

“Life in the storm”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

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The beauty of storms is that they pass. They rumble and thunder for a while, and then they’re done. No matter how dark they become, no matter how much destruction they cause, there’s always a moment when the wind slows, and the rains dry, and the earth becomes steady again. The world goes back to normal.

If only life itself were so simple.

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.

I am reminded of an interaction in the movie "Stranger Than Fiction." It's a brilliant, funny movie about Harold, this IRS accountant who's never really lived his life at all; every day's the same; he works, he eats, he sleeps. He exists in a small fortress of order, until one day he learns that he's going to die (he learns this by the way when he discovers that a voice is narrating his life and that he might actually be a character in someone else's novel... you need to watch the movie). The following is an exchange between a friend and Harold, after Harold tries to hunker down in his apartment and avoid all action, until a wrecking ball smashes through his apartment:

The friend says, "You were right. This narrator might very well kill you. So I humbly suggest that you just forget all this and go live your life." Harold replies, "Go live my life? I am living my life. I'd like to continue to live my life." His friend says, "I know. Of course. I mean all of it. However long you have left. You know, I mean, Harold, you could use it to have an adventure. You know, invent something, or just finish reading *Crime and Punishment*. Hell, Harold, you could just eat nothing but pancakes if you wanted." To which Harold says: "What's wrong with you? I don't wanna eat nothing but pancakes. I wanna live. Who in their right mind, in a choice between pancakes and living, chooses pancakes?" His friend replies, "Harold, if you'd pause to think, I believe you'd realize that that answer's inextricably contingent upon the type of life being led and, of course, the quality of the pancakes." Harold says, "But you have to understand that this isn't a philosophy or a literary theory or a story to me. It's my life." And the friend says, "Absolutely. So just go make it the one you've always wanted." **Amen.**