

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

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Jeremiah 29

"Living In Exile"

Two generations have passed; Isaiah has come and gone with his prophecies that the little remnant kingdom of Judah will survive the attacks of the Assyrians, but fall to the Babylonians – and will even be restored after the Exile. Jeremiah appears in the last generation before the Exile, ministering under three kings from about 627 BC to the fall of Judah in 586 BC. Jeremiah, like Isaiah, has a clear call from God to pronounce the coming judgment on the remnant of God's people, and suffers for it – arrested, imprisoned, reviled, "not a true patriot." But he lives to see Nebuchadnezzar destroy the city of Jerusalem, and the Temple, kill the last Davidic king, Zedekiah, and carry off the leaders of Judah to Babylon. Jeremiah weeps over his people, but he also has time to send them instructions on how to live in exile, and to tell them that the LORD promises to restore Israel when their 70-year exile is over.

1) *Why, Oh LORD?*

But why, oh why, does this happen? What is God doing to "his chosen people"?

Judah had forsaken the LORD. Jeremiah knows the language of the prophets like Hosea who went before him: God's people are like "an unfaithful wife," like "wayward sons." "*You have forsaken me, the spring of living water; and have dug your own useless pits that cannot hold water.*" The religious and social and political life of the supposed

"kingdom of God" has gradually become just like their pagan neighbors. Oh, there are short-lived revivals under the better kings – Hezekiah, Josiah – but under Manasseh and Jehoiakim, things are worse: Baal worship, Moloch worship, temple prostitution, idolatry of every kind.

Jeremiah sees that none of the reforms will hold up, and that in the eyes of the LORD "*there is not one honest or truth-seeking person in the city – or he would forgive his people.*" They no longer have any shame. In fact the nation is living with massive self-deceit. They know nothing of truth, but they rely on slogans they believe will protect them. They tell each other "peace, peace, when there is no peace." And the most insidious lie of all is that "*This is the Temple, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD*" – that is, the LORD will always protect us because we have this symbol of his presence in our midst: "In God We Trust."

Has the LORD not promised to be our God, and we will be his people? Has he not promised that David will always have a descendant on the throne of Israel? Has he not declared Zion "his holy hill"? If we are God's people, how can any harm come to us? But through Jeremiah, the LORD says otherwise: "*do not trust in these words, 'the temple, the temple, the temple of the LORD.' You have turned the house that bears my Name into a den of robbers.*" So you will go into Exile. Like

a potter who discards a flawed pot, I will discard you. *"I will summon my servant Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon... you will serve him 70 years."*

2) *Living In Exile*

And so they go - by the thousand, in three waves of deportation - and in 586 BC the Temple and the city of Jerusalem are reduced to rubble. What now of the people of God? Where is God when his temple, priesthood, sacrifices, city, land, Torah, people, nation are no more? Little wonder that *"Rachel weeps"* from her grave for her *"children who are no more."* And Jeremiah weeps too, and we are to understand that as his words are the *"words of the LORD,"* so *"the LORD weeps too"* as his people go into exile...

What will happen now? Jeremiah is given words to write to the exiles. And they are surprising in many ways. Bear in mind that Jeremiah, of all the prophets true and false, is credited with being the only one to see that the Exile will not be short; not a couple of years, as some say, but 70 years. So his letter to the exiles in Babylon begins *"This is what the LORD says ... build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat their produce."* You are going to be there a while, settle down to it! *"Marry and have sons and daughters... increase in numbers there, do not decrease."*

Now this does not mean *"assimilate"* - it does not mean *"lose your identity as God's people... as Jews"* (the people from Judah; the name they will be called by the end of the Exile). It means *"recognize that you can still seek the LORD, and still serve the LORD, while you live in exile!"* Understand that all those *"props"* that sustained your society and are now gone, all those promises whose interpretation you took for granted, may have been removed; but that is meant to teach you new truths about your relationship to God. It does not mean that he has

abandoned you forever; it means you have to *learn new ways of faith!*

So that does not, for example, mean that you have to live in a cultural ghetto. You do not even have to be like Daniel, who in the latter years of the Exile will decide to keep himself pure by not even eating the food of Babylon. You have to become an integral and important part of the culture of the people you now live among. So *"seek the peace of the city to which I have carried you into exile... pray to the LORD for it, for if it prospers, you too will prosper."* Indeed in the later Persian period of the exile, even Daniel will rise to become a chief advisor to the king; Esther will become a queen; and the Jews will be seen as a distinctive group within the Babylonian and then the Persian empire; people who *"follow the LORD their God, and their own customs."*

So the day will come when, says the LORD, *"I will come to you, and fulfill my gracious promise, and bring you back to this place."* The instrument for that return will be the Persian ruler Cyrus, who has conquered Babylon and who will recognize the worth and the culture of the Jews, and issue a decree that they shall be allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild their city and their temple.

