

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

29:1 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.

29:4 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

29:5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

29:6 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.

29:7 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.

Hebrews 13:1-16 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Service Well-Pleasing to God

13 Let mutual love continue.

² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

³ Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.^[a]

⁴ Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

⁶ So we can say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper;

I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?"

⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

⁹ Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food,^[b] which have not benefited those who observe them.

¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent^[c] have no right to eat.

¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

¹² Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood.

¹³ Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.

¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

¹⁵ Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.

¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Proclamation of the Word

Jeremiah wrote, "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." (Jer. 29:7)

You may remember the old movie City Slickers where Billy Crystal is unhappy in his job in New York City. His marriage is falling apart.

Miserable and depressed, he seeks an escape and takes off to be a cowboy as a vacation. He and a few friends live out their wild west fantasy and do some soul searching.

There is plenty of comedy, but in their time in the wild west, Crystal's character is able to reflect on his life. In some ways they went into exile, to learn what they really missed about home.

God's people in Jeremiah are in exile.

The Jews, we can now call them for they are from the tribe of Judah, have been hauled off to Babylon.

The Temple is destroyed.

They are disoriented, suffering, and lost.

They are strangers in a strange land.

And the Psalmist sings, "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down, and we wept when we remembered Zion." (Psalm 137:1)

Lament, loss, suffering and grief are the emotions of Babylon.

I am not sure if any of us can imagine that kind of experience.

But people all over the world can.

They are refugees of war, migrants seeking work and safety, a mother leaving the abusive spouse with her children.

Home is gone.

The first questions of food, shelter, and safety are most pressing.

Disorientation and confusion set in.

God's people have been there.

After the questions of security are answered, along come the questions about self and God. How can I trust myself?

How can I trust that God loves me?

That God's promises are true and more importantly, include me.

When you get to Babylon, literally or figuratively, like the Jews in exile,

we might begin to think,

"Remember the good ol' days? How wonderful it was before smart phones?

When people talked to one another in person?

when neighbors sat on front porches and knew one another?

when we worked outside with our hands and got a healthy dose of vitamin D and time to think?

Remember?"

Exile

Or for the youth or young adult? remember when I had no real responsibilities.

My job was to play, go to school, and mom and dad paid for everything?

Adulting is hard.

Exile.

God's people have been there.

In Babylon, they remember how great life used to be back home.

"Remember when we used to go as a whole community to Temple (or church) together after the Sabbath?

Remember when we lived with folks just like us who shared our faith and our values? Remember when the traffic was light and it only took seven minutes to get anywhere in town?

Things have changed. This is a strange land. I feel like a stranger.

Exile.

The email comes, "Thank you for applying, but..." or "In surgery, it was worse than we thought." or the uniformed men on the doorstep say, "The President of the United States regrets to inform you..." disappointment, despair, hopelessness, exile.

Exile was not a new experience, however, for God's people.

After God delivered the people from slavery in Egypt, they are relieved.

After the Exodus, then reality of the wilderness sets in.

"Remember when we were in Egypt how we had meat to eat and water.

We might have been slaves, but at least, we were not starving."

So what word does the prophet write on God's behalf?

In the meantime, make the best of Babylon.

Pray for this city.

Seek the welfare of the city in which you live, and in it you will find your own welfare.

In fact, the word welfare is really the Hebrew word Shalom.

Shalom is my favorite word in Hebrew.

I even have the t-shirt to prove it!

Shalom means wholeness, completion, well-being.

Divine grace and blessing.

The rabbis teach that Shalom is something we help create by living ethically in the social realm, not just personal realm.

That gift and blessing of God's grace, is to be shared for the common good.

While the local prophet Hananiah has been promising this will only take a couple of years. Albeit a more popular message, it was not the truth.

God's prophet Jeremiah says, "Settle in, folks. This may take awhile."

And the word of hope, even if it is a dose of healthy realism.

Eat, drink, and get married.

Invest in Babylon.

Build houses, plant gardens, grow good things, and look forward to grandchildren.

"Bloom where you are planted," as we say.

In the meantime, make the best of Babylon.

Pray for this city.

Seek the welfare of the city in which you live, and in it you will find your own welfare.

Do you think this is a timely word from God for us today?

God's message to the exiles there and now is to find contentment in your situation.

But it is not a passive contentment.

There is action- building, planting, investing in your family and community. And surprisingly, intermarry with these strangers in Babylon.

Do not separate yourselves, but show hospitality to strangers.

You may be surprised that you just might be entertaining angels unawares.

For in the welfare of the city, you will find your own.

Contentment is something we help create.

Contentment is not about settling for things as they are necessarily, but building a better situation.

I mentioned the movie, City Slickers, and since it is an oldie, I will tell you that in the end, when Billy Crystal's character returned home to his wife, she asked if he needed to get another job, and he responded, "I just need to do this job better."

