

Wisdom for Exile
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
May 1, 2022-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Jeremiah 29: 4-14

This morning we begin a sermon mini-series. Our next 4 sermons will be on texts that come out of Israel's experience during her exile in Babylon. There are LOTS of Old Testament texts that address the Babylonian situation. Big parts of the book of Isaiah are addressed to exiles. The books of Daniel and Esther tell stories from Babylon. A number of the Psalms are written during the exile. The book of Lamentations reflects on the disappointment and struggle of exile. Most important for today, the book of Jeremiah records the prophet Jeremiah's warnings and encouragements to the people of Judah as they face exile. The book begins with Jeremiah warning the people that exile is coming. The book ends with the Babylonians destroying Jerusalem and carrying all God's people back to Babylon.

Why exile texts? Because, as you've heard many times and as you've no doubt sensed, the modern church's situation is becoming more and more like exile. We are losing social position and social power. We are often at odds with the culture around us. So we face the question that all exiles have faced: how do we carry ourselves in times like these? How would God have us live? As we look at these old texts, as we hear God's instruction to these ancient exiles, we will get a deeper understanding of how God would have us respond to our current challenges. Today's passage addresses this question head on. Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles and in the letter he says, "Here is how you should live in Babylon. Here is what God wants you to do in this strange city."

Before I read let's get a clear picture of the context. You probably know that all the people of Jerusalem were eventually exiled into Babylon. What you might not know is that the Babylonian exile took place in stages. The final stage of the exile involved the complete destruction of the temple and the city, but that hadn't happened yet when Jeremiah wrote the letter of chapter 29. This letter was written after the first stage of the exile. When Babylon first conquered Jerusalem it didn't destroy the city, instead it left the city intact and it took only some of the people into exile. The Babylonians took all the highly skilled workers into captivity—the expert craftsmen, the business leaders, the intellectual leaders. Jeremiah was not taken into exile during this wave. He was still in Jerusalem. And this letter was written from Jerusalem to all the exiles who were taken over to Babylon in the first wave.

If you know the book of Jeremiah—and most people don't—you know that there was controversy about how God's people should react to this first exile. A large group of the people advocated resistance against their conquerors. "This invasion will not last!" they said. In chapter 28 a prophet named Hananiah strutted through the streets of Jerusalem and said, "Within two years God will destroy the power of the Babylonians! He will break the Babylonian yoke! The exiles will return and we will be strong again! Do not serve Nebuchadnezzar! Resist him! These are a pagan people! They worship false gods like Bel and Marduk! The Lord is about to punish them!" These prophet's message was popular. It sounded very forceful, very devout. It was a message of strength and victory. Many people heard their sermons and thought, 'This has to be the word of the Lord! It's strong, it draws bright lines between good and evil. It sounds morally serious.' But as it turns out, it was not the word of the Lord.

So, how do we relate to the culture around us? When we are in an exile position, when we find ourselves surrounded by a culture that doesn't share our values, how do we live? In Jeremiah 29, God answers that question, and the answer Jeremiah gives represents a kind of middle way. Before they read Jeremiah's letter, the exiles would have been presented with two very different options for relating to the people around them.

On the one hand, there was the posture suggested to them by the Babylonians. The Babylonians were actually really clever in their dealings with conquered people. Before Babylon, most conquering armies would enslave the people they conquered. That was the approach of the Egyptians, right? Give them menial jobs—brickmaking in the case of the Egyptians—and use brute force to keep them in servitude. The Babylonians were certainly willing to use brute force, but their approach was subtler. They didn't just make you into a slave. Remember who the Babylonians took during the first exile? It was the skilled laborers and educated classes. They took who they saw as Jerusalem's most talented citizens and then they allowed them to participate, more or less fully, in the Babylonian economy. Think of Daniel and his friends. They weren't slaves. They weren't making bricks. They had high level government jobs. They were executives.

Why did the Babylonians do that? Well, as any employer knows it's always good to have smart people working for you, but their larger strategy was *assimilation*. Rather than holding them down with brute force, they wanted to invite them to enjoy the fruit of Babylonian prosperity and the joys of Babylonian culture until they willingly gave up their identity as Jews and became Babylonians. That's assimilation. You see that strategy in the story of Daniel. Remember what they did to Daniel when he got to Babylon? They not only gave him a government job, they also gave him a new name, a Babylonian name: Belteshazzar. Do you know what Belteshazzar means? My god is Bel. Bel is one of the Babylonian Gods. You see the assimilation strategy in the name. "Daniel, you are a smart guy, come work for us. Hey Daniel, we like you, but your Hebrew name is hard for us, mind if we call you Belteshazzar? Hey Daniel, we're having a little party on Marduk day. Come and join us! It'll be fun! We'll have a pig roast! Hey Daniel, let me introduce you to my sister." Assimilation. That was one path offered to the exiles.

The other option being pushed on them was the one we already talked about, the one being pushed by the prophets like Hananiah. Let's call that sectarianism. A strategy of fearful separation. Proponents of this path said, "There should be no cooperation with the people of Babylon. They are enemies! They are evil. Association with them is dangerous." "The Lord will break the yoke of the king of Babylon, and in two years all the exiles will be home. The countdown is on! Soon and very soon the Lord will come in judgment! He will destroy all our enemies and save us. Until then, huddle up and stay separate." So assimilation on the one hand, and sectarianism—fearful separation—on the other. As the exiles tried to figure out their lives, those were the two options presented to them.

