

Sermon, St. David's, Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Here at St. David's we listen to Old Testament stories on a three-year cycle in the seasons after Pentecost, so basically every summer and autumn. The first year, we hear from stories in Genesis and Exodus. The second year, we hear the story of Israel's relationship with kings. And then the third year, which we're in now, we hear from the prophets. We hear from Jeremiah more than any of the other prophets, and in today's installment, we hear a letter from him to the exiles in Babylon. At this point in the story Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem, and what he says—that is, what God told Jeremiah to say—was not what those exiles were expecting.

The exile to Babylon was a defining moment in the life of God's people in what we Christians call the Old Testament, much like the Exodus was a defining moment. Many of these stories were written and refined while the people were in exile, trying to figure out how things went so wrong. After all, they were the people God had led out of slavery into the Promised Land. How did they end up conquered in another land?

So they probably expected Jeremiah to tell them how to escape or overthrow their captors, or offer a new Moses. Instead, Jeremiah tells them that God wants them to build homes. In *Babylon*. Plant gardens and eat the produce. Have families.

And 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.

Ouch. Ouch. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray for your enemies. Sounds something like Jesus, doesn't it, hundreds of years before Jesus was born.

Last Sunday, when I was elsewhere, you all heard from the book of Lamentations, a mournful book-length lament following the fall of Jerusalem. Before that, the language we heard from Jeremiah vacillated between lament and rage: destroying and overthrowing. Be appalled, be utterly desolate. We heard the word evil over and over. Fierce anger. Surely such a wrathful God would wreak vengeance on the enemies of God's people, taken into exile into a foreign land. A land where God was not worshipped. Babylon.

But no. They are being told to live their lives. And to pray for the welfare of the city where they have been dragged. That is, where some of them had been dragged, after people they loved died horrible deaths in front of them.

How can this ancient letter speak to us today? Is it telling us not to try to change the world, to just accept the injustices that happen, and ignore everything, staying inside our house of worship here and pray? Is this something like the thoughts and prayers that are offered again and again after tragedies, that tend to enrage the victims, who want things to change?

I do not hear Jeremiah's letter as asking us not to take action. I hear it as encouraging us to engage with people who think differently than we do. That's not a popular message in our divided country right now—and it's not only our country that's divided. Many in the world have drawn lines. I've seen things on social media proudly proclaiming sides. While I am troubled about such division, I have no interest in anything to do with someone racist, for example. But as

a white woman of privilege, I also know that I barely understand racism, and that I need to keep my mouth shut and listen and try to use my privilege in positive ways.

I further know that I see divisions where I don't have to. Sometimes I want to argue when I could listen. I think about that prayer attributed to St. Francis, a saint we will honor at our annual blessing this afternoon: he prayed that we would seek to understand rather than be understood. That's hard for me to hear and sincerely pray, especially as a preacher who stands up here every Sunday and tells you all stuff as you listen to me. I know that *I* need to *listen* more. What about you?

The exiles probably wanted a swift resolution to their predicament, but that's not what they heard from God. Building houses and planting gardens and creating families are not activities that happen quickly. Neither is rebuilding and reimagining church. The shutdown during the first year of the pandemic happened fairly quickly. That Monday, I was hearing things about the coronavirus, and I suddenly had to wear a mask at my oncology doctor's appointments. Three days later we were told we could not have Sunday services. A week after that, almost everything was shut down, and it took months for a few things to slowly reopen, with restrictions. We've been creeping along since, and some things will never be like they were before.

The world has changed in the past three years. It changed quickly, but rebuilding is slow. People we loved are no longer with us. Some things, including church, are never going to be exactly like they were three years ago. We have to learn to live with these changes: how to build and plant, and seek the welfare of this place where we find ourselves now, by the grace of God.

In this summer of prophetic ministry, we are encouraged to be prophets, like Jeremiah. Sometimes this means tearing things down, but sometimes it means seeking the welfare of the place where God has sent us. Where do you think we are right now?