

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7

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.

⁴ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

MESSAGE - Living in Babylon

We're continuing to work through the time period of Jeremiah, though not chronologically. As you will recall, Judah had strayed from its roots and had become like the other nations – no longer relying on God but playing politics on the world stage, seeking advantage and wealth through alliances and treaties.

Due to some double dealing, they had earned the wrath of king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and since God had been relegated to the background by his people, he remained there to allow Judah to reap what they had sowed.

Rather predictably, Nebuchadnezzar rolled in with his army, removed the manipulative and ambitious king Jeconiah from his throne, replaced him with a more docile ruler, and returned to Babylon taking with him many of the educated class along with a large number of skilled tradesmen and artisans.

At this point in the story Jerusalem was still standing – remember that Nebuchadnezzar's army visited Jerusalem twice over a ten year period. The second time they left the city a desolate wasteland, but we're not there yet. This morning's reading takes place after Nebuchadnezzar's first visit in which he merely hollowed out the ruling and elite class, taking the best and brightest as captives along with a hefty amount of treasure as tribute. This was Nebuchadnezzar still using his inside voice.

So things were bad, but not end times bad. The temple still stood, sacrifices were still being made, Judah was still a largely independent country even though it had to defer to Babylon, and Jerusalem was still the Holy City. Those taken back to Babylon had suffered disruption and humiliation, but their lives were far from over. Though they were captives they weren't slaves working in salt mines – they were taken because they had education and skills and they were employing those same skills in a new empire.

Most of these people were expecting to merely bide their time, fully anticipating a return to Jerusalem once Nebuchadnezzar's anger cooled. This attitude was encouraged by prophets like

Hananiah who rather dramatically smashed Jeremiah's symbolic yoke in the temple and predicted a full return to normalcy within two years time.

Everybody thought the whole thing was going to soon blow over. Everybody except Jeremiah. Build houses and get comfortable, he said. You've got time to dig a garden, sow it, and eat from it. Plant a tree and watch it grow.

Don't spend your time being alone, waiting to come home. If you find someone, marry them, and even have children. This is going to be a generational thing – your kids are going to mature and get married before you get to come home. Settle in for the long haul, because this situation is not going to resolve itself any time soon. Your old life is dead. Your new life is to be found in Babylon. Deal with it.

Kind of a harsh message. I can see why Jeremiah was not as popular as the other prophets of his time. My son tells me of an expression used in the army – embrace the suck. Essentially this means that life in the army sucks; so you can either waste time and energy fighting it, or just accept what you cannot change and make the best of it. Look for the lemonade. This seems to be the gist of Jeremiah's message this morning.

That is not to say that Jeremiah was without hope – far from it. This is the same Jeremiah who bought a plot of land that had an invading army camped upon it, knowing that one day he would walk upon that land as a free man.

This is the same Jeremiah who spoke to Israel God's words:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

⁴ Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O virgin Israel!

Again you shall take your tambourines,
and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.

⁵ Again you shall plant vineyards
on the mountains of Samaria;
the planters shall plant,
and shall enjoy the fruit.

This is the same Jeremiah who prophesied God's new covenant:

After those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah was not a doomsayer, though at times his message was brutally forthright. He merely spoke the word of God, and in this case the word of God was 'endure.' Don't wait for the quick fix, settle in.

Of course, this is all well and good for those captive Israelites. But, does it relate to us in any way? Are we displaced? Aliens in a foreign land? Captives?

Maybe not. But let me ask you this – do you ever find yourself feeling dislocated; not recognizing where you are anymore? Perhaps wondering how we have all gotten to this point? I'm not talking about early signs of dementia here, I'm talking about everyday real life.

Do you ever walk around downtown dismayed at the empty storefronts, remembering when this area used to be vibrant and exciting? Do you remember when gentlemen wore hats outside, and removed them indoors? When people didn't wear pyjamas as regular walking about clothes?

As we look about we see a culture in which governments promote and profit from gambling, drinking, and drug use. A culture in which lack of character is no impediment to leading a nation. A culture that celebrates sex without love, children without families, freedom without responsibility.

Perhaps we have not been exiled, but as we were quietly living our lives Babylon has been coming to us. Our society is growing increasingly hedonistic, licentious, and self-indulgent. What would have been unthinkable a generation ago is now commonplace; we boast when we should blush.

