Nov. 26, 2017 Jeremiah’s Letter to Exiles Jeremiah 29:1,4- 14 (John 14:27) Liturgical color: White/Green PRAYER OF THE DAY God of hope, How often have we found ourselves in exile, separated from your presence! Restore us, and let us find you when we seek you. Amen.

John 14:27 “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Children’s message

Christ the King – gives peace… in a special way… from the cross not a chair/throne

Inside of us. Not a piece of candy… rather a peace, making whole

Comforter, when you are troubled or afraid (like Charlie Brown’s friend Linus’ blanket)

Announcements:

Hi Brenda from Thelma,

    Following for bulletins as you see fit:

**Consider providing a dessert for "The Life Begins at 75" Dinner which will be here at St. Daniels on Saturday, December 2, at Noon. Thank you in advance from The Robesonia Community Association (RCA).**

* Prayers:  
  Comfort in grief for Family of Charles Esterline (Christine Griesemer’s dad)

Jeremiah was a {bullfrog}… letter writer. Many in this congregation are quite good at that art of communication… I’ve seen the increasing number of Christmas cards in the baskets for people in the congregation who are home-bound; heard about the correspondence with members of the active military, been on the receiving-end of beautiful notes of thanks… people write texts, and Facebook posts, and this past year some of you contributed to a devotional book! {You could even write a letter inspired by Jeremiah and place it in the Big Bible!}

What would that letter contain? Maybe something like this one… a letter encouraging prosperity: build houses, plant gardens, get married, have babies, raise these children so that they can grow, get married, and give you grandchildren! {Some of you know well the delight of grandchildren!} Maybe you have even written letters containing this kind of well-wishing, blessing and encouragement already… maybe as someone was completing their schooling, or getting married, or moving for a job… but what about the recipient of this letter?

Many of the people receiving this letter were well educated, they were craftsmen, scholars, elders, priests, prophets, the privileged in society, some were even royalty, such as the Queen mother… why did they need a letter of encouragement and blessing as if they were just starting-out in life? Because they were! The Babylonians had traveled all the way from modern-day Iraq to modern day Israel in a huge military action… they broke down the thick walls around Jerusalem, they destroyed the beautiful temple that Solomon’s craftsmen and laborers built… the details get a bit nasty… the victors, like fishermen with a trophy catch literally hooked their prize… and kept them on the line until the best and brightest of Jerusalem had walked about 800 miles all the way back to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. These are the people receiving the letter from Jeremiah… people living as exiles, slaves in a strange land, who speak a different language, eat different food… these are the people Jeremiah writes to with the words of the LORD of hosts, the God is Israel: “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you.” (29:7)

What?! God sent these people into this forced exile?! Yes. We have heard the threats as we have read bits from prophet after prophet… king after king strayed from God, people worshiped idols, and little ‘g’ gods, and stopped participating in worship of our God, stopped offering sacrifices of thanksgiving, and repentance, stopped caring for the poor and oppressed… king after king and their followers were greedy and self-indulgent… and God was fed-up, warning about consequences of these sinful actions for generations… and now, in addition to the consequences on smaller scales of small military losses… we have this huge consequence. And it will be long-lasting… 70 years God says in Jeremiah’s letter (29:10)… remember 7 is the number of divine perfection, and every multiple of 10 is like an underline for emphasis. A long ‘time-out’!

Yes, God is the reason for this season of exile. AND God is directing these punished people to ‘bloom where they are planted.’ To add value to their new neighborhoods, to use their gifts of craftsmanship and build houses, to put in the hard labor of planting gardens… in fact to grow their own produce adding bounty and beauty to this Oppressor’s strong-hold: (Babylon may already have been known for its’ lush hanging gardens (in an otherwise flat, arid land), impressive streets, palaces, Temples and walls!).

God is not done there, God did not stop acting once the chosen people were in exile, no, there were more instructions from God to these exiles… pray for them, yes pray for your oppressors, and for the welfare of their city! … then the silver-lining, in that enhanced welfare of the foreign city, you will find your welfare. (Not welfare meaning a federal social service program… but the outcome would be similar… ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’… enhance the place where you find yourself. Embrace your new surroundings and enhance them, help your oppressors thrive; seemingly counter-intuitive advice.

