

## Scriptures

### Psalm 66:1-12 [NRSV]

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;

<sup>2</sup> sing the glory of his name;  
give to him glorious praise.

<sup>3</sup> Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!  
Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.

<sup>4</sup> All the earth worships you;  
they sing praises to you,  
sing praises to your name."

<sup>5</sup> Come and see what God has done:  
he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.

<sup>6</sup> He turned the sea into dry land;  
they passed through the river on foot.

There we rejoiced in him,

<sup>7</sup> who rules by his might forever,  
whose eyes keep watch on the nations—  
let the rebellious not exalt themselves.

<sup>8</sup> Bless our God, O peoples,  
let the sound of his praise be heard,

<sup>9</sup> who has kept us among the living,  
and has not let our feet slip.

<sup>10</sup> For you, O God, have tested us;  
you have tried us as silver is tried.

<sup>11</sup> You brought us into the net;  
you laid burdens on our backs;

<sup>12</sup> you let people ride over our heads;  
we went through fire and through water;  
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

### Jeremiah 29:1, 4-11 [NRSV]

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.

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

<sup>8</sup> 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, <sup>9</sup> for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

<sup>10</sup> For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> 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.

## Sermon: Grow where you are planted

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

For several weeks I've been preaching a series of sermons that was moving toward discovering our identity. Last week, because of communion I stepped out of that. This week we're not going back. I've decided to abandon that identity series - not because it wasn't interesting or important, but rather because I was delving too much into sociology and philosophy, without providing a solid gospel message. It was all about people and the church and culture, and not enough about Jesus. It makes for good and useful discussions, but not appropriate sermons. I may return to that topic when I can make it more biblical – in the meantime, we're returning to the lectionary for a while.

And what a time to get back into Jeremiah. We were in the opening chapters of Jeremiah a month ago, and you will remember that the southern kingdom of Judah had fallen to the Babylonians. Jeremiah had warned of it and it was happening. In 597 Jerusalem fell and many of the best and the brightest of Judah had been carted off to Babylonia to serve king Nebuchadnezzar and the empire.

This practice of moving people around served the Babylonians quite well. On the one hand, the conquering nation received skilled artisans and smiths, accountants and generally people of good quality as the spoils of war. In other words, those who could be of use to the Empire. The other group of people removed included the king, his generals, and other leaders of society, including priests and prophets. The idea was that by removing the cream of the crop from the conquered territory there was less chance of an uprising as most of the potential leaders of a rebellion had been removed.

These Babylonian captives, or the exiles as they were also known, were, of course, quite upset about this arrangement. We should understand that while they were exiles, they weren't sold off as slaves with chains around their necks. These were useful and important people, and though they were forced to leave Judah, they were allowed to keep their families, their communities, their public gatherings and their worship services. In other words, they could still be who they were, and still experience themselves as a community – they weren't being treated badly in their new home.

But, the fact remains that they were in a new home and that had some significant consequences. Remember, these people defined themselves by their land – their whole national story was about escaping slavery and then being given a land of milk and honey. They were quite clearly told by a whole string of prophets that as long as they were faithful they would continue to live in this land and it would be their inheritance. If they strayed, they were warned, they would lose the land to foreigners.

So, they had lost the land, they had lost their capital, but most importantly, they had lost the Temple. The Temple was the center of Jewish life, it was the place where God was, in the holiest of holies. The Temple is where festivals centered, and where sacrifices were made. To the Jews in Babylon, the loss of the Temple was more than they could bear, and there was a very real concern that with God in Jerusalem and the Jews in Babylon that they were no longer God's people. They weren't even sure that God could hear their prayers while they were so far from the Temple.

These exiles thought they were the losers, and they envied those who were left in Jerusalem. Indeed, those who were left in Jerusalem thought the same thing. They were counting themselves blessed that they had escaped the judgment of God. Often in a disaster we seek scapegoats, someone to blame, so those left in Jerusalem assumed that God was punishing those who were carried off to exile, and that those left behind were therefore righteous.

Now, the normal course of events when God's people had turned away from God and had therefore suffered invasions was to repent – to return to the life that God had set them aside for, and to regain God's favour. The way things were supposed to work is that after they repent, God will restore them.

So the captives, and the remnant left in Jerusalem were looking forward to a time in the near future when God would raise up a foreign army to smash the Babylonians. This is what some prophets were speaking of, and in the previous

chapter we read the story of one such prophet: Hananiah son of Azzur, from Gibeon. Hananiah spoke saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon."

