
“Thus Saith the Lord: Seek Shalom”

A SERMON on Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 for the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Preached 12 October 2025 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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“That summer day,” writes a woman named Emory Gillespie... “That summer day, I stood by our empty mailbox and cried out to anyone who’d listen, mortal or immortal: *Where are you? Why are you so far away? I need for you to stop this. I need for everything to stop. Just stop!*”¹

You see, there are many ways we can find ourselves in exile. For Ms. Gillespie, it was her sister’s death that marched her off, past the horizon of normalcy, into the hinterlands unknown. Her sister, like so many who depart this life at what seems all too early an hour, had fought the valiant war with cancer, a war with battles spread out over nearly 4 years. She had emerged from some of those battles victorious. “But within a year or so,” Ms. Gillespie writes, “Susan’s cancer came back. It took no prisoners. It advanced, conscripted, adapted, destroyed, paused, reloaded, and attacked again.”²

In the immediate wake of her sister’s death, Ms. Gillespie herself was besieged with the onslaught of forces beyond her control. “Like an avalanche,” she writes. “The sliding. The panic. I realized I hadn’t left the house in two days, and now I was afraid to leave, because it was the last air Susan had breathed.”³ The death of her sister had left her in a life and a world she did not recognize. “Well, whatever it was – and I didn’t care what it was-” she says, “it was new, and I hated it. I wanted my old life back, where I could punch 366-644-6826 and say ‘Hey, whatcha doing?’”⁴

Indeed, there are many ways we can find ourselves in exile, find ourselves in that new world that seems good for nothing other than making us wish we had the old one back again. Like Ms. Gillespie, it could be the death of someone we love. It could be our own health struggles, or cognitive decline. It could be the end of a relationship, or of a job by which we knew some key part of our identity. Really, it’s any time we find ourselves in “a whole new world” – not from the exploratory excitement of the Little Mermaid, but from the existential dread that tells us in no uncertain terms that we can never go home again.

We know from history that exile can be quite literal, too – the many times and places where a person or an entire people has been forced out of their home and hauled off to some other strange place or land or form of existence. We talk about royalty being forced into exile after their country went through some form of revolution. We use the word exile for Napoleon the Great’s imprisonment on Corsica after his imperial regime failed in France. We know of exile as escape, too – Jews going into exile to escape Nazi Germany, or Cubans in exile here to escape Castro’s regime. Even when sought out as escape, though, to be truly in exile seems nevertheless to always include longing for a “home” one wished they weren’t separated from.

We’ve been journeying through portions of the Old Testament book of the prophet Jeremiah these past many weeks – with one more stop left next Sunday – and if it hasn’t come through clearly enough yet, it practically goes without saying that this book is defined by the experience of exile. Pretty much everything we hear in it is either Jeremiah speaking a word of

¹ Emory Gillespie, “In Life and In Death,” *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts*, vol. 45.3 *The Holy Spirit*, pg 35.

² *Ibid.*, 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 34

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34

warning that if the nation doesn't change its ways, it will be overrun and forced into exile. Or Jeremiah speaking a word of hope to those who have already been hauled off into exile. It's quite possible that the experience of being in exile even shaped what was finally recorded from Jeremiah's warnings beforehand – the people looking back and wrestling with that piercing question, 'how on earth did we get here?'

In the passage we've heard today, Jeremiah is writing a letter addressed to some ones who were already off in exile. Whoever all this group included, they understandably were a bit like Ms. Gillespie when she said she just wanted her old life back, the one before her sister died, when she could just pick up the phone and hear her voice on the other end. For the Jewish exiles in Babylon, they understandably wanted their old lives back, too – get out of Babylon, get back home to Judea and Jerusalem, and get back to the rhythms of life in their own land. And, as it happened, they had ones among them who claimed to be prophets who told the comforting tale that the exile would be short-lived. In only a year or two tops, they'd be going back.

Jeremiah knew better. Perhaps he was smart or had good intuition, but the scriptures themselves tell us it was because he had received the actual word from the actual LORD, the one who was actually God. In any event, Jeremiah's message was fairly simple, even if it was a bit of a 'downer' for those who wanted to be done with this exile business. And the message was this: hey, y'all, you're going to be there a while. So you all should probably give up on just stalling and biding your time. Go ahead, build houses, plant gardens, have children – even grandchildren. Your life is there now, so you should go ahead and make 'life' out of it.

