

*Setup, today's piece of the biblical story, along with the Exodus out of Egypt is one of the two biggest identity shaping events for God's covenant people in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. Last week, Pastor Ryan shared the story of how the Assyrian empire had destroyed the Northern Kingdom in 732 and how the prophet Isaiah brought hope to the people of God in that time. By the timeline for our text today, the Assyrians power had faded away, with imperial power shifting to Babylon. In 605 BCE, the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians to gain political power over the Southern kingdom, Judah, who rebelled against their rule, leading to the crushing of Jerusalem in 598 BCE. The oracle we hear today is sent by God through the prophet Jeremiah as he sat in the ruins of Jerusalem. He wrote to encourage the first of three waves of exiles forced to migrate to Babylon over the next two decades.*

**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. 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 fulfil 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. (Prayer)**

Those of you who heard my testimony two years ago during Pastor Ryan's first secret visit here may remember that my brothers were involved in a fatal car

accident my senior year in high school, in which my brother Shawn died and my brother John was left with a severe traumatic brain injury. After we celebrated Shawn's life, most of the family returned to school and work, feeling very much like square pegs trying to fit back into the round holes of our lives from before the accident. It was tough on all of us. But the person whose life changed the most was my mom. She left her job as a music minister to care for my brother, sleeping in countless bedside chairs in hospitals and rehabs from VA to NC. We were all exiled from the family we knew, but my mom was totally displaced from every aspect of her former life by this tragic and unexpected event – from her home, her bed, her table, her relationships, her call to ministry. Those of us at home wrestled with what to do. In that desolate foreign life, how could we go on like before? My mom insisted that we must keep on keeping on, to live, to not let the accident take anything else away from us, nor let it rob us of future joys, that we were to keep making plans for college and whatever opportunities life brought us.

So, this may shock you, but when an invitation came to participate in the debutante ball, surprisingly, we signed up. It's an absurdly antiquated tradition, fit more for a Jane Austen novel than the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but we needed something to look forward to doing together, something joyful. But then, in a wave of more unexpected bad news, my mom shattered her ankle, needing a zillion pins to piece it together. It seemed like life just kept raining upon us. But taking the setback in stride, my mom's adaptive and resilient spirit wouldn't let her temporary disability hold us back from participating fully in the debutante season. On the morning of the ball, all the mothers gathered for a brunch. My escort's mom wheeled my mom up to the venue, where a million steps blocked her entry. Not to be deterred, they wheeled her around to the back kitchen, where she would only need to overcome a few steps. So, in her fancy dress, my mom plopped herself down onto the steps and scooted up the back stairs on her bottom, until she finally got in the house where her wheelchair awaited her. Though dripping with sweat from the summer heat, she was there. She had made it. My mom had chosen life and though it required endless adjustments to the ever evolving "new normal," nothing was going to keep her from savoring the joy that remained. That weekend was a hopeful reminder that, amidst chaos, life continued.

Preceding our text for today, after Judah's rebellion and the Temple were squashed by Babylon, the people of the covenant were forcibly deported to Babylon. While it doesn't jive

with our Gospel understandings of how God works in the world, at the time, most all believed that this was God's doing, likely as punishment for something they had done or neglected to do. In the first wave of exiles, when our text for today was written, the royals, elders, priests, prophets, and skilled tradespeople had been carried away from all they knew. They were forced to work as cheap labor for the very society that had taken everything away from them - their families, their homes, their beloved Jerusalem, their language and culture, and their religious expression at the Temple where God was known to dwell. They were bereft of hope, unsure how to go on. Prophets at home and in exile urged them to fight and rebel. These faithful, but false prophets delivered the platitudes everyone wanted to hear, that God would vindicate them, enabling them to soon return to their former lives. Jeremiah on the other hand, was a pragmatist called by God to speak the harsh truth to prepare the people to accept their new reality. He cautioned them that rebellion would only lead to death, to the extinction of their culture and faith. Instead, he prophesied the opposite, delivering an oracle from God that they should choose life instead. They should recognize this as their new normal and settle in for about 70 years, a few generations. Through Jeremiah, God asked the exiles to get back to living and plan for a long sojourn in Babylon - to build houses they'd live in for a while, to plant trees that might not bear fruit for a decade. But beyond these necessities, they were to do the things that would really help their lives bear fruit, to marry and see their children and grandchildren born and married in Babylon, to multiply their number and celebrate all the normal milestones of life. In the midst of exile, God asked them to cultivate joy and peace. Furthermore, with counter-cultural advice that Jesus would one day echo, the exiles were charged to pray for their enemies, to seek the shalom of the city that held them captive, for somehow their welfares were intertwined.

