

“Home is where you are”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, 11-14 and 2 Timothy 1:1-14

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

A sermon continuing the season's theme, about adjusting our expectations. We imagine and long for a home that is somewhere else—in the past or the future, with other people. We want to get back to way church was; we want people to return. But in many ways, we can't go back, and many of those folks aren't ever coming back. They weren't really engaged in the first place, which is why it was so easy to leave. Jeremiah's people were called to make their home where they were, trusting God was there and would do good. We are called to be the church we already are, with the gifts we already possess, with the people we already have, to love them, to find new life right here, to grow our faith in this soil, not some other.

You think the gifts are out there—but they are right there in you. Don't be ashamed. Paul's in prison, so he makes that his home, his ministry. Make this ours. It's not what you wish it was, but what it is.

Grow where you are planted.

What do we do when life doesn't live up to our expectations? It happens all the time. Plans go awry. The world disappoints. Life—be it our relationships, our career, our faith, the church itself—just doesn't measure up to what we thought it would be. That's especially true after the disruption of a pandemic and the myriad of crises the world finds itself in. On Sunday, we'll hear from two people who know this disappointment well: Jeremiah and his exiled people who have lost their homeland, their temple, and the very fabric of their identity... and Paul, the great apostle, who sits chained to a damp wall in a prison cell. You might expect from them despair. They offer the opposite. They offer a resounding word of hope and some really wise counsel for anyone living through disappointed expectations—counsel which could transform not only how we live but how the church itself survives and thrives.

This isn't saying be content with abuse or injustice, poverty or unhappiness. It isn't saying they just accept how things are and take it. It's saying that when life disappoints, rather than looking for another life somewhere, wishing things were different, or just waiting, biding your time passively, separating yourself, dive fully in. Live now. Find your strength, your joy, now.

We wish church were different. We wish the people were different, or that there were more of them, or more faith, or more passion, or more engagement. But this is your home. Live here. Work with what you've got. This is where you were called.

If you wait, you'll never live. If you walk away, you'll just find new disappointments elsewhere, and you'll never live. The only way to live is to make your home right where you are, in your own skin, in your own relationships.

You were called to these people.

So often, dear God, we live either in the past or the future. We long for the good old days, or wish for better ones to come. We wish we were more like this person or that, while thinking our own selves inadequate. And in the midst of all this longing for what we don't have, we miss out on the life that is happening right now—the amazing, glorious life that is so full of possibility, if only we would live it. If only we would love it. Re-center us, God, in the holy present. Forgive our distractions, and help us grow and flourish where you have planted us. Awaken us to the hope that is already here, all around us. Rekindle the gift—the strength, the Spirit—that is, even now, within us.

They must accept their new reality.

2019 sermon

I keep waiting for life to get easier, and for some reason, it's not obliging. It really is stunning—my capacity for self-delusion. Every time life is stressful or busy or hard—which you know is pretty much all the time—I tell myself that as soon as things calm down, that's when I'll start to truly live my life. As soon as I'm not so tired, I'll exercise regularly and eat better, I'll make real time for family and for God, I'll have fun and rest, I'll do all those big projects I've been thinking about and will reach out to all the people I've neglected, I'll take serious action for justice and do everything around the house I've been putting off. You know, as soon as I'm not tired... It's the best kind of promise—I strongly recommend it—because you get all the self-satisfaction of wanting to be that kind of person without ever having to *be* that kind of person.

If only I could speak to my former self, before I got married, started ministry, bought a house, and began raising a tornado that we affectionately call a child, I'd shake him and ask him what he's waiting for—life's about to get so much harder. Of course, he probably wouldn't believe me.

Life's like that, isn't it? Putting off the things that matter most until we're out of school, or we're settled in our career, or the kids are out of the house, or we retire. And before we know it, it's over; we missed it. We thought that's how you survive the storm—you batten down the hatches; you do what's safe and familiar; you don't take risks. How else are you supposed to survive losing your job, or your marriage failing, or being up to your eyeballs in stress? How else are you supposed to survive getting that dreaded diagnosis, or losing someone you love, or feeling overwhelmed by the problems of the world?

Which brings us to our Scripture reading today—because that's exactly what the people of God were wondering when they were carted off to Babylon as a conquered people, exiles in a foreign land. Everything they ever knew or loved was taken from them. They're in this strange place, where strange gods are worshiped in towering temples. They're grieving, frustrated, and confused. Every day they pray that life would just go back to the way it was.

The psalmist writes, "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps, for there our captors asked us for

songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:1-4).

Everybody’s asking the same questions: How long will this tragedy last, and what are they supposed to do in the meantime? A lot of folks are saying that they should just hunker down and ride out the storm—hang up their harps—because like any storm, this too shall pass quickly. The prophet Hananiah predicts that the exile will be over in under two years. The best thing to do, then, is wait. Don’t get too settled. Don’t mix with these heathens and their sinful ways. Just bide your time until life can begin again, when everything goes back to normal and we’re home.

But that is not the word of God. The word of God, through the prophet Jeremiah, tells them something completely counter-intuitive, something completely unexpected. God tells them to live. Live right where they are. Make a home, plant a garden, create a family, involve themselves in the city. In the midst of loss and grief, change and uncertainty, God says: Live your life, find joy where you can, practice good, help others; do not wait for the future, do not wait for things to be perfect, but live now. God even tells the people to seek the welfare of the same city ruled by those who conquered them. God’s instruction for them to marry might even suggest they should look for love among these foreigners. God tells them to become part of that city, to seek their welfare in its welfare.

