

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14, CEB

Jeremiah 29:1

“¹ The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the few surviving elders among the exiles, to the priests and the prophets, and to all the people Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon from Jerusalem.”¹



Jeremiah 29:4-14

“⁴ The Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don’t dwindle away. ⁷ Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

⁸ The Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims: Don’t let the prophets and diviners in your midst mislead you. Don’t pay attention to your dreams. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I didn’t send them, declares the Lord.

¹⁰ The Lord proclaims: When Babylon’s seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. ¹² When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. ¹³ When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. ¹⁴ I will be present for you, declares the Lord, and I will end your captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have scattered you, and I will bring you home after your long exile, declares the Lord.”²

Sermon³

Picture this: You’re at a family reunion, catching up with relatives you haven’t seen in years. As you share stories, you realize how many of you ended up somewhere completely different than you planned. Maybe you’re living in a town you never meant to stay in. Maybe you’re in a job that was supposed to be temporary. Maybe you’re caring for someone you love longer than you expected.

¹ Jeremiah 29:1, CEB.

² Jeremiah 29:4-14, CEB.

³ Adapted from <https://bittersoutherner.com/the-souths-ellis-island-clarkston-georgia-refugees>

Life has a way of taking us places we never planned to go.

Today's ancient story speaks directly to this experience. It's about people who had to make homes in places they never wanted to be. And it teaches us something surprising: God often shows up most powerfully in the places we never chose.

We've been exploring how ancient wisdom connects to modern stories in our summer series. Two weeks ago, we discovered how God reshapes us like a potter working with clay, using our cracks and flaws to create something beautiful. Last week, we saw how truth survives even when powerful people try to destroy it.

Today, as we welcome Pastor Chantel to our church family, we're exploring what it means to begin new chapters we never expected to write. This timing is perfect—because new beginnings, whether chosen or unchosen, require the same courage and trust.

Before we dive into our ancient scripture text, let me tell you about a small town in Georgia that shows God's wisdom in action from a story in *The Bitter Southerner*.⁴

Clarkston, Georgia, used to be a quiet suburb of Atlanta. Then something unexpected happened. Starting in 1980, the U.S. government began sending refugees there—people fleeing war, persecution, and disaster. Today, over 60,000 refugees from more than 40 countries have made Clarkston their first American home.

Imagine being Naing Oo, an 11-year-old boy from Myanmar. He arrived speaking no English, carrying secret documents hidden in his backpack, everything familiar left behind. Or picture Malek Alarmash and his mother, Syrian refugees who lost everything, starting over in a strange land.

These modern exiles faced a choice: spend their energy wishing they were somewhere else, or invest in making their new place better for everyone.

They chose to invest. Naing Oo now helps other refugees adjust to American life. The Alarmash family started a restaurant that brings neighbors together over Syrian food. Families from Eritrea, Somalia, and Bhutan opened businesses, started farms, and created community gardens.

The result? Something beautiful happened. Refugees in Clarkston achieve independence faster than almost anywhere else in America. The whole town has come alive with new energy, new foods, new friendships. When displaced people chose to bless their new home, everyone benefited.

This modern story helps us understand an ancient letter written to people in a similar situation.

⁴ Adapted from <https://bittersoutherner.com/the-souths-ellis-island-clarkston-georgia-refugees>

Twenty-six hundred years ago, the Jewish people faced their own forced displacement. The Babylonian Empire conquered Jerusalem and dragged thousands of families hundreds of miles from home. These weren't volunteers or adventurers—they were captives, torn from everything they knew.

Imagine losing your home, your job, your community, and your place of worship all at once. Imagine being forced to live among people who destroyed your life. That's what these ancient exiles faced.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote them a letter with God's surprising message. While other religious leaders promised quick rescue, Jeremiah delivered different instructions. Listen to what God told these displaced people in verses 5 to 7:

⁵ Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. ⁷ Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare."⁵

Wait—what? God wanted them to put down roots in the place they hated? To pray for their enemies' city? To invest in a life they never wanted?

Then comes the part many of us know in verse 11

¹¹ I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope."⁶

But here's what we often miss: God says this won't happen for seventy years. Seventy years! Most people hearing this message would die before seeing home again. Yet God calls them to live fully anyway, to invest completely in their present reality.

This message shows us something profound about how God works, something John Wesley (Methodism's founder) understood deeply.

Real faith always flows outward. Wesley taught that you can't truly love God without loving your neighbor. You can't have personal holiness without social holiness. The command to "promote the welfare of the city" shows this truth: our spiritual health connects directly to how we treat others, especially those different from us.

Think about it—God could have told the exiles to keep to themselves, to wait it out, to just survive. Instead, God said: make your enemy's city better. Pray for people who hurt you. Build community where you'd rather build walls.