Are those two options still being presented to us exiles today? Yes. Absolutely. In our society are Christians tempted to give up their identity and take on secular habits and secular values and secular entertainments? Are Christians being assimilated? Yes. All the time. On the other hand, are some Christians removing themselves from the world and saying some version of, 'it's all evil out there, but don't worry because soon God will destroy this evil and carry us home?' Yes. This too.

In between these two approaches steps Jeremiah. Jeremiah tells them that God wants a very different approach. "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I

carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

This is not sectarianism. This is not the attitude of fearful separation. That approach is explicitly rejected when God tells the people, “Do not listen to those other prophets! They are preaching lies!” The city of Babylon may be full of idols, it may be full of immoral practices, it may be full of corrupt people, but God still wants his people to engage this city. Seek its peace, pray for it. Grow a garden, plant a tree, raise a family, be a neighbor.

This isn't assimilation either. God is very explicit about that. They are not to become Babylonians. They are not to center themselves on the ways and practices and values of Babylon. They are citizens of Jerusalem. God calls them to engage Babylon, but he tells them that he will bring them back to Jerusalem. “I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to [Jerusalem]. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you...I will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile”. They may be living in Babylon and working in Babylon, but their hearts and hopes and their imaginations are focused on Jerusalem and the promises of God. They are God's people and their hearts are set on his promises, not the trinkets of Babylon.

Can we just stop for a moment so we can hear the deep resonances of the instructions that God gives the exiles? “Build houses. Plant gardens. Have families.” “Cultivate the earth. Be fruitful and multiply.” Where have we heard instructions like that before? The instructions that God gives the exiles in Babylon are essentially the same as the instructions God gave to Adam and Eve. “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Cultivate my garden!” Grow and plant and build! Seek the peace of the city!” It's a wholehearted call to engagement. God is not asking the exiles to tolerate their neighbors, he's asking for more than mere civility, he's saying to those Israelites, “Show those Babylonians what paradise looks like!” He's calling them to stand up in the city of Marduk and embody the city of God! And to do it, not with animosity and outrage, but with genuine hope that the Babylonians will recognize the world's true king.

Do I need to apply this? I think you see the implications. Certainly our forbearers in this city managed to apply this passage to life in Grand Rapids. This city is full of institutions founded by women and men who heard the call to seek the welfare of the city. Pine Rest. Wedgewood. Jellema house. Bethany Christian Services. ICCF. Pregnancy Resource Center. Degage. Lutheran Social Services. Catholic Social Services. All of these were founded by people who lived in city of Grand Rapids, but who saw themselves as citizens of the new Jerusalem. People who lived in Grand Rapids, but whose values and hopes and passions and dreams were all focused on King Jesus and filled with his Spirit.

How did the exiles keep their engagement from turning into assimilation? Because that's the danger right? When you engage the culture, you surrender to it instead of staying distinct. The original exiles did that by practicing habits of hope. Think of Daniel again. Daniel 6. All the people of Babylon have been commanded to bow down to King Darius and to worship him alone. They are commanded to put their hopes in Babylonian power. Daniel continues to work for the king, but he doesn't bow down to Darius, instead he goes to his room every day and bows down towards Jerusalem and worships the Lord. He didn't worship Babylonian power, he kept

his heart on his home city. It was his habit. God used that habit to ground him. He could serve in the belly of the Babylonian beast, but he stayed true to himself and to his God.

There were other habits that kept the exiles on track. The exiles meditated on God's laws and his stories. Though they were in a different country and far from home, all the stories of Genesis and Exodus and David were preserved. All the laws of Exodus and Leviticus were remembered. They kept singing the old Psalms. Most scholars believed that the roots of synagogue worship go back to the Babylonian exile—unable to gather at the temple, the exiles gathered in synagogue communities on the Sabbath. They did so habitually. These habits of hope allowed them engage in the city without being assimilated by its values. So much of the talk surrounding the changes in our times is gloomy. We talk about and the loss of the church's position in society and the rise of the 'nones' and dwindling congregations. Then we moan and groan, or we get angry and complain. By contrast, God's word to the exiles is hopeful, positive, full of confidence in their ability to be God's people in this place. It's positive even though the exile's situation is much worse than ours. It's positive because it's rooted in the certainty of God's plans and promises. "I know the plans I have for you" says the Lord.

Stefan Paas is a professor and pastor in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Amsterdam is one of the most secular places in the west. Not only are people in Amsterdam not Christians, they are completely uninterested in faith. In this country, a lot of the atheists are ex Christians and they will engage you in debate if the subject of faith comes up. In Amsterdam they're past that. They're not angry; they're indifferent. They won't argue. They'll shrug their shoulders and move on. So Stefan is in an exile position and first that was very intimidating. He came from a Bible belt environment. He was used to being surrounded by Christians and churches. At first it felt as though God was absent in Amsterdam. But eventually he realized that God rules everywhere. God is sovereign everywhere. God is active in these lives of these secular people too. That helped him to view his neighbors and his city more warmly and hopefully. And just as Jeremiah suggested, he started to pray for the city. He found that if went to his neighbors and said, "let me tell you about salvation in Jesus Christ," they said "no thank you." But if he moved towards his neighbors and engaged them with friendship, and worked with them to help improve the city, and if during those engagements he heard about their lives and their worries and their sorrows, if he said to them, "I'm so sorry. Would you mind if I prayed for you?" they almost always said yes, and said so with gratitude. It opened a spiritual conversation. Even in exile it made his neighbors aware of the presence of the living God who holds this world. We don't know what the future holds, but we know the future. And we know the plans he has for us. Plans to defeat evil. Plans to raise up the good. Plans to change everything. Plans to give us hope and a future.

© Rev. Peter Jonker