And there’s more… if you hear good news preached or proclaimed... It’s a lie. The prophets that were taken into exile with you, the fortune-tellers and diviners in your midst… the ones telling you what you WANT to hear… they are lying. Even-though they say that they are proclaiming in the name of the LORD of hosts… Isn’t this incredible!... God sent a letter to the exiles, courtesy of Jeremiah, written by Elasah who may have been a scribe (29:3)… and God directly called-out the lying evangelists… with a corrective Divine promise, after 70 years, I will visit you, I will fulfill my promise, I will bring you back to this place (Jerusalem).

There’s anticipation for the fulfillment of a promise… sounds like Advent, in fact next week we will continue in this land of Babylon, with the people of Jerusalem embracing and aiding the welfare of their foreign forced-home-town.

For now, we’ll sit with these last few verses from this letter. (29:11) This part is on plaques and cards in most Christian bookstores, but listen to it in context “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.”

This is not a plan for the individuals hearing this letter read to them… those adults will not live to see the end of the 70 years. They will not get to go back to their homes in Jerusalem. And they have already been harmed with the trauma of their home-town destruction, and forced march into exile… imagine the horrors of harm they have witnessed. That future with hope is not even for their children, it is for their grandchildren, and maybe even their great-grandchildren. This is a plan not for individuals, it is a plan for a whole community… generations later.

Then when you call on me, and come and pray to me… I will hear you {not now, by the way}. Then when you search for me you will find me … not now, by the way… and not then either unless {~~sounds like the Lorax~~!}… you seek me with all your heart. I will LET you find me {then, not now}. I WILL restore you and gather you and bring you back {not now… and not for you as individuals.}

What does this letter say to us today, on Christ the King Sunday? God is in charge. God’s promise is powerful and effective… yet, God does not always work the way we would like, not always calling us to be comfortable, not always working on our time-frame, or in our parameters.

A seminary professor said of this passage… sometimes the exile happens as home, where a person has lived for decades or generations and the community changes around them, the world changes around them and suddenly, that one discovers they are an exile without having to move. People can be exiled in this way, or by a world that now writes letters and communicates in facebook or Instagram, twitter or snap chat, or what’s app… people not involved in conversations on those platforms become exiles from a growing portion of daily life.

So one could reason that learning to participate as part of these new surroundings, both virtual and real, would be a necessary step. Seeking the welfare of our neighbors old and new would benefit all of us together as a community. The LORD has plans for ‘all y’all’ the whole community, again maybe not immediately… but we can start now preparing, teaching, looking ahead a few generations, to what the children of the next generations will need to know about the LORD so they can seek with their whole hearts, and pray, and call upon the Lord… and be aware of the promise that the LORD will one day bring them home; to a place they’ve never known.

