

October 9 2016

Scripture Lesson:

Psalm 66:1-12

Luke 17: 5-10

Sermon *Listen to Jeremiah*

Today's words from Jeremiah go against some of our stereotypes of the prophetic message. Many people today think a prophet is one who can predict the future. The older, and more correct view of a prophet, was of one who would call the listeners forth out of their present arrangements. Prophets were those whose brave voices led, and even today lead, God's people out of the status quo, using words that move us from here to there, encouraging words demanding that changes be made. Many segments of the book of Jeremiah are congruent with this example of what it is to be 'prophetic,' Through many chapters, Jeremiah's words, burn hot with anger. Yet, here in chapter 29, the speech is different, and this too is prophecy. Here Jeremiah urges Israel, a people exiled to Babylon, to settle in, to plant gardens, the make the best of a tough situation. In exile, they are to live as best they can in an alien culture. Here we find prophetic word creating life amid the ruin. Given our status as aliens, we are strangers in a strange land. As are Christians in a secular world. How then should we live? This is the central question behind Jeremiah's prophetic word.

Jeremiah 29:1-7

“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. This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: 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 their 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.”

Thirty years ago I read more fiction than I do today and for awhile I was caught up in some good science fiction. I read Stranger in a Strange Land by Robert

Heinlein. It was the story of a young human, raised on Mars by Martians. I can't remember all the particulars of the story but somehow he got back to earth and was trying to live here and was trying to live here like everyone else—except that he adopted many Martian customs. I remember that he had been trained to slow down his metabolic rate and he was able to go to the bottom of the swimming pool for long periods just to think alone. It was a good book, a book which caused one to think about what it would be like to be different, or alone, or outside of one's culture, I read the book when I was stationed at Barstow, California. If you have ever been to Barstow you know that it is out in the middle of the Mojave Desert. There, I was a stranger in a strange land. I was from Illinois farm country where the corn really is as high as an elephant's eye on the 4th of July. Barstow was low desert brush land with dry thirsty mountains surrounding it. The Marine Corps stored things there because the rainfall was so low that there was little rust on equipment that set out in the elements. I met a man from the inter-mountain west once who told me that in his home town they received 4 inches of rain per year-I think that in Illinois we received that much in dew.

Each of us, at one time or another, have been in a strange land. It may have been miles from home or it may have in your cross town rival's high school gym. If you have left the comfort of America and traveled, you know especially what I mean. Different languages, electricity on DC instead AC, strange monetary currencies and strange food. It's fun to be in a different world, where people and places are strange; it's lonely to be in a different world where people and places are strange.

Life in exile, far from home, consumes much of the Hebrew scripture. Masses of God's people were held captive in Egypt. Centuries later many of God's chosen were exiled to Babylon. Exile is the context for today's lesson from Jeremiah. Behind every word of Jeremiah is a somber fact- God's people have been cruelly uprooted, plucked up and transported to Babylon. They are strangers in a strange land.

“What should we do?” they wonder. “Be defiant?” Clinch our fists, hunker down, build walls, monitor the music our children sing, refuse to learn the language, keep ourselves untainted by Babylonian ways, Babylonian customs?”

That's hard to do. This is the only we've got. We're in it and it is in us in countless ways.

There are things far worse than exile. No matter where we might be, God is with us and God sustains us.

One of the greatest challenges facing immigrants to America is the sense that they lose their children. They try to teach them the language of the old country, but within 2 or 3 generations it is lost. The children adopt the slang, the dress, the customs of the dominant culture, and sadly they seem lost to the older generation.

They may feel like aliens, but they are resident aliens. Living between the cultural enclave of their family and the larger surrounding culture the old becomes blurred. Jeremiah does not hear the Lord tell Israel to adopt to where they live and blend in with the Babylonians. Neither does Jeremiah hear God telling Israel to howl in despair, to build high walls and hunker down behind them.

It's tricky. Sometimes you don't know that they have you until they have you. I have watched friends the Jews. Jews in America realize that they are in exile. America has been good to the Jewish people who live here. Yet in subtle ways, America has also been detrimental to the Jews who live here Little matters like, "Shall I go to a Christmas party or not? It's not religious, but still the symbols of another religion will be there. Should I go?"

Jews have found that to retain their faith, to keep their children in the faith, at every turn of the road they must ask themselves, "should we be participating in this or not?"

I wonder if we contemporary Christians have much to learn from our sisters and brothers, the Jews. Many of us grew up thinking of America as a "Christian country." Being Christian was the normal, natural, American thing to do.

Is that the case today? When you came to church this morning, you were probably a minority of those within your neighborhood. 40% of Americans claim to be regular church goers, but on most Sunday's only 20% of Americans are in worship. In Washington the percentage may be even lower than that. Being Christian is no longer the normal, natural thing to do.

What do you do in a situation like that? Well, says Jeremiah, you make the best of it. You acknowledge that you are in exile, to some degree a "stranger in a strange land." You realize that something is at stake in the way you spend your money, and the way you spend your time, and what you do with your family and the clothes you wear, and on and on. I think the church should do a better job equipping its people to make these important decisions.

But you also do what Jeremiah says. You plant a garden, you pray for the peace of this city, even though not everyone in the city worships the God whom you worship. You realize that this is the world to which God has called you and you try to live in this world, this world with its ambiguity and its many challenges, as best you can. That's what exiles can do.

I think each of us ought to examine ourselves and our lifestyles. In what ways have we compromised our faith by the way we live? Are we doing that which we ought to do in regard to the nurturance of the faith of our children? These are among the questions that exiles must ask themselves.

Here, at the beginning of the 21st century, peculiar challenges are placed before contemporary Christians. Let us each ask God to give us the grace we need to be faithful disciples in our own time and place; even this place of exile.

