

“Journeying with Jeremiah, Part VIII: The Beginning”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for October 9th 2016 (21st after Pentecost/Canadian Thanksgiving Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Jeremiah 29: 1-9

Sometimes it can be hard...hard to distinguish an ending from a beginning. Mind you: last Sunday, courtesy of a reading from the book *Lamentations*—a book traditionally attributed to Jeremiah—last Sunday it was not difficult to recognize an ending: an ending that took the form of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the slaughter of untold numbers of its people. A true ending, that: thus the need for lamentation.

What we encounter this morning is a bit harder to categorize. As I pointed out a few weeks ago, the lectionary has not followed a strictly chronological order in its choice of readings from Jeremiah, and so this morning we find ourselves having moved backward in time: a full decade earlier than the events we pondered last Sunday. This morning our text comes from the immediate aftermath of the **first** visit the Babylonian army paid to Jerusalem: not to destroy the city, but to enforce vassal status upon the city and its leaders. Some Judeans would have lost their life in this earlier skirmish; many others including the King of Judea found themselves exiled to Babylon; still others, including Jeremiah, remained behind inside the walls of the once proud but now sadly diminished Jerusalem. And yes, Jeremiah, being Jeremiah, had much to say: and not only to those who remained behind with him, but also to those who had no choice but to begin again in the city of Babylon and the surrounding cities in which they now lived as exiles. And the intriguing thing is this. In the letter Jeremiah sends to them—quite possibly within months of their exile—the voice we hear is not that of a poet lamenting an ending! No: it is the voice of the prophet, calling the exiles to a new beginning. At a time when others of the prophets were telling the exiles to sit tight because they would be returning to Jerusalem any day, the tidings Jeremiah offers are quite different. No: they would be staying in Babylon for quite some time. Get used to it...and then wipe the dust from your shoes and make a new beginning. Listen again....listen again to the central charge Jeremiah—more accurately the charge Jeremiah’s God speaking through the prophet—offers to those languishing in Babylon!

Build houses and live in them.

Plant gardens and eat their 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.

And finally, what may be the real heart of the matter. *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.* Seek the welfare; seek the welfare of the city!

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That phrase...that beautiful phrase...has long been a favourite of mine. During my first year as a newly baptized Christian, a year spent worshipping at one of the true cathedrals of liberal Protestantism—Riverside Church in Manhattan—during my year at Riverside as a brand new Christian, there was actually a conference hosted by Riverside that was simply entitled, “Seeking the Welfare of the City”. At the time, I rather doubt I recognized that title was lifted directly from Jeremiah. Nor would I have understood the extent to which the sentiment expressed by that phrase had helped liberal Christianity—for the better part of two centuries—to define one of the key emphases that shaped its distinct understanding of the Gospel. Other Churches and other Christian traditions might emphasize withdrawal from the world...even permitting the world to go to hell in a hand-basket! Not our tradition: not a tradition that shaped, and that in turn was shaped by, such luminaries as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nellie McClung, and Martin Luther King! **Our** calling, **our** vocation, was to turn **to** the world, to turn **to** the city, to seek **its** welfare and in the process of seeking **its** welfare, to embrace **our own**. This was the brand of Christianity to which I was drawn: a movement that understood as integral to the very shape of the Gospel, a mandate to seek not only the well-being of the Church, but of the wider community. A vocation that remains a challenge for us...and yet one, so defined, that still fails to capture the full poignancy of what Jeremiah wrote to that group of Judean exiles. And here’s one way...one way in which to measure the remarkably counter-intuitive nature of the instructions Jeremiah set before the exiles; one way of understanding just how tough it would have been for them to hear the word Jeremiah spoke on behalf of his God.

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Ponder this psalm. A hauntingly beautiful psalm that would have been written around the same time Jeremiah sent his letter to the exiles.

*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
But how shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!*

*Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!*

It's a psalm that strikes a very different tone than Jeremiah's letter, does it not? Jeremiah insists that the exiles *seek the welfare of the city* meaning the welfare of Babylon; by contrast the Psalmist vows: *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!* In truth, the psalm grows even more anguished; so far I have only read its "polite" part, the domesticated portion of the 137th psalm: in other words the section you are likely to hear in Church. Here's how the Psalm actually ends:

*O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,
blessed shall he be who repays you
with what you have done to us!
Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock!*

Those are not words most of us would expect to encounter in a "holy" book, now are they. Nonetheless, those are words you will find in your Bible: words which, if nothing else, serve to highlight the remarkable nature of Jeremiah's letter. Where the psalmist sees only an obscene end, Jeremiah sees a new beginning, a new opportunity. Where the psalmist rehearses his anger at his conquerors, Jeremiah urges his people to *seek the welfare* not of Nazareth, not of Bethlehem, not of Jerusalem, but the welfare of Babylon! That city—that despised city—was nonetheless the place where these exiles had no choice but to make their new beginning. It was the city on whose behalf they were now to pray. And yes: it was the city whose welfare they now needed to seek. None of us...none of us...ought to underestimate the challenge, the sheer leap of heart and mind, these exiles were facing in their time, in their place, if they were to obey the command of God.