As I said, this message probably seemed like a bit of a downer to those exiles – Jeremiah admittedly is rather good at being a bit of a wet blanket much of the time. But while it may not have been quite the message they were hoping for, that doesn't mean it was devoid of good news. In fact, Jeremiah's instruction to the exiles is packed with good news, with grace-filled news, with life-filled news.

To a people whose whole concept of being and belonging, of life and livelihood, of faith and fruitfulness was centred so squarely in their land and customs back home, the word spoken by Jeremiah affirmed that life was, in fact, still possible – and not just possible, but possible in abundance. Building and planting, eating and living, being fruitful and multiplying – that which is truly life, that which stands as sign of God's presence and providence, it carries on. Even in exile, God does not abandon.

When Ms. Gillespie's sister got sick, she said it became as though she traded all [her] radios, televisions, cell phones, newspapers, friends, jobs, even church...for one giant satellite dish that was pointed directly at [her sister's] bedroom."⁵ By the time she was writing about the experience, though, some two years had passed, and with that metaphorical satellite dish, she got "no signal." "And now," she reflects, "I need to dismantle the dish. I need to get out of my self-protective, self-absorbed grief, or I will die."⁶

That, in a sense, is what Jeremiah is encouraging the exiles to do. Mourn the loss, sure. But don't stop living. And don't stop being the sort of people of God whom God has always called you to be – those ones "blessed in order to be a blessing," that nation through whom God sought to bless many nations. In other words, not only does God not abandon, but God also does not leave us without purpose – even in exile. "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you... Pray to the LORD on its behalf." You have a mission, a witness, a purpose still – and not just amongst yourselves, but in and with the world.

Even in exile, God does not abandon us. Even in exile, God does not leave us purposeless.

⁵ Ibid., 35

⁶ ibd

These things were good news to the exiles in Babylon some 2,500 years ago. And they are good news to us today, in any and all of the ways we ever find ourselves as exiles. Ms. Gillespie was reminded of this truth as she, a Presbyterian minister, found herself re-reading one of her basic theology text books from back in the day. The author, Shirley Guthrie, asserts that “Christian spirituality begins by looking outside, not inside, ourselves.”⁷

For those exiles in Babylon, God’s word through Jeremiah invited them to start looking outside themselves to find the presence of God still with them, and to find their own welfare intimately connected to the welfare of those around them in this strange, and perhaps even hostile, land. And their purpose and mission, too, as they received the call to continue being a light to the nations, ones to pray for and even produce beside those who they could have seen merely as enemies.

In any and all of the ways we find ourselves exiled today, such an invitation – and such good news and grace as is found in taking up that invitation – it still stands. In the face of disease and destruction that threatens life itself, we are invited to look outward and see the God who stands with us even there, even in the “valley of the shadow of death” as the beloved Psalm puts it. In the midst of a society and a political climate where even common decency and basic human respect seem so very lacking, we are invited to pray, along with someone like Saint Francis, for God to make us ourselves the instruments of God’s own peace, and know that even in a strange and foreign land such as this, it’s not only possible but in fact is the very fulfilment of who we are – God’s ongoing revelation and ongoing incarnation in ones such as us for times such as these.

And even for us together as church: not a few have compared the situation of the church today, especially the so-called “mainline” Protestant church, as akin to being in exile, to being taken out of a place-in-the-world we found comfortable and familiar, and being thrust into territory about which we could – if we allow it – have nothing but despair. To us too, Jeremiah speaks, counselling us that a return to what was is not in the cards anytime soon, but also encouraging us, cheering us on even. There are still houses to be built, gardens to tend, generations to raise up, and even people beyond ourselves, for whom our mission of seeking their welfare will reveal to us our own.

“Seek the welfare of [the place] where I have sent you,” says the LORD. “For in its welfare you will find your welfare”. Indeed, may it be so.

Blessing and honour, glory and power, be unto God, now and forever. Amen.

⁷ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville KY: WJK 1994), 298