This was what people wanted to hear, it is what they expected to hear. It was a rousing, inspiring, feel good message. But it was false, they were not God's words.

Jeremiah spoke God's words, and it was a very different message. While the people were waiting for redemption, for God to raise up an army to smash the Babylonians – Jeremiah told them – get comfortable, you're going to be here a while. Don't sit there waiting to return to Jerusalem, but 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.

The reason for them to settle in is that this is no short term exile. This isn't going to be a bump in the road, but will last for 70 years. What this means is that for nearly everyone, the exile is permanent. Their children or grandchildren may return to Jerusalem, but most of the exiles are going to die never seeing their homeland again.

This certainly sounds like bad news; in fact, this is catastrophic news for those who heard it. But, Jeremiah says, the good news is that God knows what He is doing; God keeps promises, and God has promised us a future, and a hope. "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" (29:11).

With such a future, and hope, in their hearts and minds, the people, then, are instructed by Jeremiah to live in a kind of extended "in-between" time, not just sitting around and waiting for something to happen, not rising up and trying to escape or overthrow their captors, and not letting themselves be dragged down into depression and complaining. No, Jeremiah instead speaks about building houses, planting gardens, and families that go on and on, even in a strange and inhospitable land, surrounded by pagans but flourishing nevertheless.

The book of Daniel describes life for some of these exiles, and we see that though they are living in a foreign land, Daniel and his friends are still very much Jewish, very much favoured by God who turns out to still be with his people, even in this strange country.

But more than just telling the people to get comfortable and settle down, Jeremiah goes even further telling the exiles to seek the welfare of Babylon – to pray for Babylon as well. Pray for your conquerors; pray for your oppressors. This should remind us of the words of the ultimate prophet of God who commanded us to pray for our enemies.

These conquered Judeans, who have lost their homeland, their freedom, and their temple, are being asked to move on – to let go of what is gone, to leave in the past that which will not be part of their lives anymore. The ones who were carried off into exile will not live to see its end, so they need not only to learn a "new normal" but also to see a new future for themselves, to accept that what is in the past is gone, and something new is being born.

They are being told to grow where they have been planted. Stop dreaming, stop wishing, and stop plotting. Life is happening right now, all around you. Engage it and get busy with the work that God has prepared for you.

This message applies to me – I've recently been transplanted. I am not to look back to where I was last year and wish for a return to what was. I'm putting down roots in this new soil, and I'm certainly grateful that I haven't been sent to the backside of the desert, but rather in quite a lush garden as I look around.

This message applies to you – grow where you are planted. In your family, in your neighbourhood, in your workplace. Don't look to the past and pine for some remembered glory days, but get busy living now. There are people in our lives right now who need our love and our support. Maybe even some enemies that need our love.

How do we let go of the past so that we are free to love now? How did the Judeans accept that they would never see their homeland again, and move on and let go? How do people sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole go on? How do people diagnosed with a terminal illness go on? How do people living in the midst of natural disaster, war, poverty; those who are losing hope that their circumstances will ever change, go on? How do they live?

It is different for everyone. In some cases, hope for a future is not found in our own lives, but in the lives of our children and our children's children. It is found in the seeds we plant, but that we may never see grow or harvest.

In the end though, the way we cope is by trusting in love. By clinging to love like a life raft in the midst of a terrible storm and by believing that no matter what happens, the power of love is always stronger than the power of hate.

For the chosen people, love comes from the very heart of God. Their strength and their hope comes from the secure knowledge that the people are never alone in their struggles - their God has not abandoned them. Even though they will not see God for many years, they can still call upon the Lord and pray. And they know that the Lord will hear them. When they search for the Lord, they will find the Lord. Even though terrible things have happened, they can find comfort in knowing they are the beloved children of a God who loves them. They can depend on that, always.

For Christians, for us, the love of God came to us in the form of a human being. And that love, experienced now through the power of the Holy Spirit, is physically present among us, and in many ways is us as we faithfully live as the body of Christ.

The good news that that we can hold on through tough times because we have a coping mechanism that we can count on. The news doesn't have to be good in order for us to live out the good news. The good news is this: we have God's love in the world, and God will never give up on us. Over and over we hear this in our scriptures.

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

I am with you each and every day until the end of the age.

The LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

Perhaps it is said most emphatically by Paul in the letter to the Romans.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? 33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39, NRSV).

This undying and unrelenting love is what enables us to grow where ever we are planted. This love that we have seen gives us the strength to have faith what we have not yet seen, and enables us to find our peace in God's promise in through Jeremiah.

I will fulfill 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.

Amen.