

(Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.

## Living for the Long Haul

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: October 14, 2001

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Text: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

What a hard time it was for the people Israel. The moment that Jeremiah addresses in his letter is the lowest point yet for the people to whom God had promised so much.

All Israel knew the story of those promises by heart. They remembered when Abraham was still called Abram, when from way up in the land of Haran he heard God tell him, (Genesis 12:1-2 NRSV) “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” They remembered how Abraham and Sarah followed those directions and wandered year after year with no sign of the promise’s fulfillment. And they remembered how God came to Sarah and Abraham in the desert that day when they were both old and ready to see their lives come quietly to a close, lives spent chasing an apparent fiction of the promise of God. God promised them a son in their old age, and the idea of the promise coming true at that point in their lives was so preposterous it left Sarah howling in laughter in her tent. But sure enough, she was soon howling another tune as at a hundred she delivered her first-born and named him Isaac. In Hebrew Isaac means he laughs, which reminded the old couple always that the last laugh was on them.

The people Israel remembered that the rest of the story was a story of long waiting and of fits and starts. Generations would pass – Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, some of the richest and most memorable stories in all the Bible – but there would be little glimpse of the promise to become a great nation. Even as Joseph and his descendants flourished in Egypt, they remained a foreign people inhabiting a foreign land. And never was that more clear than in the picture created by those few short words in the beginning of Exodus: “Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” (Exodus 1:8)

Thus began the long oppression of toiling under Pharaoh’s building projects, oppression that would be removed only one day many years removed when a man minding his own business and his father-in-law’s sheep stopped by a bush burning in the desert. But, of course, the story of Moses and the liberation of the people is another story of time standing still. The Red Sea waters stood aside for their escape, but that was but the beginning. Forty years wandering in circles in the desert was their plight. Forty years before they finally glanced across the Jordan River at the promised land.

The problem was, however, they took long enough getting there that a whole lot of other people were already living in it. The spies came back and reported, “The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land.” “The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey.” The idea of a land flowing with milk and honey

was an idea that would continue to capture the hopeful side of the promised land. But earlier the same spies had reported, “The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

And so the story continued for many more generations with promises half realized and conflict realized always. Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua and Judges recount the saga, and like Genesis the accounts are rich with characters and plot lines. These were the years when Joshua blew his trumpet and the walls of Jericho tumbled. These were the years when Samson cut his hair and lost his strength. These were the years men whose names when we hear them now still conjure up the Bible: Othniel, Jephtha, Gideon. And to call their time years is to imagine them too quickly gone by. For by the time a boy named David came on the scene to defeat Goliath with a sling and a rock our best estimates are that a minimum of two and a half centuries had passed since those spies had given their mixed reviews of the possibilities in the land.

The boy David became, as we know, the greatest hero of ancient Israel. Our own Jesus was to be called a son of David, which described the great things that many expected of him. But Jesus comes much later; we get ahead of ourselves. David the hero managed to assemble the empire, as it was called. David’s empire was the farthest realization of the promised land. But to be honest, it was a modest piece of real estate. It was an area of about 375 miles by 100 miles. Much of it was uninhabitable, and most of the valuable seacoast belonged to the Phoenicians and the Philistines. And the truth was that David’s success was at least as attributable to a momentary and rare lull in power all at once among the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Assyrians and the Babylonians as it was to David and Israel’s army.

This humble empire lasted barely the rule of two kings – David and Solomon – before it began to flounder, splinter and shrink. The next two or three centuries were marked by division of the kingdom into two minor regencies – Israel and Judah – each ruled by a succession of mostly inept kings who were little match in almost every way to the powers that grew to the north and the east. First Israel fell to Assyria. A hundred and forty years later Judah fell to Babylon and the Babylonian Exile swept away the remnant of God’s chosen people from the promised land.

This is the time Jeremiah. Jeremiah was an unpopular figure most of his life, largely because he seemed out of tune with the popular movements of his day. At the beginning of his career Jeremiah understood that Judah was no match for Babylon. But king Josiah had dreams of restoring David’s empire. King Josiah saw the decline of the Assyrian empire, and he thought he could seize the moment to restore Judah to her former glory, such as it was. So, when Jeremiah kept reminding the king that not Judah but instead Babylon was the likely successor to Assyria’s power, Jeremiah irked the king.

But, of course, Jeremiah was right. The great Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon found Judah’s pretensions little more than a bothersome mosquito. With a flick of the finger, Jerusalem was ruined and the captives were marched to Exile.

