

Exile and a New Thing  
(Jeremiah 29:4-7)

Please know this sermon was written to be preached and not for publication. Thus, when you read it, please understand the punctuation and syntax may not be grammatically perfect. ~ Rev. Emily J. Kellar

Over the past few weeks in my sermons, we have heard a lot about discipleship...how we as disciples are to live out our faith...we are to die to our own selves.... we are also to seek out **the one** who is hurting or in need.... we are to unbind ourselves and seek to serve. This week in today's text we find the people of Israel in exile in a foreign land called Babylon....they felt unhappy....discouraged....and restless. So, they constantly dreamed of returning to Israel. If only we could go home again, they thought, then we would be happy. If only we could leave Babylon and return to Israel, then life would be good. In that context God sent them some advice through a letter written by the prophet Jeremiah.

God's message to these restless exiles was crystal clear....God said 'quit dreaming about returning....instead make the best of what you have .....put down roots...build homes...plant crops...have children and grandchildren....enjoy life....and seek its welfare'.....it's interesting advice....the people of Israel want to

go somewhere else but God says to live life fully where you are....in short, God is saying “Redeem the circumstances you find yourself in”.....

God knows that external circumstances such as geographical location play a very small role in our overall contentment....contentment is not about having the perfect job....the perfect spouse.....belonging to the perfect church....living in the perfect house....or attending the perfect school.....such things just do not exist.....they never have and they never will.....in one way or another we always live in Babylon....we are always in exile....bc external circumstances are never perfect....therefore one of the secrets of a good life is learning to make the best out of the circumstances we have....

We would do well this morning to listen to God’s advice to these restless exiles ....perhaps a few of us need to make a change....get a new job....or move....that is not necessarily a bad thing....but very few of us ***need*** those kinds of changes in order to be happy....most of us need to follow God’s advice and flourish in Babylon....we need to make the best of our job....make the best of our marriage and family....make the best of our church....and make the best of our lives...***not just tolerating the imperfect but investing ourselves in it***....in other words, we need to quit dreaming about living a perfect life somewhere else and start living fully right where we are....in spite of the imperfections...only then will

we overcome our restlessness and find contentment.....and peace within....serenity now...

The classic movie City Slickers...tells a great story of a restless middle aged man who is considering changing jobs....near the end of the film his wife says to him...."honey if you really want to change jobs its ok with me".....with great insight he replies "I don't need a new job I just need to do my current job better".....sometimes all that needs to change is our perspective.....I recently visited someone who has had surgery after surgery.... setback after setback in the past few months....I walked into her hospital room only to find her looking radiant....just beautiful....I commented on how amazing she looked and she replied quickly....let me tell you about all the wonderful people I have met in the hospital....here in this place....I'm making the best of exile....I had to ask her to repeat her words so they would sink into me...into my heart....making the best of exile...

A lot of times churches want to return to the old...to the familiar.....they want to hang on bc they need for the church to remain the same....but just like the people in exile could not go back to the familiar....the church too cannot stay that way....we cannot stay with the familiar....I would even assert to you this morning that when a church stays with the familiar it is welcoming death...it is not leaning into new life...hard to hear but I have endless examples....our whole gospel story

is about letting go of the old ...resurrection and being all about the new...and it's impossible to lean into the new while clinging tightly to the old...

At one of my previous churches, a woman with dark glasses would often come into the service late.... she sat on the back row. She left before the services ended. She was a mystery of sorts. I would greet people up and down the aisles during the peace...and often her wrist would be splinted, or bruises would peek out from the sides of her dark glasses. Sometimes weeks would pass, and she would not be on the back row. I came up with this idea to leave a note for her. I sealed it in an envelope and asked one of the deacons to hand it to her when she came next. In the envelope I placed my business card and resources for battered women bc I had a hunch. My note asked her to forgive me if my assumptions were incorrect.

I will never forget the week she came.... I watched during the opening hymn as she read my note...hands shaking.... tears rolling down her face...her hand wiping them away....and to my surprise, she picked up a pen and wrote me back and handed it to the deacon as she left that day. I remember running down to my study after the service to read her note in the quiet of my office. It began, thank you for seeing me...your assumption is correct...please pray for me. I come here bc it is one of the few churches I can say "Our Mother instead of our Father in the Lord's Prayer bc you see I was raised by an abusive father and am now married to an abusive man" ....

Now you need to know that at the church I was serving...I had recently asked them to let go of the old...to lean into the new...and embrace new language for the Lord's Prayer...I had asked that we would pray "Our Mother...or Our Creator" and if someone was particularly wed to "Our Father" so be it but we had to have options... I did not want to model gendering God for the children at the church...I did not want them to think God is male...I didn't want to preference one gender over another....to have the little girls in our pews think they were not equal....that they were less than....and I knew for survivors of abuse it could be particularly damaging to think of God as Father....God is the Creator of all of life.....Jesus is The Christ.... and the Spirit is the Spirit.... I personally prayed Our Mother...or Our Creator..... I had told the church in recent weeks if we remained the same old church our doors would close.... we must embrace the new.... for the old can only bring about death. That woman's note to me was timely.... she had come to our church bc our words were safe for her.... bc she was embraced by our language...

Scholars tell us that much good came of this period of exile in our text today. Israel wrestled with the God questions and learned that worship could happen anywhere, not just in the temple. Much of the Hebrew Bible was formed during this period. Synagogues became a vital part of the community during this time. Jeremiah's letter is a reminder that no circumstance is beyond God's

purview. It is a reminder of God's promise to be with Israel and of Jesus' promise to be with us the Church. Exiles remember the stories that shaped their lives, and they lean into the not yet.... they lean into the new thing that is dawning.

What in our lives needs to slip away? Do we need to turn and be about the new? What do we need to let go of? Maybe you are here today, and you are in exile.... your life is different than what you had thought it would be.... Maybe without warning your life has changed....a trusted boss has let you go ....you have had a marriage dissolve....or another significant relationship....or you are living with a diagnosis that is incurable...or maybe your life has just turned out differently from your dreams ....and you feel in exile....but today the letter from Jeremiah has arrived....saying “build, plant, pray”....these are not just disembodied commands but rather they are gifts from God....these are things God gives us that help us discover a sense of purpose and community within exile....and most importantly behind these words is an implicit promise ....God is with us always in exile...when life changes or turns out differently than expected....God provides us recourse to make our home in the exile....we are to gather rocks and wood....and find a field and take up a new plow....here we can be who God made us to be .....

God says to us today “redeem the circumstances we find ourselves in”....tease out the new thing....be about life and not death....this life is not

perfect....it never will be.....God calls us to focus on the now....what we do have.....where we are currently.....who we are surrounded by .....instead of talking about what we no longer have....or no longer do....instead of talking about things ending.... may this church seek to embrace the new things here in your midst.....keeping your eyes open to new life....to new birth here....remaining present to life here and now...that's what disciples do....they make the best out of the in between times....they make best out of exile....bc truthfully life here and now is ever blessed....

And in conclusion, I am happy to share with you that woman on the back pew in the dark glasses left the abusive man in her life and with the church's help we hired a lawyer...and she started a new life...and I will never forget helping her set up her new apt in a new town...she still contacts me from time to time...her 3 daughters are now grown and thriving and she is a completely new woman having left her dark glasses behind...and gotten help for her trauma...

Thank you for the blessing of serving you while Will was on sabbatical...thank you for your extravagant welcome and kindnesses...may you here at First Church know of the presence of the Creator, Christ and Spirit in your life this day...may you seek to be about love, peace and justice in this life for ALL people...may you lean into the new together...expecting great things...and holding up hope for all who enter here ....amen.