they first had to go through the suffering and humiliation in Babylon. It would be hard in that circumstance to be very hopeful about anything or to believe God cared about them at all. It must have furthermore been difficult to see God as living up to His covenant promises. Their exile seemed beyond explanation. Hebrew history had been built on the promises of Yahweh to protect the Hebrew people and use them for his purposes in human history. Their defeat and loss of the land promised them by Yahweh seemed to imply that their faith was misplaced. A real change in their self-understanding and destiny was required.

What was also required was a word of encouragement, something that would stand as a counter to despair. But at first the words we heard today from Jeremiah sound perplexing.

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 their 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.

Is God telling them just to go on as if nothing has happened? Are they to live in denial? Of course not. God knows they are at the end of their rope. He even claims that He has sent them into exile. He is not telling them that they shouldn't be sad. What He wants is for them not to give up. They will be in Babylon for quite a while. In fact, those to whom His words are addressed will not see their homeland again. But they are to continue as a people, His people. They are to build, to cultivate, to marry and to produce offspring. They are not to die out. God is not done forming them into His holy people.

We in this parish, and parishes and congregations all over the world, are facing our own Babylon. This scourge of COVID has brought hardship and testing, uprooting us from what we have always known. There is fear and anxiety among many in our country and in our church. We have many who cannot be with us, including our priest. The restrictions on in-person worship and travel are going to become more stringent, and many see our religious liberties under attack. There is a lot to be concerned about. Though we have not lost our homeland, we are experiencing the same disorientation and difficulty coping as were the people of Judah.

But we must do as the Lord told his captive children. Continue on building and planting, marrying and bearing children. For the Lord has not forgotten us nor forsaken us. We are to seek the welfare of the cities and towns where we live, contributing to the common good as we can. We will continue worshipping God and seeking His guidance. What we cannot do is slip into despair. This cuts us off from God and leads us to give up. Nor should we start looking to politics for our salvation. When the Church seeks Her security in a Faustian bargain with the powerful, Her unique witness wanes, and She becomes corrupt. Jeremiah mentions the false prophets and diviners who promise a quick fix. Those people are still with us. They promise worldly solutions to what will only admit of a heavenly one. Leaders in love with power are not going to save the Church; they will just domesticate it. The Church needs to remain faithful to her True King. If she trusts in any other, she is doomed.

A very good weapon against the temptation to forsake God and take matters into our own hands is to remember the story of Joseph. This is one of the most engaging stories in the Bible and its appeal never dies out. As you remember, Joseph was the golden child. His father loved him more than the other 11 brothers and they hated him for it. God gave Joseph a couple of dreams that, in essence, said: "Joseph... I've got a

plan for your life. You're going to become a man of great importance. In fact, you're going to be so important that even your family are going to bow down to you." Joseph makes the mistake of sharing that dream with his family and, unsurprisingly, his brothers are not pleased. In fact, when they get the chance to get Joseph off by himself they beat him, and then throw him into a pit with the intent of killing him. But then their older brother Reuben intercedes: "Let's not kill him," he says. "After all, he is our brother...let's sell him instead." And that's just what they do. They encounter a group of slave traders and exchange their brother for a handful of silver. Joseph, this man who had the promise of God that one day he would be great, ends up being sold into slavery in Egypt to a man named Potiphar. Here too, just like the Exile, everything seems to be arguing against God's love and care for Joseph. But Joseph decides he will be God's man, even in slavery. And God rewards him.

"From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field." (Genesis 39:5)

God still was watching over Joseph in the midst of his slavery. But then Potiphar's wife falls in love with him and tries to seduce him. Joseph honors God and will not commit adultery with this woman. What does he get for his faithfulness? Potiphar's wife accuses him of attempted rape and her husband throws him in prison. But even in prison, Joseph determines to be God's man and God rewards him again:

"[T]he LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden...The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did." (Genesis 39: 21, 23)

For almost 17 years Joseph spends his life in slavery or in prison, until eventually God gives him the desires of his heart. After all the unfairness he had endured, Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream, is released from prison, and becomes the second most influential man in all the land of Egypt. Joseph becomes a great man and subsequently changed the course of human history.

God had a plan for Joseph's life, but it took nearly 17 years of difficulty and heart ache before that plan could be fully realized. But when that time was done, Joseph had been educated in humility and in patience, and grown in the knowledge of a God who is still there amid all of life's cruelties. He came through that period a changed man, a man who had been molded by God for a great task. He was able to come to this point, not embittered or ground down by the injustice of life, because he kept his eyes on God. He trusted the promises God had given him and he made up his mind he would serve Him no matter what.

The children of Israel in Babylon had to learn this lesson again, just as we do. They had to learn that God had not abandoned them. They, just as we, had to learn that God is faithful and much more eager to hear us than we are to pray to Him. He seeks our good, not our destruction.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you...

Everyone in this room is in exile. We are not living in our true home, the home God is preparing for us. We all have to live in Babylon for a while. But we can choose to live faithfully to God, or we can choose to turn away from Him. Let us all choose to be God's men and women during all this time of trial. Let us seek God with our whole heart and walk in the paths He has prepared for us. Let us strive to live as Joseph, even when things look bleak. Let us wait patiently on the Lord, who has great things in store for us.

In the Name...