



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Seek Shalomⁱ”

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Luke 17:11-19

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The book of Jeremiah brings us into a turbulent time in the life of God’s people. Jerusalem has fallen, and many of its inhabitants have been taken into exile in Babylon, ripped away from home, temple, and everything familiar. They are disoriented, grieving, and unsure of how to live in a place that is not their own.

Psalms 137 captures their anguish: “By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept—How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” Exile felt like abandonment. Singing felt impossible.

And yet, into that very situation, the prophet Jeremiah sends a letter, not with words of escape or quick solutions, but with a startling command: settle in. Seek the welfare of the city where you’ve been sent.

This was not the word the exiles expected, but it may be the word they most needed. And perhaps it’s one we still need to hear.

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7. 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.

⁴ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they



produce. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

God's word to the exiles was not, "Hold your breath until things get back to normal." Nor was it, "Revolt, escape, or give up hope." It was, "Live here, love here, seek the good of this strange place where you find yourselves."

That, too, is what our Gospel story reveals—how healing and salvation come not by escape, but by seeing where we truly belong.

Luke 17:11-19. ¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten men with a skin disease approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus's feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? So where are the other nine?" ¹⁸ Did none of them return to give glory to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Luke tells us that Jesus is traveling in the region between Samaria and Galilee. Given that Samaria and Galilee technically border each other, there's no real "region between" the two. It *may* be that Luke has little grasp of the geography he describes, but (as I believe is often the case) the journey itself, and not the geography, is the point. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, to the cross, and the encounters he has along the way reveal something about the nature of his kingdom to come.

In this borderland, ten men with leprosy cry out to Jesus. Jesus doesn't touch them or pronounce healing immediately. He tells them to go to the priest, and as they go, they are healed.

One by one, the men recognize they are healed. But one, only one, truly sees, stops, turns around, and runs to Jesus praising God. This one, a Samaritan, a religious and ethnic outsider, a "double other,"ⁱⁱ as one commentator describes him, returns to give thanks.

All ten men are healed, but only one returns and is told, "Your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:19).

When author and first generation American Debie Thomas was a preschooler, she went exploring, unsupervised, in her father's study. In the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet, she found a folder with four little booklets wrapped in tissue paper. Curious, she opened them and was delighted to find that one little blue booklet had her baby picture inside. Seeing several blank pages behind, she grabbed a pencil and set to work.



Thomas writes that she doesn't know how many pages she defaced before her father walked into his study and caught her. Snatching the booklet from her little hands, he frantically flipped through its now grubby pages. Only after he started carefully erasing her drawings did she realize he wasn't angry; he was frightened.

"What are those?" she asked, stunned that she'd so unnerved her father.

"Our passports," he said, scattering eraser shavings all over the desk. "These books are what prove we belong here."ⁱⁱⁱ

Even now, decades later, Thomas writes that she treats her US passport gingerly, like an icon or a fragile bit of lace. When she travels internationally with her kids, she hovers over *their* passports, checking often to make sure they haven't been left in a seat back pocket or an airport Starbucks. Her children tease her about it, but she doesn't care; something in her insists on vigilance. Her father's old, immigrant fear of not belonging, of being cast out, lives on.

When I teach Luke's Gospel lesson to our preschool children here at Second, I focus on the theme of thankfulness. As Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, he heals ten lepers and sends them on their way. Only one returns to thank him. This man's wholehearted gratitude, and Jesus' response to it, reminds us that we are made to see life as a gift from God, and that true salvation is found at the feet of the Giver.

But, of course, this story is about much more than gratitude. It is about the gratitude of a *foreigner* who receives healing and welcome. It speaks to the question of identity: of being excluded and then embraced, of exile and homecoming. At its heart, this is a story about the kingdom of God—about who's invited in and who truly belongs.

What does it mean to say that in Christ, we are all one? Where *should* the children of God find their identities, their homes, their spiritual families?

Years later, while visiting family in India, Thomas says that she remembers seeing two men in the train station with visible signs of leprosy. What stands out to her about that memory now is that the two weren't just sick, they were completely alone. "Their aloneness was otherworldly," she writes. "As if some invisible barrier, solid as granite, separated them from the rest of humanity."^{iv}

When Jesus heals these men in our story, he doesn't just fix their skin. He breaks down that granite wall. He restores their humanity, he invites them back into community, into family, touch, worship, and life. He gives them "unblemished passports,"^v ten of them. In this miracle, they are given a new identity, a new belonging, a new home.

