

"Blooming in Babylon"

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Jeremiah 29:1-14

I've been utilizing the lectionary this Fall. The Common Lectionary was developed long ago and is utilized by most churches. (earliest ones = 4th C) If you were to go to a Catholic Church this morning, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal Church, , Methodists, UCC - you would most likely hear Jeremiah 29 read. It's the Old Testament lesson for today. There's usually an OT lesson, Psalm, Epistle & Gospel lesson for each Sunday. I tend to utilize just one of the texts.

Jeremiah 29: 1-14

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiyah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they 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.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord. For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

A few weeks ago we studied another passage from Jeremiah and we learned that:

Jeremiah was a prophet. (not a bullfrog!)

Was a good friend of mine.

People never understood a single word he said

But he really did preach so fine.

Yes he really did preach so fine.

We also learned that Jeremiah was always swimming against the tide. When the people were up, he was down. When the people were down, he was up. He was always going the opposite way. Have you ever felt like Jeremiah? - out of step with society, seldom with the majority? The announce some poll on TV, 80% of Americans believe such & such. "Oh, I don't look at it that way." Or someone tells you that such & such is a great book, on the best seller list, and you read it and just don't get it. It's a strange feeling to be out of step or behind the times? Everyone was doing email long before I got on line. By the time I got pretty good at it and everyone else was busy on Facebook. I'm starting to figure out Facebook,

but now I'm hearing about Linked In. And I've still never "tweeted." It's hard to keep up with the times these days.

A lady had a problem with her computer, so she called Eric, the 11 year old next door, whose bedroom looks like Mission Control and she asked him to come over. Eric clicked a couple of buttons and solved the problem. As he was walking away, she called after him, 'So, what was wrong? He replied, 'It was an ID ten T error.' She didn't want to appear stupid, but nonetheless inquired, 'An, ID ten T error? What's that? In case I need to fix it again.' Eric grinned ... 'Haven't you ever heard of an ID ten T error before? 'No,' she replied. 'Write it down,' he said, 'and I think you'll figure it out.' So she wrote down: ID10T. She ended by saying, "I used to like Eric."

Well, Jeremiah was often viewed as an idiot by his people. He was always out of step, always going the opposite way of the people. Prophets are like that. He lived during a tumultuous time - before, during & after the Fall of Jerusalem & the Babylonian Captivity.(587 BC) As the siege of Jerusalem was happening the people said, "We're invincible. We can't be defeated." Jeremiah replied, "No, we do not have God's favor. We will be defeated." But as the end drew near the people could see what was happening and they became despondent. Jeremiah offered words of hope - he bought a piece of land in Jerusalem and said "One day this land will once again know prosperity."

That's what we looked at 2 weeks ago. Today in ch. 29, Jeremiah's situation is different. The Jews are now in exile. They've been taken captive and transplanted in Babylon. Some false prophets have been telling the people that something big is about to happen and they'll all get to go back to their homeland, back to Jerusalem. But Jeremiah knows that's not true. He knows they're all going be there a while. So he sends them a letter. It's really quite a beautiful letter:

“ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles . . . Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they 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.

Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream. . . . For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me.”

This was not the letter the Exiles were hoping for. This was not what they wanted to hear from Jeremiah or from God. "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city." Settle in. You're going to be there awhile. This was not music to their ears. What they wanted was a quick fix. What they wanted was out of there.

It's like the old question - if you were stranded on a deserted island and could only have one book with you, what would it be? Of course, Christians are supposed to say, "The Bible." GK Chesterton, the famous preacher once answered it this way, "If I could only have one book with me on that island, I'd want it to be a book on how to build a boat."

That's our immediate reaction too, isn't it? When we get stuck we want to get unstuck, and we want to get unstuck now! And perhaps worst of all we want all our solutions to be quick & easy.

We want to lose weight quickly. ("Lose 15 lbs in 10 days!")

We want to get out of debt quickly. ("Start those low monthly payments right away!")

We want to feel better instantly. ("I saw the counselor once or twice, but it didn't work.")

We want to get rich quickly ("These people made \$90,000 last year, just working 5 hours a week!").