Now, some of these new liberties are beneficial – it is good that we are able to openly discuss some things that could not be broached in polite conversation thirty years ago. Of course now we simply have other topics and opinions that are no longer allowed to be shared – in that sense the wheel has simply turned and not much has significantly changed.

But, on the whole, I think it's pretty safe to say that our present culture is substantially different than the one that most of you grew up in. Where once we had Norman Rockwell posters, now we have Post Malone.

So what do we do, once we wake up and realize that Babylon is moving in? For the Israelite exiles in Babylon, their response was to hunker down, keep to themselves, and pray that they would soon wake up back in their beds in Jerusalem. They longed for a return to the past.

Jeremiah pointed out to them that pining for the good old days was a poor strategy, and that is just as true today. It will do us no good to bury our head in the sand and wish for the way things were. We can't hide from the changes in society, it will do no good to simply close ranks and set ourselves apart as the lone outpost of sanity. That path only leads to isolation, stagnation, and eventually death.

Instead, Jeremiah would have us engage with the culture that we find ourselves in – even to the point of inviting some of that culture into our very homes. When Jeremiah encouraged the

exiles to marry he couldn't have meant that they should only marry other Jews. The bulk of the exiles were scribes and tradespeople who would have been mostly men. For them to marry and have children they would have to have relationships with women from that other culture.

This seems to go against much of the instruction previously given to God's people; the Israelites were traditionally a closed culture, though there were notable exceptions like Ruth or Rahab. But, if the exiles were to be gone for 70 years, without intermarriage they would become extinct, which couldn't be allowed to happen for reasons that we will get into in a future sermon.

So, the Israelites were to embrace the culture in which they found themselves, they were to multiply and grow within that culture.

But as they grew, they were to also remember who they were. They were to thrive but still retain the particular flavour that made them pleasing to God. We can see this in the injunction that Jeremiah gave to pray to the Lord. Despite being surrounded by the Babylonian panoply of gods, they were to remain faithful to their own God. This gives us some valuable instruction: though we live in our present culture and we actively engage in it, we do not worship the same things that this world does.

That means that we are not to bow down to either liberal or conservative ideology, to humanism, scientism, or any other ism; we don't become unthinking parrots for any viewpoint. We are to be sly as serpents when it comes to the things of the world – we don't pick sides in the same way that others do.

I think more of the angel that Joshua encountered just before the Israelites took Jericho. He saw an unidentified man with a sword and asked him 'Are you with us, or with our adversaries?' to which the man replied 'I am neither with you nor them; I am the commander of the Lord's army.'

That should describe our position – neither for nor against any particular ideology, but rather for God in whatever form that takes. In all the ways in which we engage in our culture we remember where our true allegiance lies, and we do that through prayer. Indeed, to go back to the beginning of the sermon the whole problem with Babylon began because the rulers of Judah tried to deal with the other nations in a worldly manner, forgetting their allegiance was to God first.

So, we don't hide from the scary, unfamiliar culture in which we now find ourselves. We don't dream of days gone by, we find ways to engage in this culture – thrive in this culture – in a way that allows us to maintain our relationship with God.

The final observation I have about Jeremiah's instruction to the exiles is that while he encourages them to stop looking back to Jerusalem and engage with their new city, he does not instruct them to try to make Babylon into a new Jerusalem. They are to engage with the city,

pray for it, and work for its welfare, but it is not their job to remake their new culture. I think that this is very important. Domination and manipulation are not the goals here.

The Israelites don't have to tell the Babylonians how to live. Their role is to live peaceably and faithfully, genuinely seeking the good for all who surround them, praying to the Lord on their oppressor's behalf. They do not need to force their wills or their ways on their neighbours. They are not in the business of changing hearts and minds directly. That is God's domain. Thus says the Lord 'I will put my law within them, I will remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh. No longer will they know *about* me, but rather they will know me directly.'

God does the transforming. He may do it through us, but only if our minds are focussed on him – if our minds are focused on changing the other person then we aren't really a useful tool anymore.

And so our lesson is that as we walk around our little corner of Babylon here in Simcoe, feeling dislocated and alienated at what the world has become, our job is to stop dreaming of a bygone era that may or may not have even existed, and instead engage those very people who we may be afraid of, who seem to be encroaching on our plans or our way of life, who seem so strange to us. We are to pray for them, and genuinely seek their welfare – rather than complaining about them we really want them to do well, to live well, because as they prosper, so do we all, and in this way God's kingdom grows right in the very heartland of the enemy, right where it is least expected.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.