Contentment is making the best of Babylon.

The Apostle Paul, who experiences beatings, imprisonment, afflictions, and eventually death for the sake of the gospel, wrote words like,

"Give thanks in all circumstances," to the church at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:16-17)

Paul was saying settle in. We will be here awhile...actually, until Jesus Christ returns!

So I wonder what is our Babylon? your Babylon?

Personal sufferings or struggles can be an exile.

Social struggles and strife of these times is our Babylon.

In the meantime, make the best of Babylon.

Pray for this city.

Seek the welfare of the city in which you live, and in it you will find your own welfare.

I like the way Eugene Peterson puts it in verse 16 from our Hebrews lesson today,

From the MSG

¹⁶ Make sure you don't take things for granted and go slack in working for the common good; share what you have with others. God takes particular pleasure in acts of worship—a different kind of "sacrifice"—that take place in kitchen and workplace and on the streets.

Make a difference where you live and in your neighborhood.

Fred Rogers taught generations of children how to live in the Neighborhood with kindness and peace. In the recent documentary on Mr. Rogers, which I recommend, I was reminded of his message. Rogers, a Presbyterian Minister who knew his Bible and theology, speaks to television audiences after the tragedies of September 11th, 2001. In the passage, Mr. Rogers says:

"No matter what our particular job, especially in our world today, we all are called to be Tikkun Olam—repairers of creation. Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are, to bring joy, and light, and hope, and faith, and pardon and love to your neighborhood and to yourself."

Many times, he would share,

*"When I was a boy, and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"*ⁱ

We participate in God's redeeming work of grace and blessing.

I know a couple in our congregation, Beth and Chris Griffin, who have become foster parents and now the girls, Z_____ and N_____, are part of our church family.

They allow me to share their story.

Beth and Chris....Youth advisors, Beth is a Deacon, Chris sound.

And the beginning of the journey to foster parenting comes out of deep place of disappointment and hurt.

When they found they could not have children, they decided to invest in some children in their city.

To be a place of refuge and hope for children in need of temporary security and love.

As most changes come, it was a series of signs that led them to this place.

It was not all at once, a blinding light.

- Beth remembers setting up for Trunk or Treat, and thinking of kids who have no one to help them be creative, play, and enjoy community.
- Chris then read a book about the experience of being foster parents.
- Decision made.
- Thornwell Home for Children speaker come to worship to discuss the Foster parenting program. And they felt God confirmed their decision.

There are many joys and lots of love for the girls, but there are also frustrations with underfunded state foster care system, overworked social workers, and decisions which are out of their control.

They would love to be a forever home for the girls, but have to see.

Perhaps you cannot serve as a foster parent, but you can help support this family.

Need- Sitter to go out a night and nurture their marriage. Prayers for Z_____ - dental surgery for 8 cavities and corrective eye surgery. Pray for N_____ and her struggles in school, and for being away from home and their family.

They are making the best of their Babylon, investing in the welfare of some children, who have also been a great blessing.

As followers of Jesus we are saved by hope- saved by Christ.

And we are exiles on earth. The Kingdom is present here and now, and will become full reality in the end.

In the meantime, make the best of Babylon.

Pray for our church and our community.

Seek the common good.

God is on a cosmic reconstruction and repair project.

In the way Jesus Christ made a sacrifice for us all, we sacrifice and serve the Kingdom of God. Then we can all know wholeness, welfare, Shalom.

In the words of N.T. Wright,

“To put it another way, if you want to help inaugurate God’s kingdom, you must follow in the way of the cross, and if you want to benefit from Jesus’ saving death, you must become part of his kingdom project.”
(from *Surprised by Hope*)

Prayer:

Lord God, you are Wholeness of the sick and Home of the exile,
give us grace to seek the well-being of those among whom we live,
so that all people may come to know the healing of your love
and new voices join to give you thanks in Jesus Christ. Amen

Benediction

Hebrews 13:13-15

¹³⁻¹⁵ So let’s go outside, where Jesus is, where the action is—not trying to be privileged insiders, but taking our share in the abuse of Jesus. This “insider world” is not our home. We have our eyes peeled for the City about to come. Let’s take our place outside with Jesus, no longer pouring out the sacrificial blood of animals but pouring out sacrificial praises from our lips to God in Jesus’ name.

In the meantime, make the best of Babylon, of Fort Hill church, of your family and workplace, of this community

For the in welfare of our city, we will find the shalom God intends for us all.

ⁱ Bonnie Asoulay, June 28, 2018, *The Forward*, posted to [/jewishinsandiego.org/jewish-community-news/when-mr-rogers-a-presbyterian-minister-talked-about-tikkun-olam](http://jewishinsandiego.org/jewish-community-news/when-mr-rogers-a-presbyterian-minister-talked-about-tikkun-olam)