Now, we can't ignore that apart from how problematic and antithetical to the Gospel it is to assume God is our puppeteer, doling out suffering to those who can't toe the line, there is another part of this message that's quite unsettling. We know it is abusive to ask oppressed people to settle in and accept their fate, as has been done by every exploitative empire ever, often facilitated by the religious establishment. No, no, no, we worship a God of justice who liberated the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. So, why does the architect of human liberty seem to be discouraging Judah's rebellion? It doesn't make it more palatable, but I suspect it had to do with basic survival. For whatever reason, the reality was that Babylon held all the cards at this time. The book of Jeremiah says they were known to annihilate those who merely prophesied their doom. Perhaps, if the exiles needed to blame their plight on God to accept their reality and move on, then God acquiesced to being the scapegoat. The way of rebellion had already brought

too much destruction. The exiles needed more than just courage and strategy. In order to survive, they had to work cooperatively and prove their worth to their captors. They were called to follow Joseph's model, who after being sold into slavery by his brothers, rose to control the destiny of all the nations under the Pharaoh and save countless lives in a time of famine, including the lives of his Egyptian captors and his brothers. Perhaps in the very living together through this exile, in returning to the basics, there was an opportunity for renewed faith formation. By seeking the welfare of not just Israel, but of Babylon too, they used their covenantal blessing to bless others, ready to receive the new future God was preparing for them all. To not lose hope in this marathon, the uprooted people of God had to learn how to live in their new normal, to cultivate community and persevere. In a hopeless situation, the traumatized community needed to pray and practice their faith, preserving their cultural and religious identity as the people of God. They needed to stabilize their community by resuming ordinary activities. Jeremiah tempered this sobering timeline with the promise of hope to buoy them up through the setbacks and stalled promises that often accompany justice work. In the rhythms of those days, they would come to discern God's ongoing presence in their lives, still working on their behalf, even in a foreign land. God was not bound in Judah, crumbling under the Temple's ruins. Not only were they not beyond God's reach or care, but God did eventually fulfill the promises made to the covenant people and deliver them. As told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, they returned to Jerusalem with not only the blessing, but also the funding from the Babylonian King Cyrus. Those in exile just had to remain faithful and fruitful in their waiting, praying and relying upon God for deliverance, rather than risking their collective future. In Jeremiah 21, they had already been reminded of the call from Deuteronomy 30, that when life and death, blessings and curses are set before us, we should choose things that preserve life, trusting in the multi-generational promises of the God who always makes a way. Though our text did problematically encourage the exiles to know their place, Jeremiah's oracle not only encouraged the preservation of life and holy community, but it also empowered the vulnerable and displaced exiles to be authors of their own joy, even amidst the conditions thrust upon them.

Now, very few of us have been exiled in this Biblical way. But, we have likely known a bit of what exile feels like through other unwelcomed events, some as a result of webs of bad decision-making, but many through no fault of our own. Perhaps in hearing the tale of my mother's resilience or as the Spirit opened Jeremiah's story to you, something about the experience of exile resonated with you. We have known those inevitable moments

