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The Prophet Jeremiah

VIII. Life in Exile

Jeremiah 29:1-14

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From the very beginning, Jeremiah had declared to the people of Israel that if they did not repent and return to the Lord, the Lord was going to bring judgment upon them through the armies of Babylon. We jump ahead a bit in Jeremiah's story this morning. Israel has not repented and, indeed, the Babylonian army has now captured Judah, ransacked Jerusalem, and carried off into exile in Babylon a number of the leading Israelites. Remember the stories of Daniel and his three friends, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego – they are among those carried off into exile in Babylon. And our passage this morning consists in a letter Jeremiah sent to these exiles in Babylon at God's direction.

Note the opening sentence of Jeremiah's letter – and just imagine all the exiles gathered around to hear Elasah and Gemariah read the letter to them: *“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” “Whom I have sent”* – in other words, straight off there is a rebuke, a reminder that they are in exile in Babylon because they forgot the Lord their God. That what has happened to them they brought upon themselves – they should have listened to the Word of God Jeremiah had proclaimed to them while they still had a chance.

But that's not even the hardest part of the letter for the exiles to hear – it is what comes next that really sets their teeth on edge. For the exiles had been taking solace from a group of false prophets who had come to them saying, “You won't be here long. You'll be back in Jerusalem before you know it.” God tells the exiles not to listen to these prophets – that they are false prophets. In fact, says the Lord God, you are going to be here for a long time. So, therefore, what you exiles are to do is *“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.”* Settle in, says the Lord God to His exiles. Settle down there in Babylon and get on with the daily business of living.

Now we can imagine how disappointing that word must have been to the exiles. Remember it was these very exiles in Babylon who gave us Psalm 137 – a lament for their lost home: *“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.”* But it is what the Lord God says to them next that must have turned their disappointment and sadness into outright fury at the Lord God and His letter: *“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.”* Work for the good of Babylon, our captors? Pray for the welfare of the Babylonians who are our

enemies and our oppressors? Psalm 137 captures not only their grief over Jerusalem, but also the exiles absolute hatred of the Babylonians – one of the most horrible verses in the Bible, where the exiles wish that someone would do to the Babylonians what the Babylonians have done to them: *“Blessed shall he be who takes your Babylonian little ones and dashes them against the rock!”* And yet here is the Lord God saying to the exiles work for the good of Babylon while you are there – even pray for the Babylonians! How shocking this command must have been to them, how repulsive to be told that they are to love their enemies! Something Jesus would one day command us all.

But then comes the invitation and the promise which are the heart of the letter. The promise is that after seventy years God will bring the exiles home to Jerusalem. And the invitation: that during this time of exile, the Israelites should do what they failed to do back in Jerusalem. *“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, declares the Lord . . .”* The promise: after seventy years, I will bring you home. The invitation: in the meantime, come home to me, says the Lord God.

And then comes the Gospel: *“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.”* *“For I know the plans I have for you”* – in our day, we have made that into a personal, individual statement of assurance. But it is important to understand that God spoke those words first not to an individual, but to a community – the people of God in exile. And it is even more important to understand what God meant by that plan, that future, that hope. What He meant, what the exile and return from exile would set the stage for – is nothing less than the coming of Jesus Christ, the Lord of all nations, Savior of all peoples, Babylonians included. The plan of God from the very beginning to His call of Abraham¹, down through the years of Moses and David and now Jeremiah and the exiles – this plan to bring the Messiah to earth, to bring to all the earth wholeness, to give to all peoples a future and a hope. What God is telling the exiles is that He is going to use them, this one people, to prepare the way for His bringing of salvation and blessing to all peoples – the same thing He had been telling His people from the very beginning of the covenant He made with Abraham. So, not merely that in seventy years the Israelites exiles get to come home to Jerusalem – but that their exile, as well as their eventual return, are part and parcel of the unfolding of God’s salvation plan which will serve to prepare the way, the final stages, for the coming of God’s own Son on earth to save us all.

And here is where you and I enter into this story. We live in the fulfillment of that promise God made to the exiles – the coming of Christ to His people. We live in the fulfillment of the salvation accomplished through His cross and resurrection. And we live in the aftermath of His ascension back into heaven, and so also of His promise to us that He will one day come again and establish His Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven; and so also take us to our heavenly home forever: *“In my Father’s house are many rooms . . . I go to prepare a place for you . . .”*² Because of God’s fulfillment of His plan to the exiles in Babylon, we now live in anticipation and hope of God’s final fulfillment of His ultimate plan that all shall be redeemed and we who are redeemed shall dwell with Him forever. Which also means that we also now live in a form of exile, a time of exile. We now live as exiles – as those who live in this one place, the world, even as we await our going to our true home, which is heaven. The Babylonian exiles were living in Babylon waiting to get home to Jerusalem. We are living here on earth while waiting to enter into His

Kingdom. We are exiles – caught between where we find ourselves now and where we one day shall be, which is heaven, which is the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

And it's not just me saying that – the New Testament is full of this imagery of exile as a way of speaking about life in this time between Christ's first coming and Christ's final coming. It begins even with Jesus Himself praying for us that, as His disciples, we should "in the world, but not of the world."³ Like the Israelites in Babylon – living in Babylon, but not as Babylonians. Paul writes to the Philippians reminding them not to become like the world around them, not to live like those around them, not to set their minds solely on earthly things: "*But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.*"⁴ And Peter basically writes the whole of his first letter on this theme of life in exile while we wait for Christ to come:

*Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*⁵

We are now in exile, living here on earth while we await the day when we enter our true home in heaven. Which means what God said once through His prophet Jeremiah to His exiles in Babylon, He says also to us this morning – the counsel of God leaps over the centuries to speak afresh to us in our time of exile. "*Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Marry and have sons and daughters . . . Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you . . . and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*" Christians are not to withdraw from the world around them, nor are they to take over and dominate the world around them. What they are called to do is the good work of the people of God, bringing blessing upon the place where they live. They are, in short, to act like Christians – and so to be a blessing to all around them.