This ancient wisdom speaks directly to two common struggles we face today.

⁵ Jeremiah 29:5-7, CEB.

⁶ Jeremiah 29:11, CEB.

Maybe you're navigating changes you never wanted. A job loss turned your family's world upside down. Your kids left home, and you're wondering what comes next. Your career plans fell apart. Health challenges changed everything. You're in a place you never planned to be. Our instinct is to put life on hold, to wait for things to get better before we really invest. But God's message challenges this: "Build houses. Plant gardens." In other words, don't just survive where you are—create something beautiful there.

Imagine a daughter who moves back home to care for her aging father. She thinks it'll last six months, but it stretches into years. At first, she feels trapped, her life on hold. But what if she starts a caregiver support group at church? What if those difficult years become a time of deepening relationship with her father, conversations they never would have had otherwise? She plants a garden in unwanted soil, and unexpected beauty grows.

Another struggle is feeling like we can't contribute anything meaningful while dealing with our own challenges. When we're hurting, we often think we need to get ourselves together before we can help anyone else. But notice what God tells the exiles: "Work for the good of the city... because your wellbeing is tied to its wellbeing." Our healing and our neighbors' flourishing are mysteriously connected.

Think about someone going through divorce—perhaps one of the loneliest seasons of their life. They start volunteering, thinking they're helping others. But something unexpected happens. In serving strangers, they find their own healing. The community they create while serving becomes the community that carries them through their pain.

Or consider someone who feels lost after retirement, their sense of purpose gone with their career. They begin tutoring kids struggling with math. Soon they discover those students give more than they receive. The young people remind them they still have wisdom to share and value to offer. In blessing others, they find themselves blessed.

When we invest in others' wellbeing—even when we're struggling ourselves—something shifts. We discover that God works through our weakness, not just our strength.

The good news is that God specializes in transforming exile into opportunity. God takes our displaced seasons and makes them birthplaces of unexpected blessing.

This isn't fake positivity or pretending hard things aren't hard. The exiles' pain was real. Our struggles are real. But God promises to work through these very circumstances we'd never choose, creating good we couldn't imagine anywhere else.

Sometimes God's plans unfold slowly—remember, seventy years!—spanning generations. Your faithfulness in difficult circumstances might create blessings your children and grandchildren inherit. The garden you plant in tears, they may harvest in joy.

God doesn't abandon us to our circumstances. Instead, God is already there in the place we never wanted to be, preparing soil for growth, setting tables for connection, opening doors we didn't know existed.

So how do we live this truth in the coming week? Let me suggest a few concrete steps:

Plant something where you are. This week, invest in one thing that makes your current situation better. Maybe it's starting a conversation with a neighbor you've never met. Maybe it's adding beauty to your workspace. Maybe it's beginning that project you've been postponing until "things get better." Stop waiting for ideal circumstances—plant something now.

Bless someone outside your circle. Perform one act of service for your community. Help an elderly neighbor with groceries. Support a local business owned by minorities or women. Volunteer somewhere that serves people different from you. Remember: your wellbeing connects to your community's wellbeing.

Practice patient trust. Choose one area where you've been demanding immediate answers. Maybe it's your career path, a relationship, or a health concern. Instead of needing everything figured out, ask: "What small, faithful step can I take today?" Trust that God's timeline might be different—and better—than yours.

As we welcome Pastor Chantel and begin this new chapter in our church's story, we embody the same truth the exiles discovered. New beginnings—whether we chose them or not—invite us to plant hope right where we are.

Some of you came today feeling displaced. Maybe you're between jobs, between relationships, between life stages. Maybe you're somewhere you never planned to be, doing things you never planned to do. Hear this good news: God is already there, preparing good things in that very place. Your job isn't to escape—it's to invest.

The refugees in Clarkston discovered that seeking their new city's good brought unexpected blessing to everyone. The ancient exiles learned that God's presence travels with us, even to places we'd never choose. We're invited into this same discovery. This week, plant seeds of hope exactly where God has placed us. Trust that the God who kept promises to ancient exiles keeps promises to us too.

Will you pray with me?

God of all journeys, we confess we resist where life has taken us. Help us trust you work through circumstances we'd never choose and give us courage to plant gardens in unlikely soil. Remind us you go before us, preparing good things even in exile. Amen.⁷

⁷ In crafting today's sermon, I employed AI assistants like Claude and Apple Intelligence, yet the ultimate responsibility for its content rests with me. These tools offered valuable perspectives, but the most influential sermon preparation hinges on biblical study, theological insight, personal reflection, and divine guidance. I see AI as a supportive aid to enrich the sermon process while ensuring my own voice in proclaiming the Word of God.