This is a shocking counsel, because it means accepting that this is their life now. When Jeremiah tells the people to build houses and raise families, he’s suggesting that they’re going to be there a lot longer than a couple years. And we know that Jeremiah saying this made people angry; it made them want to lock him up and silence him. It was disillusioning, but that was the point: Jeremiah needed them to let go of their illusions.

It’s going to be 70 years before the Israelites go home. Whole generations will be born and will die in that time. More deportations will happen; Jerusalem will be destroyed. And even when they return to Judah, life will be a far cry from what they remember. It’ll be hard living, a wasteland. And of course we know the remaining trajectory of Jewish history: diaspora, prejudice, Holocaust. A long storm indeed. And that’s what Jeremiah wants them to see: existence is a storm; it may ebb and flow, sometimes easier, sometimes harder, but there’s always pain and stress and uncertainty, and if they try to wait it out, they’re always going to be waiting.

God says: You want to survive the storm? Don’t hang up your harps; get them down and sing. Don’t hide behind locked doors; go out into the world and open your heart to the storm, grieve it, feel it, and learn to dance in the rain. There is life here, in the storm, a gift from God—if we would but look for it.

Jeremiah knows that this seems like the hardest thing God could ask from you. The nature of stress, of grief, of depression, of anxiety, is to sap us of energy and willpower, until even the smallest of tasks can feel enormous. Jeremiah wears a heavy wooden yoke on his shoulders, as a sign of his people’s captivity—not only to Babylon, but to grief and uncertainty. He knows how hard it is to take even one step in this storm, when you carry such a yoke.

But Jeremiah also knows that without life, without risk and love, we shrivel. One step might be all it takes. Go for a walk, eat a nice meal, give someone a hug, come to church. God can do amazing things with little seeds just like that. God can grow a whole life, given over to faith and justice, to love and purpose, with a little seed like that.

God says: find life in the storm. Love the people right beside you, no matter how flawed they may be. Care for this place, this moment, no matter how far afield of your expectations. Delight in the unexpected. Find what makes you happy, and share that with others. Sing in the rain.

Sometimes all we've got is rain, so we might as well sing.

Jeremiah After the text

Beware false prophets. It will be 70 years before God returns the people, not before. There is hope. "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." God promises destruction for the people who did not go into exile.

Shemaiah of Nehelam sends a letter to the people in Jerusalem, saying Jeremiah is a "madman who plays the prophet" and should be put in the stocks and the collar, should be rebuked, for he wrote to those in Babylon saying, "It will be a long time; build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat what they produce". [They didn't like the implications: Jeremiah was telling them to get settled, because this isn't going to be over quickly.]

John Holbert:

- This vast metropolis features a 25-story tower, Eti-men-aniki ('mountain of god') at the top of which resides the huge statue of the city god, Marduk, along with the fabled hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, a second story garden of parks and trees, gracing the palace of the king.
- the ghetto of Tel-Abib where the Judeans eventually were to live.
- This answers the question: how long? Long enough to marry, have children and grandchildren, at least three generations, with the implication of even more. And then there is the sticky question of where these wives and husbands are to come from. Does Jeremiah imply that intermarriage with the locals may be a possibility or perhaps even a necessity in order to keep the community alive and vibrant?
- Pray to YHWH for the shalom, the peace and welfare and soundness, of Babylon, the pagan center of all things we know as evil? Because YHWH is in fact God of Babylon, too, not the so-called mighty Marduk living at the top of the great building in the city, it means that YHWH has deep concern for Babylon, the place where YHWH's people now live and will live for many years.
- This is nothing less than a call for the exiled Judeans to open their lives and hearts to the people among whom they now have been forced to live. Rather than close their lives to the Babylonians, Jeremiah asks them to open up their lives and to learn and grow in the new reality of Babylon.

Bruce Boak:

- Shockingly, he says, “Your old life is dead. Your new life is to be found in Babylon. Deal with it. Settle down. Adjust!” It is a seemingly harsh and provocative message to all who face the uncertainties and consequences of unintended change. It is a message for those facing loss of employment when the company ‘downsizes.’ It is a message for those who become new parents and the familiarity and freedom of private and personal time is eroded by the demands of parenthood. It is a message for those who were able to scrape by on personality and natural intelligence but are now forced to study and prepare in a demanding classroom.
- Yes, we will miss much of the past, but whining and pining about it will not make it reappear. Embrace the place where God has us and find ways to be faithful in our living, so that others might inquire about our inspiration, our resolve, and our trust, and thereby be drawn into relationship with God.

Jeremiah 29:11-14

“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. 12 Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. 13 When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, 14 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.”

We can live in the present, even when our expectations are not met, because God is working hope for us. We just have to trust God.

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Paul expresses gratitude, even though he’s in prison. Paul prays night and day. He remembers Timothy, his friend and “beloved child,” remembers his tears, his faith. Paul knows Timothy’s grandmother and mother.

Paul invites Timothy “to rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit, and to Timothy’s ordination (and perhaps baptism). He says, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

Paul says, “Do not be ashamed.” He shouldn’t be ashamed of what happened to Jesus (a lot of unfulfilled expectations there) or of the fact that Paul is in prison. Rather, he invites to Timothy to “join” him in this ministry and suffering.

Paul says, “For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.” And yes, that involves suffering. “But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust.” He trusts that God will guard what Paul has done.

Paul says that the Holy Spirit lives in us and helps us.

Paul goes on, after our passage, to describe how many (“all who are in Asia”) have turned against him, “turned away from me.”