But even as we live our lives in this world and seek to be a blessing to the city in which we find ourselves, we are to do so without ever forgetting where our true home lies, without ever forgetting to whom our lives really belong. In this sense, above all else our time of exile in this world is – like Israel's time in Babylon – a time in which we are to seek after God. This and this alone is the primary purpose of our time on earth: "*You will seek me and you will find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you.*" And, of course, the corollary to this is that in seeking after God, we seek to have our lives shaped by Him and not by the world around us. We work for the good of Babylon, but we refuse to turn into Babylonians. "*Be not conformed to the world,*" writes Paul to the Romans.⁶ Or, as my mother used to put it, just because everyone else is jumping off a cliff is no reason for you to be doing it too – you are not everyone else! Exiles – living in Babylon, but not as Babylonians. Disciples of Christ living as those devoted to the one true God, who is our one true and eternal home.

Two Will Willimon stories illustrate this aspect of life in exile – of living in Babylon without turning into Babylonians. Of seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, not the kingdoms of earth and their unrighteousness. First, Willimon tells of having a conversation

with a rabbi in downtown Greenville back when he was the pastor of a Methodist church in Greenville:

One day over coffee, the rabbi remarked, "It's tough to be a Jew in Greenville. We are forever telling our children, 'That's fine for everyone else, but it's not fine for you. You are special. You are different. You are a Jew. You have a different story. A different set of values.'"

*"Rabbi, you are probably not going to believe this," I said, "but I heard very much that same statement made in a young couple's church school class right here in Bible-belt Greenville the other day."*⁷

And then this story:

I know a barber who, after a day of cutting people's hair for money goes out to a hospital for the mentally challenged and cuts hair for free. A friend of his is an accountant who after a long day of serving people's financial interests for money goes out at night to cruise local bars, pick up women for one-night stands, and to enjoy himself as much as possible.

*Both men, the barber and the accountant, are apprentices, people attached to some larger vision of what life is about, why we were put here. One is attached to Jesus. The other is attached to American consumerism and selfish hedonism. So the most interesting question to ask them is not the abstract, "What do you believe in?" but the more concrete, "Whom are you following?"*⁸

We work for the good of the land where we live, but without ever forgetting the Kingdom to which we ultimately belong and to where we are ultimately going. We seek the welfare of the place where we live, but we do so first and foremost by seeking out the Lord with all our heart, and by seeking for Him to shape us into persons fit for our eternal home. We may live in Babylon, but we are not to become Babylonians. We may seek to build a home and live in it, plant gardens and eat the produce, have families and all the rest – but we seek, first and foremost, and in all things, we seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness. That is the work of exile.

And last, we exiles never forget that we live here in exile with the absolute assurance and hope of knowing that God *is* working His purpose out – among us and around us and through us. We exiles live here in the assurance and hope of knowing that God will fulfill His promises to us, just as He did for those exiles in Babylon. We exiles live here in the assurance and hope of the same truth God spoke to those exiles in Babylon – He says it anew to us this morning: *"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."* Plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope – that is what the Lord God will do, is doing even now while we live in the time between His coming to us at Bethlehem and His coming to us again in glory.

Plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. This is one of my favorite passages in all Christian literature – one, because I had exactly this same thing happen to me in exactly the same place before I ever came across this story; and two, because it so beautifully pictures exactly what that promise of God for our wholeness feels like, looks like. It’s a Frederick Buechner story. He tells of going to Sea World in Orlando one summer morning, and of finding himself overcome to the point of tears by the performance of the killer whales. When the show is finished, he turns to his wife and daughter and sees the same tears in their eyes as well. It took him years to understand exactly what lay behind those tears, exactly what had so moved them to tears:

I believe there is no mystery about why we shed tears. We shed tears because we had caught a glimpse of the Peaceable Kingdom, and it had almost broken our hearts. For a few moments we had seen Eden and been part of the great dance that goes on at the heart of creation. We shed tears because we were given a glimpse of the way life was created to be and is not. We had seen why it was the “the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy” when the world was first made, as the book of Job describes it, and of what it was that made Saint Paul write, even when he was in prison and on his way to execution, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” We had had a glimpse of part at least of what Jesus meant when he said, “Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.”

The world is full of darkness, but what I think we caught sight of in that tourist trap in Orlando, Florida, of all places, was that at the heart of darkness – whoever would have believed it? – there is joy unimaginable. The world does bad things to us all, and we do bad things to the world and to each other and maybe most of all to ourselves, but in that dazzle of bright water as the glittering whales hurled themselves into the sun, I believe what we saw was that joy is what we belong to. Joy is home, and I believe the tears that came to our eyes were more than anything else homesick tears. God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy.⁹

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord our God to all His sojourners and exiles here, “plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

¹ Genesis 12:1-3.

² John 14:2.

³ John 17:15-16.

⁴ Philippians 3:20-21.

⁵ I Peter 2:11-12.

⁶ Romans 12:2.

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, Resident Aliens (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 18.

⁸ William H. Willimon, “Christianity: Following Jesus,” in Pulpit Resource, Vol. 28, No. 4 (October – December, 2000), p. 17.

⁹ Frederick Buechner, Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p. 240.