



Gardening in Troubled Soil

Sunday, October 9, 2022
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Hannah Lundberg

Psalm 111
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

I'm not sure what your favorite part of the Bible is, but with no irony to this claim, my favorite parts are all the passages influenced by the pain and disappointment of the Babylonian Exile. Before, during and after this period of being ripped from their homes in Jerusalem and sent away to Babylon, losing family, property, and familiarity, this critical historical moment shapes the way many voices in the Hebrew Bible explain their relationship with God. Here in Jeremiah, and in other books like Lamentations and Haggai, we hear the perspectives of folks who are wrestling with deep disappointment, real hardship, and difficult news at every turn. They're often angry at God and weary from journeying through unfamiliar territory. They're sometimes cynical and frequently unsure of their God (though different writers admit that to different degrees).

Here in Jeremiah 29, the author is specifically rejecting some of the false prophets who have been offering more "good news," than Jeremiah thinks is warranted. Other prophets have tossing out hope, saying that the exile will end soon, the people can look forward to "returning to normal" back in Jerusalem...and so Jeremiah writes this letter to say "wait a second. We might be here for a while. How do we seek goodness and fulfillment, faithful care for one another, and joy where we can find it right here where we are, even if it's disappointing, and even if it's only temporary." Here in our current moment, the wisdom of Jeremiah coming from the Babylonian exile reminds me that it's okay to settle in and seek joy, long before all our problems are "solved."

In a moment where many are feeling discouraged and disheartened, Jeremiah calls his audience to plant gardens, build houses, get married and have children, and maybe most significantly: to pursue the welfare of the city where they have been exiled, understanding that in that welfare they will find their own welfare. He invites them to become rooted in the place where they have landed even though it is far from ideal and may last only for a season.

I think about these questions of how and when we become deeply rooted in a place especially while connecting with college students here at First Pres. We want to welcome and embrace the full participation of students in the life of our community, and yet for many of the students I talk to, it feels

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complicated to fully connect with a faith community when their lives in Ann Arbor might feel transient or temporary. To what extent do you engage with a community rooted in being *known* while expecting to leave before long?

I relate to them as a resident minister, always aware that the two years I spend here in Ann Arbor will go by in the blink of an eye. How far do I invest in friendships, programs, and long-term projects when it feels like the next season of life will come in a split second? I'll admit that I often feel a little envious of those of you who have been in the same place for many years, rooted and established, with space to imagine seeing the fruition of a long-range strategic plan and not just the initial visioning. I just finished submitting the 2023 budget for campus ministry, recognizing that the fall programs I budget for will be carried out by someone else. All I can do is faithfully lay the groundwork, building on what I inherited and hoping to make a difference.

And yet, Jeremiah's words invite us to rest in the here and now, seeing the goodness God calls us toward even when the next steps are not yet clear. Don't worry, I won't try to draw a direct line between my time in Ann Arbor and the Babylonian Exile (check in with me again in February and I might tell you differently), but I think we often find ourselves in temporary or discouraging moments where we convince ourselves that all we can do is settle in, bide our time, and wait for a change: We'll seek goodness and joy when the semester is over when the kids are grown, after the pandemic has passed, or when retirement arrives. Jeremiah calls us to a different vision. How can we create deep welcome, engagement, and meaning even if it's just for a season?

This is not a call for resignation. Jeremiah is not telling his community to give up their hopes, make the most of a bad situation, and simply wait it out. Rather, liberation is tied up with accepting the reality of the moment and then creatively imagining how a better future could grow from this point forward. They might be in exile for a long time, so what goodness can grow right here?

Here in the midst of stewardship season at First Pres, we're all asking difficult questions about how to faithfully discern the needs and priorities of our church. As committees and ministry areas develop their budgets for the year, we consider the stories we need to tell, the values we hold, and the people we most need to serve. Inevitably, concerns about scarcity will arise. We fear that there is not enough time, money, or people-power to do the things that are most important. We might feel weighed down by difficult losses from the past year, by weariness of the pandemic, or by fears of what the future of the Church might hold. Change continues to come for the modern church in every corner of the world, and while we might be inclined to pine after the past, God calls us to faithfully move forward, seeking the welfare of the world around us in the moment we find ourselves in.

Jeremiah argues that the exiles in Babylon should seek the welfare of the city and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare they will find their welfare. Increasingly at First Pres, we are having

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conversations about this very topic, broadening our imaginations about what the work of the church might be to prioritize the needs of our community, even if it means cutting back some things here in our cozy corner at 1432 Washtenaw. Are we limited to these four walls or are we called out into the community, advocating for issues of justice, standing in solidarity with our neighbors, and supporting organizations that meet basic needs in our community?

Christ calls us to flip the script on cultural norms, pursuing radical love and hospitality above all else. Christ calls us to be uncomfortable at times and to sometimes risk the safe path in pursuit of the path of love and generosity. Like the exiles in Babylon, we might resist that call, wanting instead to see a clear path to return toward comfort and familiarity. The gift of church community is that we can encourage one another in those faithful and imaginative risks *together*. Perhaps our safety at First Pres is tied up with the safety of our community, our resilience tied up with the resilience of our neighbors, and our future inextricably linked with the futures of those around us.

A few months ago, I got to attend a meeting of the Washtenaw County Community Violence Intervention Team, put together by the Sheriff's office to engage faith leaders in conversations about reducing violence in Washtenaw County. The conversations that day were rich and nuanced, recognizing the distrust between many communities and the police, considering the complicated role of clergy and faith communities in the midst of that, and offering real possibilities for how churches might play a key role in peacemaking in Washtenaw County.

I was one of few folks in the room representing a predominantly white, upper middle-class congregation, and I was humbled by the deep wisdom and lived experience of many pastors in parts of our county further to the east whose day-to-day ministry experience looks incredibly different than my own. There were folks who regularly meet with members of their congregations who have been part of street violence, helping them process their experiences to reduce retaliation, pastors who have helped facilitate community conversations after gun violence in their neighborhoods, and churches restructuring their programming to provide a safe place for youth to hang out after school with an eye for community-wide wellness. These clergy were responding to needs I don't see in my daily ministry work, and our conversations expanded my understanding of the community needs beyond our front door.

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I've known, theoretically, that to truly envision the future of the Church we cannot speak in echo chambers, but participating in that meeting I saw firsthand examples of how we must widen the table of conversation, listen to our neighbors, and seek the welfare of our city, county, and country in order to truly do the work of God in the world. As I spoke with faith leaders living a different reality than my own, I was reminded of how complicated it is to discern the scope and focus of the work of a church. Are we doing our work if we only meet the needs of folks who walk through these doors? What more can we do to listen and respond to needs much greater than our building, greater than our members, and greater than our block?

And let me be clear: this is in no way a denigration of the work of First Pres. This church *is* actively engaged in the needs of our community, in our neighborhood, in our county, and in the world. I am regularly amazed by the vision and perspective that you, the members for First Pres, call us toward, the way you remind me to consider larger possibilities for serving the world, the ways you offer innovative and creative ways of imagining and building love in the world. What a gift it is to learn and serve in a congregation like that. Sitting in the meeting with Washtenaw County faith leaders I was challenged as a pastor to broaden my own perspective, to stop focusing on the short amount of time I have in Ann Arbor as a resident minister, and to consider how God might be working here, right where we are planted, even when we don't see the whole story yet.

Where are the moments where God calls us to seek the welfare of the communities around us? When we worry that we are in exile, with a long road before us, let us seek the welfare of the world around us, plant gardens and embrace the moment—for in its welfare we will find our welfare.

May God be with us on the road, and may we have the humility and strength to continue the journey. Amen.