

Jeremiah's Letter to the Exiles

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce.

The readings from Jeremiah and Lamentations the past few weeks have been dramatic. Jeremiah's warnings to his people and their leaders that neglecting their relationship with God was sowing the seeds of their own destruction. The assault on Jerusalem by the army of Babylon and the fall of city. Jeremiah's heart-wrenching lamentation over the abandoned city. The spiritual agony of the exiles, now deported to Babylon and scattered in various places.

Jeremiah has remained in Jerusalem. He receives a report that some of the prophets have been inciting the exiles to rebellion in Babylon. They are promising the people that their exile will not be long, that they will soon be able to return home. So Jeremiah writes a letter to the scattered exiles. He condemns the prophets for making false promises. Israel's exile will not be over quickly, but will last for seventy years. Jeremiah writes that God's word for Israel now is this: You are there for a long time. It will be three generations before you can go back home. However, don't sit around sulking because you are in a foreign land and don't feel like "singing the songs of Zion (Ps. 137)." Forcible resistance will do no good. Your being there is part of God's purposes. There are important spiritual lessons to be learned from your time of exile. Start building houses to live in. Plant gardens and raise your food. Have babies and raise families.

Exile in Babylon was not as grim as we might imagine. The people were allowed to maintain a modest way of life. The word from God now is that the people need to make the most of the situation they are in. They could sink into their despair. However, Jeremiah calls them to take up normal life activities as much as possible. We might say that instead of the idea of "blooming where you are planted," the message here is "plant where you are exiled."

There is a further message: Seek the good of and pray for the city where you are exiled. Your own welfare depends on its welfare. This might seem like a message of self-centered survival. And maybe it is. Maybe it is also a realistic appraisal of their situation. Exile was no picnic, but if Babylon fell apart, things could get even worse. Yet there may be more to this than self-preservation. The moral idea of seeking the good of Gentiles, even one's oppressors, has been present in scripture all along here and there. It comes to fullest expression in Jesus' teachings to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. It is overcoming evil with good. It is being God's people regardless of our circumstances.

I was amused when, some weeks ago, there was such a furor over the disclosure of Mother Teresa's diaries. In them she expressed her profound doubts, moments when her faith collapsed. Does God even exist? She could not say. This should be no surprise to anyone who knows anything about the spiritual life. The life of faith includes seasons of despair and doubt. We go through experiences as persons, communities of faith, and societies when everything seems to be, indeed, is falling apart. The eruption of gun violence that seems to happen daily in this country. The irreversible environmental damage that we must confront no matter what our efforts from here on out. Or personal experiences of loss, dislocation, or turmoil that turn what seemed familiar and safe into a world shaken at its foundations. These things are real, and it does us no good when modern day prophets make false promises that things are not as bad as they seem.

One of the most challenging experiences for me as a pastor through the years has been to be with persons going through something that had no silver lining or light at the end of the tunnel. I remember the complete emptiness and fear that gripped me when my secretary at a previous church came to my office door to tell me that the surviving parent of one of our members had committed suicide. This was only a few weeks after her husband had shot himself to death. What do you say? What do you do? This is an experience of exile. There is no going home to the way things were before. There are no quick fixes or easy answers.

I find Jeremiah's letter truly comforting for two reasons. First, he does not candy-coat things or put a pleasant spin on the situation of the exiles. There is nothing harder to bear than someone trying to make us feel better by suggesting things are not as bad as they seem! The exile was real and it was to last beyond the lifetimes of those who would read Jeremiah's letter. The people would need something deeper and more real to anchor their hopes. Facing and accepting the reality of our situation is the most empowering thing that can happen. It can open up all the spiritual resources within us.

The second comforting thing about the letter is that it offers a word of real encouragement and hope. The situation IS bad. However, there is something you can do. You can keep living and doing those things that sustain your life and sow the seeds of the future. Build. Plant. Eat. Tend to your families. Pray and work for the welfare of others. Back to Mother Teresa. I think her life showed exactly the authentic nature of the life of faith—she kept on seeking the welfare of others, doing things that are for life, while at the same time feeling great doubt and fear. No one was more in touch with the reality of human suffering and injustice, and that must have contributed to her profound doubts and even despair. Yet, she continued to live in a life-giving way.

Last week we were waiting for results from a CAT scan that our daughter Shelley had. She has been experiencing pain on and off for several years, and it has been intense the past few weeks. There have been no answers. So we waited one day, two days, and another day to hear something that would tell her what was going on. It was one of those exile experiences, full of feelings of uprootedness and anxiousness, along with powerlessness. Nothing to do but wait, while your mind seems to gravitate toward the worst of fears. I found myself keeping busy with as many things as I could conjure up to do. What I had to work with was my own anxiousness, to somehow find ways of letting things go. I used to think that "keeping busy" was simply our way of avoiding things we needed to face. Sometimes that is true. But not when we are up against something we have no control over and all we have to do is wait or live through it. Finally the doctor called with the results, which were much better than we had feared. As I look back over those days, I see that I did all I could do in an exile situation—as Jeremiah said, build, plant, eat, care for your families. Do things that have to do with life going on.

On a societal level, when we are faced with experiences and events that feel overwhelming and inescapable—like this war that keeps getting worse, or the realities of climate change. These are exile situations. Things can never be the same. We can't go home again, as it were. We are in it for the long haul. Perhaps Jeremiah's letter and its message have something to say to us here. Now is the right time to be doing things that are positive, that sow the seeds of hope and new life. Living out of our despair is not a viable option. Neither is simply getting angry and lashing out.

All of this points us once again to the importance of being on an inward journey, of paying attention to our spiritual lives. Being aware of our own feelings of doubt or powerlessness. Accepting those times when we, like the exiles in Babylon, just don't feel like singing Zion songs. However, we become aware that we are more than our doubts or despair or discouragement. We do not have to collapse into those feelings. We can hear another word, a call to build, plant, do those things that keep life going, that sow the seeds of goodness and recovery and a different future. The spiritual life is about touching our deeper self, the true self that can hear God's call to faithfulness and faithful living, even in the midst of the most difficult experiences of exile.