3) *My Plans For The Future*

So in anticipation, the LORD tells the exiles through Jeremiah: *"I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

There are few better sentences in the whole Old Testament. If God can deal with rebellious, fallen, exiled people this way, then there is no-one who is beyond his reach or his grace or his love. Exile you may have to endure for a while, but the LORD has plans for you that are far better! And while you are in exile, you can learn new things

about faith that you would never have learned otherwise – and one of them is that I, the LORD, never give up on my people, even when to outside observers it surely looks as though I have!

But that is because I have stripped away the externals, the things that made you look like God's people, the precious "boundary markers" that gave you identity (or so you thought). I have kicked away the props that held you up, and now you are falling through space, and the only thing that can save you is landing in my hands. (And as the old joke says, "no, there is nobody else down there" who will show you an easier way!).

What you will learn, says the LORD, is a new way of faith; a very personal, no longer institutional, no longer nationalistic, no longer Torah-defined relationship with me. I call it, says the LORD through Jeremiah, "*a new covenant... not like the old one I gave to my people after the Exodus from Egypt; a new one for the time after the Exile from Babylon... now I will write my law in your hearts (not on stone); I will be your God and you will be my people (again); now everyone will know me (not just a few Spirit-filled leaders); now I will forgive your wickedness and remember your sins no more (and not need daily sacrifices in the temple).*" As I restore you, says the LORD, "*I will raise up for you a Righteous Branch from David... a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right...*"

4) *Living In Exile- Again*

So how do God's people live in exile? We need to know, because in some sense that is where they live most of the time! The brief eras of national stability and goodness for Israel; the brief periods where the Church has prospered, are probably of less duration than the times of uncertainty and even persecution, deportation, exile. Jesus certainly did not promise his followers that

they would live peacefully in "Christian nations."

In fact as Christianity spreads around the world and adapts to different cultures, it will probably often be as a minority belief for long periods. And that will be true even in regions like Europe and North America as they enter a period of "post-Christian" culture - where the memories of a Christian consensus gradually fade in the face of pluralism and secularization. Some Christians in this country already feel they are "living in exile" culturally – although we could be forgiven for thinking they ought to "get out a bit more" and discover what it really means to be a minority!

Exile has many forms. Maybe you feel it at home – not necessarily because you are the only believer, but perhaps the only one who seems to care about allowing faith to shape your life, your values, your children's upbringing, your family's priorities for time and money. Maybe you feel that you are living in a regional culture that lacks the widespread Christian support system that you grew up with and took for granted in the mid-west or the south or the south-west. Maybe your workplace seems to be occupied by aliens.

What do you do as a believer? Jeremiah says the word of the LORD is "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city where I have carried you into exile... Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." That means your family and mine; your workplace, your street, my street; it means this nation, it means wherever "the Lord carries us." Some of these places leave us wondering "why in the world would the Lord bring me here?" They are dark, difficult, dangerous; they have none of the supports we think we need or have been used to; some of them are enough to make anyone weep!

So pray to the Lord for the places where we live; remind ourselves that “the Lord has brought us here” for his own good purposes; that here we may need to learn new things about ourselves, and about him, and about our relationship. Maybe our faith has to become more personal, and not rely so much on the external symbols of the “faith community” – maybe our temples, our Torah, our city will have to go – so that we will learn to know the Lord in our hearts; to seek him and find him when there is nobody and nothing else; to learn perhaps for the first time what “written on our hearts” means; what his new covenant means; what “forgiveness of wickedness and no longer remembering our sins” means – to him and to us.

You and I can still seek and still find and still serve the Lord while we are living in exile from the “promised land.” “I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord; “plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Even if you can’t see all God’s plans now, trust that he will indeed work them out, for your good and his glory – that’s what it means that he is God and we are not!

Let us pray...