But even as they wept by the rivers of Babylon, remembering Zion, as the Psalm says (137), remember and plan for Zion they did. They wanted to return home immediately. They wanted to end the Exile immediately. They dreamed even then of defeating Babylon soon and

returning home to reestablish the kingdom of David. But Jeremiah saw it differently. Jeremiah knew there was no quick end to the Babylonian Exile. Jeremiah told those who thought they would be returning to Judah right away, “<sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage ...” The people wanted to go home; they wanted to return and rebuild David’s kingdom; they wanted the promised land. And Jeremiah told them that what they needed to do was live where they were. They needed to live day by day, taking up the project of daily living, and taking up the project of living rightly.

If you read Jeremiah you cannot miss that he is one in the long line of Biblical prophets who kept calling the people to live rightly. Jeremiah preached, the Lord says, “If you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, then I will dwell with you in this place.”

\*\*\* The God of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, is a God whose mind changes from time to time. God decided the first creation was a mistake and sent the flood. God and Lot bargained over Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses talked God out of destroying the stiff-necked people in the wilderness. I like this God, this God who isn’t afraid to think that maybe he or she could have done it better at certain points. This God argues against any real fundamentalism, because this God doesn’t even consider itself to be infallible. This realization got me thinking, I wonder if God had it all to do over again, would God have made so much out of the promise to Abraham? Was it a good thing to suggest that they would be as numerous as the sands of the sea and the stars of the sky? Or maybe it was Abraham himself and those generations that followed who had stars in their eyes and made the idea of the promise into an idol.

Whatever the case, from the time of Moses on God tried to give the people a tempered version of the message. Yes, there would be a land, but it would take two generations to even lay eyes on it. Moses, the great leader of the people did not live long enough to set foot in the place. Yes, there would be a land, but it would already be occupied, and Israel’s residence there would never be a great empire. Whatever the promise was that God intended for the people, it is clear that the promise was not of a return to the utopia of Eden.

From very early on God kept giving the people Israel the message that Jeremiah gave the Exiles in today’s passage. From very early on, God gave the people the message that you live in the here and now, and that the here and now is going to be as it is for a long time, and the here and now is what it is all about. God realized that the people’s impatience for the imagined perfection of David’s empire had set them in pursuit of an illusion and had distracted them from what was really at stake. Eight centuries later Jesus would still be subject to such idealization when he had to continually fight off the idea that he was Son of David who would restore Israel’s empire. From very early on God tried to slow the people down and get them to focus on where they were. Instead, they complained, they built the golden calf, they allowed corruption, and they generally failed to realize what God really had in mind for them. Too bad, for the promises God had in mind for them were a delight to behold.

Jeremiah, one of God’s great prophets, was one of the messengers God gave to the people. And he is a messenger that God gives to us as well.

The chosen people wept by the rivers of Babylon, and they dreamt of the restoration to former glory. But Jeremiah came to them and said, this time in which you live is going to last a

long time. And you have a choice. You can weep by the rivers, you can dream of an illusion, or you can build homes, plant your crops and raise your families. In short, Jeremiah said you can waste away wishing things were different, you can waste away pining after a fantasy or you can live. And he implored them to live.

And what a choice Jeremiah offered the. It was the same choice that God had been offering all along. Deciding to live in the here and now is so filled with possibility. If you live in the here and now, rather than in the fog of a dream of some better time in the past or some better time to come, if living in the here and now counts for something, well, then, it counts for something. It means that those messages Jeremiah spoke about the oppressed and the widows and orphans and aliens mean something about how one lives today. It means that Micah's cry for us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God is a message for today and for every day.

And if today counts, and if living today counts, then we are let free to experience the presence of the living God in every step we take and in every breath we breathe. When Israel roamed in the wilderness, she was accompanied every day by the pillar of cloud and every night by the pillar of fire that was the presence of the living God. Most often they never even knew the holy presence was there. They moaned about the food and the water and being lost and wanting to go back to Egypt, and for most of forty years they missed the constant presence of the living God beckoning them to life.

A millennium and half later Jeremiah is imploring the people to pay attention to the same things. They are in an unfamiliar land, complaining, wishing with all their heart to be in a different place. And Jeremiah pleads with them to embrace the day they are living in, for in that day is the presence of the living God. And the presence of the living God means that the ground on which they are asked to put one foot in front of the other is holy ground. And if you know that you live on holy ground, you cannot help but be assured by God as your companion, and you cannot help but live fully and rightly in the light of God. To be sure, we live most often in times with their share of trouble, and the end of those troubles is hard to see, if it exists at all. But if we but look for the pillar of fire and cloud, we will see it, and we will know that God is with us, and we will know that these times are holy times, and we will know that these times ask of us that we live in them fully and rightly and gladly.

Thanks be to God. Amen.