This is what Jesus does—he meets us in the in-between places, in the borderlands, in the strangeness, in already-but-not-yet, in the exile—and offers us something deeper than comfort. Jesus is offering us a truer citizenship, rooted not in this kingdom, but in *his* kingdom.



Sometimes, life brings us into unfamiliar territory—to places that feel disorienting or in-between. Maybe you know what that’s like. You might be living between sickness and health, between caregiving and grieving, between one season of life and the next. You may feel caught between responsibilities that pull you in opposite directions—between raising children and caring for aging parents, between a past you can’t return to and a future that hasn’t yet taken shape.

It’s in places like these that we may feel like strangers in a strange land. The psalmist once cried out, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137). How can we be faithful when everything around us feels unfamiliar or uncertain?

Into that kind of space, the prophet Jeremiah speaks a surprising word. To those in exile—not at home, not where they wanted to be—God doesn’t say, “Hold your breath until it’s over.” God doesn’t say, “Escape.” Instead, God says: *Plant your gardens. Build your homes. Put down roots. Seek the welfare—the shalom—of the place where you are.*

It’s a radical call to faithfulness, not in ideal conditions, but right in the middle of disruption and displacement.

That term “welfare” here in Jeremaih can also be translated as *shalom*, meaning a well-being that is much deeper than the simple absence of conflict. *Shalom* represents a state of wholeness, completeness, and flourishing in all aspects of life—physical, spiritual, and relational. “Seek the shalom of the place where I’ve sent you, for in its shalom you will find your own.”

The man who turned back was the least likely one. He was the outsider, the Samaritan, the one people would rather forget. Yet, he is the one who sees clearly. He is the one who praises God and recognizes the source of his healing. In turning back, he becomes one of the first citizens in a new kind of kingdom.

It’s a stunning reversal. And it’s what Jesus does over and over again. He gathers the ones we’ve been taught to fear or exclude. He restores a body, and also a community. He returns dignity, identity, and participation. And he says, in every way that matters, you belong.

In a world where exile, in one way or another, touches nearly all of us, this is good news. And it’s the same, surprising, good news he gives to exiles in Babylon: “Seek the welfare – the shalom—of the place where I have sent you, for in its shalom you will find your own.”

This is what Jesus offers—not just healing, but shalom. Not just survival, but salvation. Not just being made clean but being made whole.

The question for us is: how do we respond to such incredible grace?

This call to seek shalom of the city is not a metaphor. It is a real command, for real places full of real people. It is a call to pay attention to the wounds of our city. It means recognizing that



my peace and welfare, my shalom is bound up in yours. And that *our* shalom is bound up in our neighbors.’ We are called to seek the shalom of the place where we live. God doesn’t call us to hold our breath until things return to normal. God calls us to seek shalom in our neighborhoods, in our classrooms, in our churches, and even in our exile now.

To seek the shalom of this city is to care about what makes for wholeness and justice here. It looks like churches that not only preach and pray but also build and care for neighbors in need of basic necessities like healthcare, food, and affordable housing. Because the healing of your soul is bound up in the healing of your neighbor. The salvation we proclaim in Christ Jesus is not only personal, it’s also communal.

Friends, our truest citizenship is in the kingdom of God. Our deepest shalom is at Jesus’ feet. His arms are wide enough for us all.^{vi}

May we be the people who live into this vision, who live in his kingdom now... who praise God with a loud voice, who build and plant and stay, who seek not only our own peace, but the shalom of all God’s children.

ⁱ Amy Frykholm, “Seek Shalom,” Journey With Jesus 05 October 2025, <https://journeywithjesus.net/essays/3984-seek-shalom>.

ⁱⁱ Debie Thomas, “A Foreigner’s Praise,” Journey With Jesus, 06 Oct 2019, <https://journeywithjesus.net/essays/2395-a-foreigner-s-praise>.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} David Neville, “Betwixt and Between: Healing Social Distancing in Luke 17:11-19,” St Mark’s Review, 253 Sep - Oct 2020, p 60-69.

