

Faithfully Living Our Lives
October 14, 2007
a sermon by Joe Hoffman
Text: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Our text this morning comes from a very grim time in the history of Israel. They are captive in Babylon. Their most brilliant people have been taken from their homes and forced to work in captivity. The temple has been ransacked and desecrated. There is much lamenting and grieving. They never imagined such a day could possibly come for them. They never imagined that their God would be mocked and laughed at in this way. So begins Yvette Flunder in her sermon entitled "The New War." (found in her book Where The Edge Gathers)

As if this was not bad enough, there were a variety of prophets offering a Word from God – only that word was not the same. Some were saying that this would be but a brief blip on the screen of life, that the exile would be over soon. Hananiah was one such prophet, and the controversy between he and Jeremiah sets up our text. Hananiah 's words were more popular than Jeremiah's. Thus, the people listened more to Hananiah when he said – "God will save Judah and Jerusalem, and will protect our interests." But that proved to be wrong. The people had not been living faithfully. God could not save them from themselves. Jeremiah spoke this less popular word.

This text is at the heart of a letter Jeremiah is writing from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon. The bad news is that the exile will not be brief. None of the exiles will return to their homeland. But the good news is that eventually the Jewish descendants will return. So Jeremiah instructs them: Settle down. Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat from them. Have children so that there will be a people of God to bless in a distant future. Seek the welfare of the city, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

There is no call to rebellion. In fact, it was their rebellion that got them into trouble in the first place. Now is a time to reclaim a spirituality for a future foundation of faith. Life in exile was to provide the essentials for an interim relationship with God. God had favored Israel for one moment in time, and they assumed God would always favor them. But God is a universal God. God is bigger than Israel or any nation or group of people. In the end, this is what saved Israel. God will not be compromised or reduced to our image of God. God will be God.

One of the questions asked in such a time as exile is – how do we sing the songs of our faith in a strange land? How do we tell the stories of our faith when it doesn't seem that our God was able to protect us in our time of need?

That is something that we all know something about. Most of us – perhaps none of us – will never be in a situation where our community is uprooted and moved away. But we know about exile in other ways. We know how illness can exile us from the vibrancy of our bodies. We know how depression and anxiety can rob us of our energy and ability to be present in the moment. We know how we can be separated from those we love

because of old hurts and attitudes that do not allow for change and growth. Or for forgiveness. How do we sing the songs of our faith when they have not seemed to hold us up through the realities of our lives?

The reality of the exile in the text is that the people forgot that they had the power to at least in part create their own situations. God gives us this power. Our relationship with God and one another is a covenantal relationship. God does not treat us like puppets, pulling us here and there in order to make us be what God wants us to be. We are given freedom to be ourselves. To decide for ourselves.

When we do not live in a way that is faithful to that creative spirit, when we become selfish or greedy, we have to live through the realities we create. What we are currently doing to Earth – we have to understand that God will allow us to destroy Earth and also ourselves. We have to change our course of action if we want to stop global warming and our own destruction. We cannot sit back and say – God will save us. Because God will not save us unless we also make an effort to live faithfully.

But there are forms of exile in which we have done nothing wrong. It is just the way life comes at us. We get sick – and it is not our fault. We live through tragedy, and we have to walk our way through this new landscape and reclaim our spirit that has become depressed and hidden away. We suffer some injustice, we are ridiculed or bullied for just being who we are, and we have to find a way to trust that who we are is good and worthy – not giving our tormentor power over us. And yet, we have to live as neighbors with those that do torment us. We too have to live in our own Babylons.

How do we sing the songs of our faith and trust in the stories we learned from our ancestors when we find our lives to be in such a mess? The struggle to be so hard?

The exiles long ago learned that they could not go back to the home they had once known. We can never go back to what was. These exiles could literally not go back to their land, to the homes they had built. They had to live where they were. They had to build new homes. Plant new gardens. Put down roots in a strange place. They had to build a future here in Babylon. It was important so that there could be a future generation to bless on a new journey.

Exile is part of life. Not just a part to get over. But we must learn to live well in exile. To build our lives in the realities we experience. We must grieve what is lost. That is the first step. We can not bring it back. We must seek a healing for what is wounded. We must find a way to deepen our spirituality in the place where we are – because we cannot go back to a time and place that was ideal. And the truth is, we tend to idealize the past anyway. It was never as ideal as we remember it being.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that exiles are called to a different kind of home. Not the home of our past, but the home of God's future. In the exile, faith is not lost. It is strengthened. We are able to let go of pieces of our thinking and believing that have not helped us find our way. We have to let go of the pieces that keep us stuck, for living

faithful lives calls for us to be willing to learn and live into new moments. God is over and over again doing a new thing, and we must continue to open ourselves to whatever it is God is doing. There is a lot we can learn in exile about faith, about creativity, about love and life.

Jeremiah says: Settle down. This is home for now. Learn what you can. Live the best life you can. God is with you during this time. As we read back over history, we realize that during exile the theological imagination of the people became very strong. This was the time of some of the most brilliant literature. Exile can be a time that is life-giving.

But exile is not our final home. We must continue to hope for the home that is to come with God's future. I am not talking about in the after life. I am talking about home in this world – a home that is deeply rooted in what God values most. I am talking about life after grief. Life after loss. Life that comes with forgiveness, healing, a new hope. Our spiritual task is to trust that God can heal whatever is hurting, can bridge whatever gaps there are, and can bring us home to a life that is full of love and possibility.

We also must find a way to live in a dominant culture that does not share our values. We must be full participants in this culture, according to Walter Brueggemann, but with a “sense of subversiveness that gives unnerving freedom... (God's realm) is a time and place and context in which God's ‘impossibilities’ for life, joy, and wholeness are all made possible and available. In the meantime, the waiting, hoping exiles are fixed upon these impossibilities. In so doing, the exiles refuse the world's verdict on the impossibilities, and, as a result, they pay less heed and allegiance to the world's wearisome possibilities.” (pp. 13-14, *Cadences of Home*)

Let me say it another way. We all have to live here. In the empire, if you will. There is no getting out of it. There is no separate peace, no special deals with God. This is the context of our lives. But the context is also that we believe in the hope of God for our world. It is that hope we invest in. It is that seeming impossibility of a world where justice is for all and God's grace is known by all that we long for.

So let us heed the word of God that came to Jeremiah. Let us build homes and live in them, let us plant gardens and eat from them, let us live our lives now – where we are – and know that God joins us in seeking the well being of all of us.

Amen.

I read a lot in preparing for this sermon, and am particularly grateful for the following resources:

Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion, Yvette Flunder – and in particular, her sermon entitled The New War.

Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles, Walter Brueggemann, and especially chapter 1.

Jeremiah (from the Interpretation Bible Commentary Series), R.E. Clements, and especially his commentary on chapters 28-29 of Jeremiah.