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Seems to me...seems to me that the challenge of living in exile is one that may well speak to us today, and not only because we Canadians find ourselves welcoming all kinds of exiles from a variety of places, backgrounds and circumstances. No: today as we celebrate *our* Thanksgiving as Canadians, I want to highlight the sense in which we ourselves might identify not so much with those who were welcoming exiles, but with those who found themselves in exile. And I am reminded...reminded that one of the truly defining chapters in the New Testament—the 11th chapter of Hebrews—powerfully suggests that **all** of our lives are marked by exile, lives not unlike the lives of Abraham and Sarah who, as the author of Hebrews so eloquently puts it, had no choice but to *acknowledge that they were strangers and exiles on the earth*.

And I know...I know! Such talk can make us uneasy: uneasy lest we betray our distinct heritage as that band of Christians and that brand of Christianity that most certainly wishes to be known for their devotion to the well-being of this earthly city. We rightly worry that our commitment might be diminished were we to come to the conclusion—to quote the old Gospel hymn—that “this world is not my home”. But that’s to miss the point both hymn and scripture thereby make. Indeed: if we take Jeremiah at his word, it is precisely a scattered people, an exiled people, who have no choice but to bloom where they have been planted! Whether in the suburbs of ancient Babylon...or the suburbs of a modern “harbour city”...it is ever so easy to spend one’s time longing for that which is no longer possible, rather than seizing the opportunities that inevitably present themselves here and now. Not clinging to what might have been but, strangers in a strange land though we might be, finding a way not only to make peace with the hand life has dealt us, but seeking to offer something of ourselves to a world that has great need of each heart, each mind, each offering, each gift.

And yes: some of you may hear in all of this, echoes of the Buddhist practice of non-attachment. There is, I think, great wisdom in such practice: practice that should not be a stranger to Christian circles. The point I would want to make this morning, however, is that it is not only “things” to which we can become inordinately attached. On the contrary: we can readily get hooked on perceptions of who we are...perceptions of who we might have been, if only the cards had been shuffled more in our favour. But if we spend our Babylonian years pining for what might have been if only we had been permitted to remain behind in Jerusalem, the new beginning Jeremiah urges us to make will not so much as get off the ground. And you know: if we honestly measure the gap between, say, the lives we might have dreamt about when we were ten years old, and the life we actually went on to lead, many of us will recognize something of a gulf between the two. Trust me! As a boy growing up in New York City in the 1950s, with what I will charitably describe as fairly limited athletic gifts, it was pretty important for me to give up—sooner rather than later—the dream of becoming the next Mickey Mantle...or the next Sandy Koufax. Wasn’t gonna happen! And yet: we all know people who never succeed in letting go of such dreams...those who find themselves imprisoned in dreams of their “glory days”, in the thought that they “could have been a contender” if only! Such dreams, by and large—if left unrelinquished—tend to produce nothing more than bitter-twistedness and twisted bitterness, making it hard for those so afflicted to seek their own welfare...let alone the welfare of those with whom they share their exile. To accept what life has given...to relinquish that which life has taken...to find the capacity to give thanks not for that which **might** have been...but, to paraphrase the Velveteen Rabbit, to give thanks for that which is real, torn and tattered though it may be: surely that is the beginning of wisdom...the wisdom Jeremiah the prophet—the broken-hearted prophet—offered in his time and place, to a broken-hearted people: a people whose exile had only just begun, but whose future beckoned all the same.

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Permit me a final thought. It amounts to a reminder that Jeremiah—when he wrote his letter to the exiles—was speaking on behalf of God. Notice that neither Jeremiah nor Jeremiah's God were prepared to offer cheap consolation to the exiles. Whereas the false prophets were promising a speedy return, Jeremiah—who really and truly was speaking the Word of God—had no choice but to promise the cold reality of lives lived in exile, 70 years worth of exile, meaning the ones who first read this letter never managed to return home. And yet, the ultimate promise Jeremiah offers—lurking just beneath the surface of that cold dose of reality—was the promise that God, their God and his, had not and would not abandon them: would, if need be, go into exile with them. Surely that's an assurance to which we are entitled to hold firm in our own diverse exiles: as those who gather to give thanks on this auspicious day, but do so against the backdrop of lives that will always, even on the very best of days, be shadowed by uncertainties and anxieties.

To practice non-attachment **as a Christian** most certainly does **not** mean detaching ourselves from the love that brought us into this world, the love which has promised—in Christ—to be faithful through all of our exiles and all of our homecomings...all of our endings, and all of our new beginnings. That's not cheap grace, my friends. That's the Gospel: and at that end of the day, that's why we have no choice but to give thanks!

May it be so! In Jesus' name! Amen!