

Season after Pentecost - Jeremiah's Letter to Exile

November 26, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: John 14:27; Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit — Amen

Dear Members, guests and friends of Haven Lutheran Church,

I am Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah the priest from the tribe of Benjamin. The Lord called me to his prophet, his messenger. This morning you have heard the words the Lord had me removed from Jerusalem to be exiles in Babylon. Despite all the warnings the Lord had given them, the Israelites of Judah still seemed shocked that it had come to this — the loss of their homeland, Jerusalem, the Temple and their independence.

Some of them wondered how God could let this happen. Weren't they God's special people? It would only be much later that they would be honest with themselves and God. It would take them time to admit what the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have known all along — being God's special people did not mean they could do anything they wanted or be protected from hardships, consequences or human frailties. It's a truth every person and generation seems to have to learn again and again.

God is not a genie, bails bondsman or indulgent parent. God did love them. God had plans for them — through Israel the Lord wanted to bring all people back to the LORD. God had given them a plan for how they should live their lives for the good of all — the Ten Commandments — and expected them to do their best to live that way. Still, they would not be exempt from the challenges of earthly living but they had a way to live that allow them to have peace and hope, no matter the circumstances. Through the good and the bad, God loved and cared about them.

That is why I wanted to write to you, too, people and guests of Haven. I understand that there may be some of you who feel like exiles. "Who me?" you might say, "I'm not

going to be deported?” You don’t have to be shipped out of your country to feel like an exile. It’s when you encounter circumstances that tear you away from life as you know it. Just ask someone who has heard the word, “cancer,” lost a job, experienced a divorce, went to war, cope with the death of a spouse or child — it is as if all of life gets through up in the air and comes down in different places. You’re not sure which end is up or how to act or where you are going. That’s the feeling of exile. Have you been there before? Are you there now?

The Lord wants you to know what he had me tell the Hebrew exiles in Babylon. Despite what you may feel or think, the Lord says: I have not abandoned or rejected you. I love you deeply and completely and forever. I am not only a God of the good times. I am a God who sticks with you through the tough times. Suffering and despair are not my plans for you, says the Lord. Even so, I will not leave you orphaned. I will not turn away when you walk into one of life’s swampy messes or get dropped into it by no causes of your own. Hurt and hopelessness are not my plans for you. But, like those exiles in Babylon long ago, you may also be wondering how that can help when you are in the pit or can’t see when the hurt will stop. Here is what I told Jeremiah to tell you.

First, “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.” Okay, I know some of you can’t afford houses, don’t garden or have childbearing children. Don’t miss the point. When you find yourself in a situation or time that seems foreign, don’t forget to pick up the pieces of you lives and live again. Life may not be what you imagined or wanted. Take what you have and do the best you can. Treasure the love of family, friends and your church. Notice a blessing each day. Talk to God as if God is sitting next to you. And know, in the very

depth of your worn body of spirit, whatever you are living through is not forever. Don't expect to know when or how long. But know with great certainty that there will come a time when you are on the other side of sickness, grief, war, fear, weariness to a new normal that is again rich with purpose, joy and possibilities.

The Lord also told me to tell the exiles to seek the welfare of the city where they were exiled and to pray to the Lord on its behalf. That probably seemed like strange advice — to “actively work for the well-being or peace of” the new place they found themselves in — “even praying to God for the city to prosper.”¹ This was, after all, the land of the people who destroyed their homeland and forced them to come. Yet, for the sake of their peace and the peace in this foreign land, the Lord recommended they settle in and contribute without compromising their identity, faith and the ethical practices of Israel. Be God's people, wherever you are. It will anchor and guide you. I think that may apply in whatever exile you may experience. Whether it's in a hospital, physical therapy, chemo treatment center, applying for jobs, dealing with insurance companies or social services or some other foreign territory. Be a follower and lover of Jesus wherever you are. Pray and do what you are able for those who manage, inhabit or share these stressful, difficult places of exile. God is there. You may be the way someone else gets to know God.

There were a great deal of false prophets during my time and there still are. False prophets can sound very convincing and will usually give people unrealistic hope for immediate relief so they will be popular. The Lord had me warn the people not to be deceived by them. I think you have false prophets, too. There are false prophets who tell you that if you have enough faith you can be cured of any disease. They say if you are not cured, you didn't have enough faith. They are false prophets who crush people's faith and hope. Don't be deceived. It rains on the good and the bad. It is not God's punishment if

you get sick or lose everything in a hurricane or terrorists fly into towering buildings. We cannot know all the reasons why but we can know this ---- God loves us and has plans for our welfare not our harm, to give us a future with hope. We can hold on to that truth in whatever storms we face. Don't let the easy and glittery words of false prophets unsettle you.

I don't know if you have understood all that I've said. It may not make a great deal of sense to those of you who are feeling very comfortable in your life right now. You might want to store these words away for later. But I pray you have heard the hope the Lord wants you to have, just as he wanted for those exiles in Babylon. God never stops thinking about us and wanting the best for us — even when stubborn and disobedient like the Judean Israelites to whom I first wrote. God loves us and is with us even when we are in a foreign place or circumstance — which makes it possible for us to find a way to go on and live through the trials. Be the child of God you are on purpose. Be God's witness and contribute positively to the welfare of wherever you find yourself. This will give you purpose that can keep bitterness and despair at bay when you come into unknown, unwanted territory. Don't become captive in the prison of "why?" It will only drive you to resentment or hopelessness. Though you may not see when, you can believe there will be an end to the current exile. We believe in a Lord whose love is steadfast and eternal, who wants the very best for us and so we are a people who can live in hope, no matter the situation. Put your trust in the Lord, my brothers and sisters. While we live between God's promises and complete fulfillment, be courageous and live in hope. God IS with you. God IS with us. Your friend and prophet, Jeremiah.

Linda M Alessandri 11/25/17

ENDNOTES

1. Juliana Claassens, "Commentary on Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-14" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org