

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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Hopeful Living

What a radical declaration, this one. Prophets, those who lived in Biblical times and those you and I might consider prophets today, are known for making radical declarations, statements that surprise, shock and often anger their audience. This statement by the prophet, Jeremiah must have been particularly difficult to swallow. To people, who had been taken from their homeland against their will, to live in a country that was not their own Jeremiah said,

⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take 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.

⁷But 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.

The book of Jeremiah is thought to be a collection of letters written by the prophet Jeremiah proclaiming the *judgement and the hope* of the one true God in the midst of extreme national and personal crisis. The passage that is our reading for this morning is understood to be part of a letter Jeremiah sent to God's people who were living in exile in Babylon around 594 B.C.

Just a quick refresher in our Biblical history, to get this passage placed in the larger context. You may recall God's chosen people existed for a time united under the reigns of the great kings, David and Solomon. Those reigns did not last though, and the kingdom was divided into the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the people were ruled by several different kings. These empires too eventually fell and the ancestors of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob became subject to *centuries* of political domination by surrounding powers, primarily Assyria and Babylon.¹ Life was hard and uncertain.

¹ Homiletics, October 14, 2001.

Periodically the people would rebel. And around 600 B.C the king of Babylon crushed a rebellion of the people living in Jerusalem. To assure that his power and authority in Jerusalem would stick the Babylonian king deported most of the rich and powerful to the region to Babylon.

The Old Testament book of 2 Kings recounts this story in some detail. The accounts of the devastation to Jerusalem and the surrounding areas are heart wrenching. The writer of 2 Kings says, the king of Babylon, “carried away all of Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people in the land.”²

Among those who did remain in Jerusalem following this devastation, those with less education, fewer resources, less wealth, was the prophet, Jeremiah. There in the ruins of Jerusalem, Jeremiah continued to prophesy to his people. He was their pastor. This was his time. These were his people, now scattered and decimated. It is believed that it was during this time, when he was still in Jerusalem that he wrote this letter to his fellow Judahites who were now living in Babylon.

Apparently, in an attempt to calm the anger and fear of the people in exile, there were some prophets who had gone to Babylon with the people, who were predicting an early end to the captivity. And the people there were trying to bring about their release even more quickly through means of resistance and unrest. Jeremiah and others felt that they had a false optimism and that the captivity would stretch before them for many years, which is indeed what happened.

With this vision of what the future held for the captives, Jeremiah counseled a different approach. He told the people to make their lives in Babylon, to accommodate to their circumstances; in short to settle down and adjust to their new life there. Advice that surely must have been both unexpected and unwelcomed.

As I mentioned earlier, when we read the book of Jeremiah as a whole we find two major themes running through Jeremiah’s prophesy: one of judgment and one of hope. The theme of hope is easy for us to hear and take in. A prophet of God would preach hope and the assurance of God’s presence in the face of so much loss, destruction and upheaval of life. God does not and will never leave us. We can live into hope, even when we are in exile, however we might define that.

² 2 Kings 24, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

The theme of judgment is more difficult for us to hear. This is what gives Biblical prophets a bad name – telling people what they do not want to hear. I struggle with the words of judgment in scripture too. In the face of God’s judgment we can so easily slip into immobilizing guilt, unhealthy self-righteousness (if we perceive God’s judgment coming down on some one else) or sense of hopelessness. It is challenging to bring judgement and hope together in our hearts.

Through out the first part of the book of Jeremiah he repeatedly tells the people that, “the catastrophe of Judah’s political annihilation is evidence of God’s judgment against an unfaithful people.”³ In other words, you with the choices you have made, have brought this upon yourself. A good portion of the book of Jeremiah is one powerful hell, fire and damnation sermon. Look what your choices have wrought. You brought this upon yourselves.

We have to proceed with caution here. The judgment of God is true. There are consequences to our actions, on international, national and personal levels. We know this. The choices we make as a nation impact our lives, as do our choices about what we will eat when we get up in the morning, a nice clean bowl of oatmeal or 3 chocolate donuts. Where we need to be careful is when we say that the disasters of a nation, or the disasters and pain that befall as an individual, are evidence of God’s judgment. Who is blame? Who is at responsible? What is punishment?

We teach our children that there are consequences to their actions. Where do consequences leave off and judgment begin? And what are simply the realities of human life? Prophets like Jeremiah make us examine our understandings of judgment, and do not let us off easily. In light of our Christian faith how do we understand the relationship between sin, responsibility, judgment and grace?

This complex mix of judgment and hope and grace is what makes the statement that is our text for this morning so radical. In the face of Jeremiah’s understanding of judgment and of hope he instructs the people of God to live their lives where they are. He says, in effect, leave the issues of judgment to God for now, and live in this moment.

I imagine that if Jeremiah were able to quote Jesus for these exiles in Babylon he might say, ‘render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s’.

³ Homiletics, October 14, 2001.

Know that you are strangers in a strange land, simply by virtue of your faith. Leave aside how and why you got there. Who is to blame. And find ways to live that faith where you are. Work for the good of all people here and now. Be citizens of your country, your new home, and let everything you do reflect your faith. Sometimes the most radical thing we can do is be fully present in our time, in our moment.

One commentator wrote, “Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles was radical in its call for Israel to face the historical reality of its existence with unwavering courage and unblinking candor.”⁴

Regardless of how we understand God’s judgment there are times, many times, when the most faithful thing we can do is ‘face the reality of our existence with unwavering courage and unblinking candor.’ There is a time to ask the why questions. Absolutely. To work to prevent further damage by understanding how we got to where we are. But there is also a time to live in the present we have now in order to work to create the future we envision.

The words of Jeremiah call us to live our faith where we are. To engage fully in our lives and in our community. Vote. Speak. Pray. Care, as our stewardship theme reminds us. Work for affordable housing and better schools. Work for justice right here. Think and pray about what you can do as a member of your family, your church, your city and country. We are well aware that we may differ on how we hear that call and how we chose to respond. But that does not negate the call. This is part of living our faith.

We continue to live with the complexities of God’s judgment and God’s grace. We want answers to ‘why’ questions and some kind of universal understanding of the problems and solutions to the difficulties that face our nation and world right now. And by the way, it would be nice if those solutions were the ones with which we agree.

To this the prophet Jeremiah says, “seek the welfare of the city where God have sent you, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Live with courage and candor now. Live fully in this moment. By doing so you are living your faith in the one who is forever faithful.

⁴ Homiletics, October 14, 2001.