



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Found in Exile: Settle In”

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-11

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

The Rev. Ben Brannan was scheduled to preach on our texts for today, but as you’ve heard, Ben and Valerie’s sweet baby boy arrived a little ahead of schedule.

I am grateful to the work of my preaching group members, Jenny McDevitt and Sarah Wiles, for their exegetical work on Jeremiah 29. Their writing was most helpful to me in short runway to Sunday.

Jeremiah has been “left behind,” so to speak, following the fall of Judah and the exile of God’s people. He writes to his displaced countrymen. Hear now Jeremiah 29, beginning with v1, and skipping on to v4:

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-11. ¹These 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. ⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take 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. ⁷But 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. ⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.



¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

I was probably about 14 or 15 years old when our youth group printed Jeremiah 29:11 on our long sleeve t-shirts for the youth ski trip: "I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." It's a Bible verse I've seen on coffee mugs and embroidered on throw pillows.

"For I know the plans I have for you." Or, to put it in the language of its more commonly used evangelistic presentation: "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." This means nothing will happen to me — nothing could happen to me — outside of God's plan, right?

Taken out of context, Jeremiah 29:11 offers an appealing affirmation. People sip from coffee mugs with scripted v11, finding comfort in the assertion that God has a plan for our welfare and hope.

No one, however, slurps coffee from a mug bearing Jeremiah 29 v10 about the long wait before the welfare happens, before the hope is realized: "Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place." Seventy years. Oof. Jeremiah 29 does offer important instruction and hope for God's activity in our lives, but we ought to proceed with caution about expecting that welfare on our own terms or on our own timelines.

Typical of biblical prophets, Jeremiah wrote in a time of upheaval and loss. We've heard it in previous weeks... the northern kingdom had long since been destroyed by the Assyrians; the southern kingdom has recently been defeated by Babylon—the elite have been driven away into exile, only the poor are left to tend a burned out land.

Jeremiah has been preaching and prophesying for decades. He had foreseen the destruction of Jerusalem. He had tried with all his might to get Judah to repent and turn to God. They hadn't listened to him in the end, and what he predicted and feared the most came to pass. Judah was no more. But instead of washing his hands of these tiresome people who wouldn't heed his warnings in the first place, Jeremiah digs in. He doesn't give up on them, and he continues to relay God's message to the exiles in their far-off land.

In Jeremiah's day, lots of people had advice for folks in exile. One of the most popular prophets of the time was a man named Hananiah. Hananiah told everyone not to stress, this whole thing wasn't going to last all that long – maybe 2-3 years tops, then they'd all be back home to life as usual. He encouraged the people to fight back and work as hard as they could to get home. His message was one of can-do spirit and the power of positive thinking.



But Jeremiah got a wholly different message from God. Jeremiah warns the people, “Brace yourselves, children of God. You are going to be here for a while.” Instead of encouraging them to fight or have empty hope that their situation would surely change soon, Jeremiah said that God wants God’s people to settle in. Pace yourselves, Jeremiah says. Get used to your new reality.

Build a house, plant a garden, find a partner. If you already have children, they are going to grow up here, get married here, and have children of their own here. Settle in. And while you’re at it, pray for the welfare of these enemies, because their welfare is bound up in yours now. This is your home now – this foreign land you would not have chosen.

We tend to assume that prophets had a gift to see the future. But that’s not quite right. Prophets were not gifted with the ability to see the future, but with the ability to see the present. That may sound strange to our ears—but being able to actually see is far more difficult than it sounds. Prophets then (and perhaps now) have the ability to see differently than others. And because they have the ability to see the present differently, they often anticipate a future different than the rest of us would.

Between Austria and Italy, there is a section of the Alps that is impossibly steep. In 1842, an engineer named Carl Ritter von Ghega began imagining a railway that might one day span the distance, connecting Vienna to Venice directly. It took years of planning and dreaming. It took 14 tunnels, 16 viaducts, 20,000 workers, and 12 years before the railway was complete—a railway that was then five times steeper than any other in the world. It was an incredible dream and an even more incredible accomplishment. In 1998, over 100 years after its completion, the railway was named a World Heritage Site, recognized for the advanced technology utilized in its creation and for making this vastly beautiful, previously uncharted area accessible to humankind. It is considered a marvel of the modern world.