* Exiles away from home…
* Seek the welfare of the city! (Not welfare as social service program of federal government… but rather well-fare of the people among whom you live – whether “they” moved in around you changing a community you’ve been in your whole life… or whether you moved into a community with ‘them’
* Jeremiah… it’s been a long-time of pain; some of the southern kingdom including the king has already been taken-away in “chain gangs” by foreign powers… this letter is for the elders among those who were taken. It will be 70 years until the LORD will hear your prayers (although note that the LORD is speaking to them now through the prophet’s letter)… you can seek the LORD but won’t be able to find until the LORD says so.
* And when you search for me with ALL your heart (link to Advent theme: Pray all in; breath Spirit All in; Drink forgiveness all in; live all in flesh!)
* Some Jews are STILL in the region of Mepotamia… they never went back to the ‘Promised Land’ after deportation in 587?597?BC
* What is the mighty act of God? Bloom where you are planted… God will grant live… can’t wait for attractional evangelism[[1]](#footnote-1)
* The prophet’s letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29, which has travelled across a vast distance in order to bring comfort and much needed advice to those who find themselves under imperial rule a long way from home, emerges as a powerful testimony to resilience and survival.
* This letter reflects a traumatized community who has lost everything: their loved ones, their homes, their beloved city Jerusalem, their language and culture in addition to the familiar expressions of their religion connected to the temple that had been destroyed. The underlying question addressed by Jeremiah’s letter is one that may also live in many other uprooted individuals and communities: How does one go on after such a devastating disaster?
* Jeremiah 29:4-7 in particular exhibits something of the drive present in many refugee communities, then and since, that refuses to give up. It speaks of the desire to pick up the pieces of their lives and to start living again. The focus in verses 4-7 thus is on a range of activities that signal a return to some kind of normalcy -- such as building houses, planting vineyards, celebrating weddings -- and serves as a powerful testimony to resilience. These ordinary activities express the basic yearning for being safe and secure in the comfort of your own home, having enough food to eat and wine to gladden your heart, as expressed in Ecclesiastes 9:7. It also reflects a return of joy as evident in the reference to wedding celebrations that express hope for the future through shared food, wine, and community.
* The fact that there is reference to one’s children and one’s children’s children’s weddings suggests that Judah will be in Babylon for the long haul. The exiles are hence encouraged by Jeremiah’s letter to make the best of their current situation. To build a life. They are also advised to actively work for the wellbeing or peace of their newly adopted city -- even praying to God for the city to prosper. As immigrant communities throughout the ages know all too well, if the city prospers, it might just go well with them as well.
* Except if it does not. The reality is that quite often immigrants are scapegoated when things go wrong – for example, the king of Poland’s decision to expel the Jews from Krakow at the end of the 15th century in response to a fire that destroyed a large part of the city, including the Jewish quarter.
* The letter of Jeremiah thus serves also as a warning to immigrants in which they are urged to acquiesce, to fit in to the dominant culture, to avoid bringing attention to themselves. In this sense, the letter of Jeremiah may be considered as a piece of propaganda that serves the interests of the Empire to foster peace and quiet and squelch any possibility of resistance. The potentially harmful effects of such an interpretation should be kept in mind particularly in our current context in which immigrants all over the world are struggling to survive, and perhaps hopefully also to thrive, in the cities and towns in which they find themselves.
* A further theme that is worth exploring in terms of Jeremiah’s letter to the Exiles, is the way in which the human activity of surviving and starting to live again is contrasted, or perhaps better, framed by God’s action of fulfilling promises, of bringing back the exiles to their own land, of providing them with a hope-filled future. God’s actions that frame the people’s attempts to survive compellingly demonstrate that God continues to be involved with the people even in the far-away land of Babylon. The God-human relationship is further evident in the people searching for God in Jeremiah 29:13 that can be understood as the resumption of religious activity. The reference to “finding God” is further testimony to the act of recognizing God’s presence even in Exile in Babylon. Actually, it is in the midst of those ordinary activities such as building, planting, and celebrating weddings that people see God’s hand. And even then, the emphasis falls upon God’s action, as it is God who will allow the people to find God (Jeremiah 29:14).
* A final theme in this text is the reference to the true versus false prophets that also is the focus of the previous chapter, which outlines the battle between Jeremiah and Hananiah regarding who can claim to truly speak the word of God. In Jeremiah 29:8-9, Jeremiah warns the exiles not to listen to “the prophets and the diviners who are among you” for they are false prophets who deceive the exiles. Even when they, like Hananiah before them, say that it is God who is sending them, do not believe what they say for they are lying, according to Jeremiah.
* The reason for this sharp admonition in Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles has to do with the false prophets who advise exiles to not put down roots because the current situation of having been taken against their will to a land far away was only temporary and would be over within a year or two. In contrast, Jeremiah proclaims exactly the opposite message by stating that the exile would be very long indeed. For the current exiles, 70 years most definitely meant all of their lives, and probably also for the next generation. Thus, in Jeremiah’s mind, the wise thing to do would be to accept the situation for what it is, and to seek to live a meaningful life where they find themselves.
* Many of us today may encounter situations that cannot be changed, no matter how much we would have wanted things to be different. The question then is how one, amidst such difficult circumstances, can live the best possible life, including daily practices that make life both possible and meaningful. Perhaps even more important than figuring out how to live amidst these less-than-perfect circumstances is the question of how one manages to find joy while being in exile.
* **PRAYER OF THE DAY**
* God of hope,
* How often have we found ourselves in exile, separated from your presence! Restore us, and let us find you when we seek you. Amen.
* [**Juliana Claassens**](https://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=2-claassens) | [**0 Comments**](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3318#post_comments)

1. Working preacher Narrative Podcast [↑](#footnote-ref-1)