

**“Sounds Good!” sermon by Daniel A. Surya
St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, May 29, 2022**

Good morning St. Andrew’s Kamloops! Thank you for having me, virtually, with you today! And thank you Pastor Steve for the invitation!

Such a privilege to hear a bit about St. Andrew’s congregation from Pastor Steve and also to hear some Spiritual Biography of St. Andrew’s congregation from YouTube.

Friends, today’s topic is “Sounds Good!” Why did I choose that topic? Well, when I first came to Canada with my family (that was in August 2019), I realized that whenever I discussed something like an idea with someone, in particular with the Canadians, almost all of them would say this phrase: “Sounds good!”

Now, English is not my heart language. So, I was wondering why so many Canadians like to use this phrase “Sounds good!”; is it simply a “Yes!” or a big “YES”!? I wasn’t sure. Then I looked up on English Urban Dictionary and it says that “Sounds good,” “Of course,” “Sure thing,” “All right,” or “That’s fine” each has a slightly nuanced difference, but . . . these phrases are certainly more positive than a simple “OK” or “Yes” but they are less so than “It would be my pleasure.”

So, to sum up, the phrase “Sounds good” is a better expression of agreement rather than just simply “OK” or “Yes”, but “Sounds good” is less than “It would be my pleasure!”

What is the point that I want to make here? Well, recently my family and I have been discerning about our next move after my graduation: should we continue to stay in BC or should we move to another province? Can we survive the cold weather if we move out of BC? Which congregation that God wants me to serve? Which school would my son go to? Which community would my wife need?

So, this discerning season makes me wonder if God asks me to go where I don’t want to go or to do what I don’t like to do, would I respond to him with “Sounds good, Lord!” Or, hesitantly I would respond, “OK” but in my heart I don’t actually agree with his plan.

Talking about God’s plan, one thing is sure: God’s plan isn’t always exactly the same as ours. His blessings sometimes don’t look or appear like blessings.

A Franciscan Benediction goes like this: May God bless you with discomfort (that doesn’t sound good!) at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger (that doesn't sound good!) at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears (that doesn't sound good!) to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness (that doesn't sound good!) to believe that you can make a difference in the world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.

That's a very unlikely blessing, isn't it? Discomfort, anger, tears, and foolishness.

And that's what happened when the Israelites in the exiles heard Jeremiah say, "For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon (Wait? Seventy years?), I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place (referring to Jerusalem). For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (verses 10-11).

That's a weird plan and a weird benediction isn't it? Are you sure Lord that you know the plans you have for us? We are in the exiles now, we are far away from our hometown, we are struggling here in this foreign land. What do you expect us to do as we wait for seventy years?

Verses 5-7 say, "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. But 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."

These verses, says Juliana Claassens (the writer in Working Preacher Commentary), in particular exhibit something of the drive present in many refugee communities, then and since, that refuses to give up. It speaks of the desire to pick up the pieces of their lives and to start living again. The focus in verses 5-7 thus is on a range of activities that signal a return to some kind of normalcy – such as building houses, planting vineyards, celebrating weddings – and serves as a powerful testimony to resilience.

Claassens also adds that the fact that there is reference to one's children and one's children's children's weddings suggests that Judah will be in Babylon for the long haul (which is right: seventy years!). The exiles are hence encouraged by Jeremiah's letter to make the best of their current situation. To build a life. They are also advised to actively work for the wellbeing or peace of their newly adopted city – even praying to God for the city to prosper. As immigrant communities throughout the ages know all too well, if the city prospers, it might just go well with them as well.

Claassens also argues that the letter of Jeremiah thus serves also as a warning to immigrants in which they are urged to submit, to fit into the dominant culture, to avoid bringing attention to themselves. In this sense, the letter of Jeremiah may be considered as a piece of propaganda that serves the interests of the Empire to foster peace and quiet and squelch any possibility of resistance.

The potentially harmful effects of such an interpretation should be kept in mind particularly in our current context in which immigrants all over the world are struggling to survive, and perhaps hopefully also to thrive, in the cities and towns in

which they find themselves. Before I record myself today I'm surprised to know that over 6.55 million refugees left their homes in Ukraine and headed toward other countries as of May 22, 2022. Most of them fled to Poland.¹

Many of us today may encounter situations that cannot be changed, no matter how much we would have wanted things to be different. The question then is how one, amidst such difficult circumstances, can live the best possible life, including daily practices that make life both possible and meaningful.

In an email chat with Pastor Steve I heard that before the pandemic the church had maybe 70 people in the sanctuary but now the church has around 30 or 40 people. So, what is the hope of this story from Jeremiah for a formerly dominant culture that now finds itself minority?

Perhaps even more important than figuring out how to live and to thrive amidst these less-than-perfect circumstances is the question of how one manages to find joy while being in this "exile" situation. Because in some sense all of us are

¹ See: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293403/cee-ukrainian-refugees-by-country/#:~:text=Number%20of%20refugees%20from%20war,in%20CEE%202022%2C%2>

[Oby%20country&text=After%20Russia%20started%20its%20invasion,of%20them%20fled%20to%20Poland.](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293403/cee-ukrainian-refugees-by-country/#:~:text=Number%20of%20refugees%20from%20war,in%20CEE%202022%2C%20by%20country&text=After%20Russia%20started%20its%20invasion,of%20them%20fled%20to%20Poland.)

displaced persons, perhaps not geographically speaking but culturally speaking or spiritually speaking. No matter where we live, no matter our circumstances.

When we first came to Canada – that was in August 2019 – we thought that was going to be awesome. We sold our house so that we could have enough to begin a new life here. However, little did we know, pandemic hits. Not only here in Canada, but also in Indonesia, and all over the world. It was hard for us, and I believe it was hard too for all of you, being far away from our home country, not knowing much of familiarities, customs, and experiences in Canada and now the pandemic makes it worse. My family and I couldn't do anything when we heard some of our family members died in Indonesia. We did what Jeremiah suggested to his countrymen: refuses to give up, picks up the pieces of our lives, start and restart to live again, continue to do any range of activities that signal a return of hope for normalcy, and by doing that – without I realized back then – that served as a powerful testimony of resilience to my son.

And by the way, my family and I are forever grateful to Vancouver School of Theology and to St. Andrew's Hall Residence for being there with us in those two difficult years of pandemic.

Before I wrote down my sermon, I came across the St. Andrew's Youtube channel that shares Spiritual Biography stories. I found it fascinating! Somehow I feel like I have found fellow pilgrims! And we are all pilgrims on the journey, looking for our true home, aren't we? The book of Hebrews says, "For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). If this pilgrimage is what God wants for us – perhaps for the next seventy years – then I trust we all could respond "sounds good, Lord!" Bring it on!

Friends, if I may quote in Dr. Richard Topping's sentences in his sermon for the 146th General Assembly in June last year, he said: "I trust God has work for us to do in this time and this place. By faith we are all called to venture out and do great things, small things, God pleasing things. Who knows what they may be for us? What is God up to now in our world, in this time, here and now? That is a matter for well-informed Christians to discern. We need to look at the world through Scripture lenses to spot God's MO (modus operandi) so we can go with the flow of the Spirit in the world God loves so much."

Let us pray.