But perhaps even more marvelous is the fact that at the time von Ghega conceived the idea, and even at the time excavation of the area and construction of the tracks had begun, there was no train in existence that could make the trip. In other words, one of the most ambitious projects in railway history was undertaken with no evidence, but with complete trust that someday, eventually, the right train would come along. Incredible.

Von Ghega could see the present differently from others—and because he was able to see the present differently, he was able to anticipate a different future, too.

As a prophet of God, Jeremiah had the brutal task not only of seeing the present differently but anticipating a future no one else was ready for.

Jeremiah had been a reluctant prophet. He didn’t go out seeking the job. The job came to him. He tried to exchange it for another, but God wasn’t interested in negotiating.



For 29 chapters, we read Jeremiah's response to a very difficult and serious situation. No platitudes or clichés will do. Jeremiah sees the truth like it is, and he's not afraid to speak it as he sees it.

There are times when we are faced with an ugly, horrible truth. Jeremiah's words are for the days when the ground shakes beneath us and our knees buckle.

We can imagine the Israelites asking the hard questions: How long, O Lord? How long will we have to sing your songs in a foreign land? Why can't we/when can we just go back to life as normal?

How long, O Lord, will the pressure from this pandemic loom? Why are thousands of young people in our country depressed and anxious? Why do tyrants in our world go unchecked? Why are nations embroiled in war?

Sometimes, exile is a statement of geography, and sometimes it is a condition of the soul. It is whenever we are thrust into an unfamiliar and uncomfortable place. When the darkness feels too deep. When the unknowns loom too large. When you would give anything for just a little peace of mind.

It was to those people enduring that sort of situation that Jeremiah says, "Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Grow a family, create a community, and care about the city all around you, even if it isn't the home you remember." In other words, "Keep going, as best you can. Life will still emerge, even from the strangest and least likely of places."

When Methodist pastor Jan Richardson unexpectedly lost her husband and creative partner, she says she at first didn't know how to carry on. It was as though she were traveling through a strange land. But with time, she began to hear God's call—the call was to do what she had long known how to do—to write. And so, Jan wrote blessings. These were no sugar-coated blessings, because they came not from a place of joy, beauty, and perfection, but from the depths of her shock, anger, and sorrow. From the depths, Richardson brought forth words of surprising comfort and stunning grace. Her books, her poems, her blessings are chock full of hope—but it's hope in a minor key.

Jeremiah's message is a message of hope, but in a minor key. Live—you will live, Jeremiah says. You will have homes and gardens and love—but it will be here in this foreign land. The blessings of God are here, right now. Because, says the Lord, I know the plans I have for you—plans for peace, not for disaster.

This is God's answer for us when we find ourselves in the places we would not have chosen. Settle in. Seek life here—even in this exile, because, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for peace and not disaster, plans to give you a future with hope.



This is where real hope comes from. It's not about being in happy-clappy, prosperity gospel denial all the time. Bad things happen, and we don't get a pass. God doesn't promise that it will end quickly, or that if we say the right prayers or do the right things it will go away. Instead, God promises to be with us even in exile, to bless us with life, even in a foreign land that is not where we ever expected to be.

Friends, settle in. Build houses. Plant a garden. For I know the plans for you, says the Lord—plans for peace, not disaster, plans to give you a future filled with hope.

Receive this blessing from Jan Richardson's poem...

Blessing of Hope

So may we know
the hope
that is not just
for someday
but for this day—
here, now,
in this moment
that opens to us:

hope not made
of wishes
but of substance,

hope made of sinew
and muscle
and bone,

hope that has breath
and a beating heart,

hope that will not
keep quiet
and be polite,

hope that knows
how to holler
when it is called for,

hope that knows
how to sing

when there seems
little cause,

hope that raises us
from the dead—

not someday
but this day,
every day,
again and
again and
again.

—Jan Richardson