of exile when all that has been certain is gone, when our identity markers have been swept away and the fires of our dreams dwindle. These experiences of exile happen many times during our lifetime and in the lives of those around us, especially multiplied in a community charged with bearing the burdens of one another. Maybe you have been forced to say goodbye to a family home. Maybe your financial peace has eroded. Surely many have been exiled from some close relationship, whether through divorce, relational cut-off, widowhood, or even the natural maturation process that creates empty nests. Maybe an illness or injury or addiction has left you feeling exiled from your own body and its connection to the world. Maybe you have been exiled from your professional identity through some job transition or retirement. Perhaps caregiving has exiled you from the freedom you once knew. Maybe you have been exiled from a church or small group, mourning those sacred relationships and the sense of place it cultivated. Perhaps your future feels stuck in limbo. Together, in the last year and a half, we have certainly experienced collective exile from our pre-pandemic lives, which truthfully, we may never get back. For those of us who live with family members who aren't eligible for the vaccine, the pandemic and its limitations continue, with each new variant, pushing the finish line into the distant future. It's downright demoralizing and easy to lose hope. No wonder we see the exiles in Psalm 137 sitting by the rivers of Babylon weeping beneath the willows where they hung their harps and refusing their captors requests to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. We can see in Jeremiah that if we get stuck on the mourning banks, if we get trapped clinging to expired ways of being and nostalgic versions of our former lives, if we focus inordinately on trying to recreate what was lost, ignoring this fresh call for change, we, like the exiles, run the risk of shutting out the very renewal God offers us, the very change we seek.

For us, on this first Sunday of Advent, Jeremiah brings us a word of hope to the exiles who weep and have forgotten the song. Some of you may know that, after a hard miscarriage last year at 3 months, we are overjoyed to be expecting another baby boy in April. He will be our rainbow baby, a term that has come to represent babies born following a pregnancy loss because rainbows symbolize God's promise and provision in the wake of tragedy. Last week, as I worried about certain choices I was making to navigate these times with our unvaccinated 4 year old while marking the halfway point through this pregnancy, my doctor reminded me that we have to live. We must live strategically and prudently, which means something different to each one of us, but we have to choose life, to preserve it and to cultivate it, daring to welcome new opportunities for joy, even in the midst of chaos. We settle into this new normal by first confronting our new reality, accepting the longer, more

nebulous timeline. As Jeremiah comforted the exiles in Babylon, like Sara and Abraham, Miriam and Moses, we too sustain faith by trusting in God's multi-generational covenantal promises, in God's plans for our welfare and not for harm, to give the people of God a future with hope. God promised that when we called, God would hear us, that if we would seek God with our whole hearts, we would find God. And indeed, we have seen that God continues working on our behalf blessing us to bless others, despite inhospitable times and places, in Babylon as in Jerusalem, and even in the throes of a prolonged pandemic.

In this Advent season, we prepare to welcome the Messiah, the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace, the God incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, who came as a mere babe, vulnerable to the powers and principalities of Rome, and yet, who held the power to defeat death itself. Jesus brought good news of great joy to all people. To we who wait in various forms of exile, Jesus comes again to deliver us and offer us life. Following today's text, comes my favorite chapter in the entire Bible. In beautiful language in Jeremiah 31, the prophet reminds us of the grace we find in the wilderness, of God's everlasting love and faithfulness to us. It promises a joyful return to all those in exile, whom God will rebuild. It paints a picture of us taking up our tambourines again and joining in the joyful dance of the merrymakers. It reminds us that God is the good shepherd who gathers us, who ransoms us from hands too strong for us, who can turn our lives again into a watered garden, comforting us and turning our mourning into joy. In Christ, we believe God has written onto our very hearts the unbreakable new covenant promised in Jeremiah, revealing God's capacity to forgive us and remember our sins no more, and delivering us into a new life with God and neighbor and even our enemies.

So, even in moments of exile and desperation, we search, pray, and ask. We plant our feet in the reality of a broken human community. With courage, perseverance, and hope, we play the long game, building and planting towards that future shalom we seek for the people of God and even for our enemies. We look for the ways the reign of Christ has already broken into our exile, shining the light and hope of God. Friends, let us persevere and choose life, even here in exile. Let us work for the welfare of all, even praying shalom for the enemies whose fates are intertwined with our own. Go forth to build and plant, that we might preserve life and cultivate a holy joy until we can take up our tambourines and join with the merrymakers again. ***To God be all the glory. Amen.***