

## **JEREMIAH 29:1-2; 4-7; 10-14**

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem....

The letter said: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 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; multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare...

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For 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.

Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart. I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

## **A FUTURE WITH HOPE**

**Jeremiah 29:1-3; 4-7; 10-14**

Several sermons ago, I cited a poll that found 80% of the American people felt that our country was out of control. One of the central factors contributing to this feeling is confusion—which is perfectly natural when life changes drastically with no rhyme or reason behind it. We did not do anything to deserve this so we cannot fall back on a logically based cause/affect explanation for how we should respond to it. So if the model of thinking you ordinarily use to make sense of your life events breaks down, you may experience a range of emotions as you attempt to work through it—at best it could be amusement as you laugh at your bewilderment and at worst it could be rage as you rail at the unfairness and injustice of your new circumstances. Whatever you are feeling about it is understandable and completely acceptable. Each of us has experienced different consequences so we are naturally going to have different emotions and they have very likely changed as time goes on.

That much being acknowledged, the real problem underlying our experience with loss of control is the lack of national unity around the behavior people are using in an effort to regain control. We are not all on the same page and because we are confused about the facts—what is real, what is a hoax, what is misleading, what data we can trust and which data is flawed—we are basically following our own guidelines motivated by our own needs. And the result is a mess while one segment of the population's actions are offset by the other's. This results in a great irony; namely, that we have ended up handing control of our fates over to the virus—over which we are trying to gain control. We need each other to take back the control, so our warring is totally self-defeating.

To this point, I would like to read you an excerpt from a recent article in USA TODAY:  
“That dawning realization of co-dependency faces a battle from centuries of American exceptionalism, the notion that the rules that apply to other nations don't apply here.

Mother Nature knows only one set of rules and those fly in the face of a belief that somehow the nation's coronavirus numbers will decline without any measured sacrifice by its citizens.

'When you have a pandemic and you need to have a science-based response to it by everybody in the society, and you have a population that culturally doesn't trust science and doesn't trust authority, you get problems like we're seeing now, people arguing over masks... To slow the race to four million cases, people must accept that life may no longer be the same and understand that recovering what we can of that past life depends on how we meet this moment.

This virus is something unique to our generation, and we don't know how to respond to this, because we've never been told that our world has changed and we can't continue to live the way we were living. That's a big pill to take.'"

Boy, is it ever. And do I have to tell you that the spiritual implications of this moment are daunting? Allow me to give you a little background on our lesson for this morning because I do believe it has much to guide us going forward. Jeremiah's prophetic life spanned four decades which were very tumultuous years in the life of the Judean nation. Political alliances between Judah, Assyria and Egypt were continuously changing as they all sought to protect their independence from Babylon which was becoming the reigning and threatening power in the region. But this strategy obviously backfired resulting in Jerusalem being soundly defeated by Nebuchadnezzar who subsequently made Judah a vassal state, robbing the nation of its material assets while also taking its elite citizens—artisans, smiths, priests and court officials into exile. They neutered the country. It was a national disaster.

Among those who remained, numerous factions arose which wanted to rebel against Babylon by forging alliances with either Egypt or Assyria, both of which had also been annexed by Nebuchadnezzar. But they could never get together on a strategy and their movements basically dissipated. Jeremiah, however, took an entirely different tack. He understood Nebuchadnezzar to actually be an agent of Yahweh with the exile being the punishment for the

people's apostasy.

In his letter to the exiles which you heard earlier, he outlines an approach to this national disaster which I believe offers us some solid advice. Listen again to the second paragraph of our lesson: *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...Seek the welfare of the city I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your own welfare.*

Obviously, Jeremiah correctly understands that this exile is not going to magically disappear and that God will intervene to bring the diaspora home in the the near future. It was going to last a long time. This circumstance was not something over which they had any control. So in their case—as well as in our own—that raises the question of what you actually can control. The answer is clearly both attitudinal and behavioral in nature.

The attitude is one of acceptance. Seeking out someone to blame, making up conspiracy theories, or engaging in useless skirmishes over personal entitlements accomplishes nothing and makes life more miserable than it needs to be. Instead, you regain control by going ahead and living your life within the parameters reality has imposed upon you—*build houses, plant gardens, reproduce*—and very importantly—*pray for the welfare of the city in which you now reside.*

We do not have any way to gain control over this virus just yet. Hopefully, it won't take the same 70 years it took for the exiles to return home! Otherwise, none of us will be around to celebrate the break of its hold upon the world. But it is notable that the countries that have accepted the fact of the virus and worked in harmony to mitigate its control are doing a whole lot better than we are. It has not been politicized or weaponized as we are so adept at doing. For they get it—that each person's welfare is dependent upon everyone else's. Like it or not, we are co-dependent. Our myth of "rugged individualism" does not work here. But this is how we get to A Future With Hope.

When are we going to realize that changes in our lives happen from day to day and even hour to hour? This is not something we can escape. It is the nature of the universe we live in. But accepting that allows us to make the most of it and even to capitalize on it. Without the virus, would we be tackling the horrible problems of racism and inequality we are now beginning to take seriously?

God has God's ways. Sometimes we do not understand them, but our faith can help us to forge through the changes. *For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's 70 years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have you...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

Reverend Thomas Dunlap

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