This is the world we live in. It's crazy and we know it, but we can't help but be influenced by it. It's just so much a part of our society. Quick & easy. This same phenomena was also part of Jeremiah's world. They, too, wanted a quick fix, and some prophets were telling them it was coming - quick and easy - God was going to perform a miracle and "Boom!" they'd be back in the Promised Land. But God was saying to them through Jeremiah, "It's not going to be that quick and it's not going to be that easy."

There's been some interesting studies about Baby Boomers and organized religion. Baby Boomers, my generation, are not as loyal to institutions as our parents generations were. This is true of institutions in general and to religious institutions. And in significant numbers Baby Boomers have come and gone. It's basically the same thing many of us do with our gym memberships. We go for awhile. We're really into it for a while. But it doesn't last. Health Clubs are packed in January, lesser so in February, and lessor still in March. And so many churches have changed dramatically to try and attract and keep Baby Boomers. They've replaced the organ with a Rock Band. They've replaced the hymns with popular music.(All things in moderation, I always say. The best of the old & the new.) And some churches get rid of anything that looks too churchy - robes, pews, candles, etc. And I admire their desire to get more people into worship. I share that same passion.

But I have a colleague who hit the nail on the head one day in a sermon. She said, "The real reason why people come to church in a flurry and then leave in a hurry, is that they lack patience. They're looking for a quick fix. That's not what

spirituality is all about."

There's a lot of truth in that, isn't there? We want Instant spirituality. "Grow Closer to God in 5 easy steps!" But it doesn't work that way, does it? Nothing of value ever works that way. It takes devotion, dedication, and the patience to know that real change happens step by step over a long period of time. One of my favorite book titles is Eugene Peterson's book: A Long Obedience in the Same Direction. Jeremiah is saying to the Israelites, God desires from you a long obedience in the same direction. And the direction he points them to is to stay right where they are and be God's people in that place, even though that place is called "Babylon." It's almost like he's saying to them, "Don't worry about coming back to the Promised Land. Make the land on which you live the Promised Land. " Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. Find the land of milk & honey right there within your family, within your neighborhood, within your city. "Seek the welfare of the city in which you live."

That's a remarkable verse - seek the welfare of the Babylonians? Strive to make Babylon a better place? You've got to be kidding me! "They never understood a single word he said." I think many people of faith need to hear that word today. We may think of our culture as Babylon, going to you-know-where in a handbasket. But we're called to seek the welfare of Babylon. For God so loved the world. This world. I forget the name of the theologian who put it this way: "Heaven's in good shape. It's earth that needs the help."

So Jeremiah's saying, "Don't worry about the Promised Land back here. Make that your Promised Land." Wherever you go, there you are - so you might as well live for God there! This is a radical text for the Old Testament, because the Old Testament is almost always about the geographical Promised Land, with the Temple, the holy sites, Mount Zion,

the holy city, the priests, the rituals, the sacrifices, all that. But Jeremiah is saying, In Babylon you can learn true religion. It's not about land. It's not about doing your religion in just one place. Religion isn't just about what happens in the temple. More importantly it's about what happens in your hearts and in your homes and in your relationship with the world you live in. Take your religion to Babylon, for God's sake. And God will meet you there! "Joy to the World!" Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me,

God will meet them in Babylon. Now's there's a surprise. This is a rather remarkable passage in the Hebrew Scriptures. I hope I've done it justice today. It seems to me it's about finding the Promised Land right where you are.

Let me close with this story that I think gets at the heart of this text. It's called "The Rabbi's Gift" (from The Different Drum by M. Scott Peck)

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. It was once a great order, but because of persecution, all its branch houses were lost and there were only five monks left in the decaying house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi occasionally used for a hermitage. The old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods" they would whisper. It occurred to the abbot that a visit with the rabbi might result in some advice to save his monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. But when the abbot explained his visit, the rabbi said, "I know how it is. The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the

synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and spoke of deep things. When the abbot had to leave, they embraced each other. "It has been wonderful that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. But, I can tell you that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "The rabbi said something very mysterious, it was something cryptic. He said that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant?"

In the time that followed, the old monks wondered about the significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks? If so, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for always being there when you need him. He just magically appears. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet suppose he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. People still occasionally came to visit the monastery in its beautiful forest to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even to meditate in the dilapidated chapel. As they did so, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that began to surround the five old

monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought their friends to this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another, and another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

Think about it.

The Promised Land may be closer than you think.