

“Living in the ‘In Between Time’”

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

For most of the problems and hurdles of life, there are no quick fixes.

We’re blessed here at Divinity when we have a pipe leaking or need a new toilet, we’ve had 3 generations of the Bemers to call to solve our plumbing problems.

But chances are that a rapid-response team isn’t going to show up on your doorstep to offer a quick solution for most of life’s conundrums. Sometimes we’re forced to live in the “in between,” or “meantime,” periods of life — those years when we’re waiting for circumstances to change or be altered, knowing that, perhaps, they might never change.

This was the bleak future awaiting those in 606-586 B.C. who had been exiled from their homeland. It was in these years that their nation had ceased to exist. The glory years of Saul, David and Solomon were now only shop-worn tales told by bearded scribes and elders. There was no Israel now. No Judah. No nothing.

But the critical piece in this text is the fact that the Hebrews were in exile *because God moved them into exile*. This being the case, Jeremiah says *stay where you are*. Don’t plan on moving; don’t start packing until God sends some moving trucks.

If we are where we are because God has led us, pushed us or dragged us, then we better stay put until otherwise notified. If, on the other hand, we got into our present muck up without any help from God, then we might need God to unmuck it. God might do this when God is good and ready.

This is not encouraging. In other words, there’s no quick fix here. No instant coffee, Instagram, instant gratification and no instant messaging.

The expatriate pilgrims of Babylon quickly learn to embrace the Mosaic wisdom of Psalm 90: “For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past,” (v. 4), which was revised centuries later to read, “With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day” (2 Peter 3:8).

Therefore, Jeremiah’s advice to the Jewish expats — and by extension to us — is to do two things. First, decide if we’re “here” (wherever “here” is) is the will of God; and second, if so, settle into a life as though we’re here for life — or until God moves us on. Jeremiah’s counsel is that in life, the circumstances in which we find ourselves are not always amenable to an easy solution. It might be best to adapt to your surroundings, adjust to make life bearable, and adopt the lifestyle that’s the social norm for your neighborhood.

This does not mean you compromise your faith, but that you’re willing to *take the long view*. This problem, this situation, this context, is here to stay for the indefinite future. When I find myself in a new place, new life, new experience, I had better decide how I can live a meaningful life *within* the situation, rather than *outside* of the situation.

The theme, then, is *how to live when you’re an exile, or feel like an exile*.

When I visit with one of our Divinity members in a long-term care facility, they will often describe to me what it’s like to live in 1 or 2 rooms after living in the same house for 50 or 60 years. Some are doing their best to make the most of their “being sent into exile” experience while others are complaining about everything and want to go home.

Last August, I had heard that Norma Nagy was in the hospital for a few days and was now rehabbing at Parkside before returning to her assisted living apartment at Vitalia.

It was her 91st birthday, so I took her some flowers left from Pastor Don's funeral and was singing happy birthday as I carried them into her room. For some reason, she cut me off to introduce me to her young, handsome occupational therapist. I watched the two of them do a lap together, Norma with her walker, around the commons area before returning to her room.

She sat down and I listened as she recounted stories of her life in her comfortable home with Chuck and her two daughters. Chuck's frugality except when it came to attending the Indianapolis 500. When her lunch arrived – a cheeseburger and cup of fruit – the young lady told me someone had been discharged and asked if I wanted lunch. So I shared a birthday cheeseburger with Norma followed by our Lord's Prayer and Norma receiving the bread and wine of Holy Communion. She was making the best of living "in the meantime" – between home and her eternal home.

Jump back about 2,500 years to when Jeremiah was the first prophet who spoke before the exile and during the exile as one of the exiled. Although Jeremiah had not made the trip from Jerusalem to Babylon yet, he would. Before he is trundled off to exile, he writes a letter. It's part of today's text: "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" (v. 1). This admission gives Jeremiah a sense of intimacy and legitimacy.

This is from the prophet himself. And his advice is very practical. There are no platitudes in this letter. No theological speculation. Instead, Jeremiah responds to a similar question posed by the British rock band, The Clash, in their 1982 hit, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" Jeremiah answers in terms of dollars and cents, of marriage and family, of houses and farms.

Bottom line: the exiled community must get a grip and get a life, face the harsh facts and begin a major adjustment, he says.

- They might wish they still had the temple. But they don't.
- They might wish they still lived within the walls of Jerusalem. But they don't.
- They might wish they could still drink the wine of their own vineyards. But they can't.
- They might wish they could sing their songs in Judah, but they can't.

Jeremiah tells them they must build a bridge and get over it, and he gives them a brochure with six handy-dandy relocation tips.

Step 1: Reimagine the Journey

The destination has changed. Getting “home” will not happen for another 70 years minimum. For now, Babylon *is* the destination. Like the sign says in a mall, “You are here!” Don't move unless God moves — and by the way, God is not moving ... yet. Your Jewishness is not tied to a location. You can still be a people of the book, a people of faith, a people of your religious traditions, wherever you are.

- Imagine a journey in which God has not abandoned you.
- Think of a journey in which you do not lose your faith or your traditions.
- Imagine finding God in strange and unexpected places.
- Think of a trip in which you live for the present and not the future.

We are welcoming 11 new members this morning, 9 adults and 2 children, who have found God in a new place that we call Divinity. They are a diverse group of different ages and backgrounds who are at different places in their journeys of faith. May Divinity always be for us, “a people and place of hope, healing and welcome.”

Step 2: Check out the Housing Market

The first thing any family or individual might do before moving to a new part of the country, or before moving into a nursing home, is arrange for housing. You need a place for you or your family to reside.

Jeremiah says, “Build a house.” He’s doing more than offering practical advice. He’s reinforcing the message that three generations of families are going to live in Babylon. This is the context of your new life.

In your house, you will cook kosher, sleep and take care of the dog. You will take singing lessons, study and memorize the Torah, and go to Torah school.

Step 3: Explore the Job Market

You will pay your way. The government may offer you some jobs, probably manual labor. You will plant gardens, do some farming. You need to make a living. In a long-term care facility check out what activities, transportation, meals, etc. are available.

Step 4: Start a Family

You will have babies. “Multiply there, and do not decrease” (v. 6). You will sing songs and find husbands for your daughters and brides for your sons. In numbers there is strength.

Step 5: Beware of Scammers!

Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream (Verse 8). If you get a text from Rev. Douglas S. Gunkelman asking for money for a person dying from cancer – know that it’s a scam.

Have you ever heard me refer to myself as Reverend? Would I ever send a text asking for money? It’s a scam!

Step 6: Pray and Prosper

Jeremiah says, in effect, that “If your host city prospers, you prosper. Therefore, pray for its success.” His exact words are: “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” (v. 7).

The apostle Peter also wrote to a beleaguered community — the diaspora, groups of exiles and expats in the first century. They, too, needed encouragement. They were living in all parts of the Roman Empire, including Rome, which the apostle John refers to as Babylon. Peter writes: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds” (1 Peter 2:11). Sounds much like Jeremiah’s advice.

They will pray, and they will prosper. They will sow gratitude and reap hope. Pastor Doug Scalise puts it this way: “Gratitude is how faith responds in remembering God’s faithfulness in the past; hope is how faith responds in trusting God’s faithfulness in the future.”

The truth is that we are not long for this world. As the gospel song reminds us,

*This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through,
my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue;
The angels beckon me from heaven’s open door
and I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.*

So true. We must not forget where we are, where we’re from and where we’re headed. If we’re not careful, we’ll get so wrapped up in the here and now that we’ll fail to live for the then and there. May the peace of God . . . #628 – Jerusalem, My Happy Home