

“Bloom Where You Are Planted”

Sunday October 10, 2010

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7; 2 Timothy 2: 8-13; Luke 17: 11-19

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Last Sunday, we spent some time with the Hebrew people who had been exiled to Babylon – forced to live where they did not choose to live. They were a despairing people, who refused to cooperate with their captors and “sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land.” They remembered Zion, and their hope lay in their memory of who they were shaped to be.

This week, we meet the exiled Hebrew people again, and listen to the advice of their prophet, Jeremiah, who advises them to transform their desire for revenge into prayers for welfare, or Shalom. By doing so, they will find their own welfare. “Stop despairing over what WAS” says Jeremiah to these specific circumstances. “Learn to find God in what IS.”

(Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7)

Let us pray: Lord, grant us your understanding as we consider the ways you invite us to respond to the exiles and captivities in our time. Grant us such a prophetic imagination that we might bring alive the hopes and yearnings that have been exiled with us, and that can rekindle our faithful dreams. Amen.

“Bloom where you are planted,” advises Jeremiah to a people struggling with dislocation and homesickness. Set your roots in this soil and make peace with your situation. It doesn’t matter where you are, or even who you are. You can know and be known by God in all circumstances, for “the Word of God is not chained” even if you are.

Thus, Jeremiah appeals to his exiled brothers and sisters to 'create a new ‘normal’ as they learn to live into the reality of exile. Instead of resisting the changes that this new era in their lives forces upon them, the prophet suggests for them to “make friends” with their captors and their present reality. Not perhaps the word they wished to hear from a God whom they count on to “protect them from their enemies.” But a promise, nevertheless, that God’s promise of deliverance will come, even if they must wait.

It is 597 BCE and the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar was wreaking havoc on the little kingdom of Judah and its great city, Jerusalem. His soldiers were rounding up the population to use their bodies and minds for Babylonian dominance. Rounding up a first group of Hebrews, Nebuchadnezzar first chose the leaders of Judaic society – including priests and prophets (Ezekiel, but not Jeremiah) - and “the artisans and the smiths,” or, as Eugene Peterson translates it, “all the skilled laborers and craftsmen” (*The Message*); those who could be of use to the Babylonian Empire. This is just the first wave of conquer. Ten years later, in 587, Babylon will return to devastate Jerusalem and carry off even more of the population, and then a third group will be taken in 581 (Christine Pilkington, *The Lectionary Commentary*).

This letter from the normally “doom and gloom” prophet Jeremiah was written to the first wave of exiles who were taken into captivity. Some people, who had not yet been deported from

their homeland, found comfort in the thought that they had escaped the judgment of God because God was punishing those who were carried off... but NOT those who were left behind. Sounds a bit like the televangelists who suggested, after September 11th, that feminists and gays were responsible for such a terrible tragedy. So Jeremiah, who says he is relaying what *God* has given him to say, writes to counter these “false prophets” and to bring a word of hope to those struggling to survive in their Babylonian exile.

Theologian Audrey West writes “**the news doesn’t have to be good in order for us to live out the good news. The news doesn’t have to be good to be blessed ourselves and be a blessing to those around us.**” (*New Proclamation 2010*). "Real hope for the people, according to Jeremiah, lay not in some immediate relief from the realities of their lost homeland, or the sorrows of their exile, but in living through that experience as faithful people, awaiting God’s 'future with hope'."

When he was 14 or 15 years old, Ken By was forced to flee his native Cambodia as Pol Pot’s violent Khmer Rouge regime overthrew his country, forcing leaders and intellectuals to their deaths, shutting down industry, leveling schools and educational institutions, in order to keep the people poor, uneducated, and oppressed. As you can guess, many Cambodians resisted – and between 1975 and 1979 over 2 million were killed through political execution, starvation, and forced labor. Many others escaped into neighboring countries. Some of you may have seen the movie *The Killing Fields* which annotated this genocide. I couldn’t make myself watch it.

Ken, who joined First Christian a month ago, escaped by foot into Thailand. Many of his family members had already been killed. While in a refugee camp there he, as he now described “by God’s grace” bumped into a woman who had relatives in America. Her children were still in Cambodia, and she conscripted young Ken to go back into Cambodia, find her children, and bring them to safety in Thailand. Their father was American and could therefore gain asylum in the United States.

Ken walked all the way back across the border with another young man – which was very dangerous in and of itself – found the 4 young children (ages 3-11) and walked carrying the children all the way back across the border – at least a 4 day walk. He remembers how poor they all were, they had no food, no shoes, their feet bled from the rough terrain. He shared with the Wednesday Bible Study group how hard it was to carry the children, how scared they all were, how hungry. Because he himself was young, he was not looked askance upon and was able to cross the border safely back into Thailand.

By doing this, Ken was able to accompany the children back to the United States – though he said that took another 8 months. They were sent to the Philippines for English language training as the refugee organization (whose name he does not remember) kept them in a camp until sponsors and financing was found to bring them here.

Most of us cannot begin to imagine the kinds of circumstances that Ken faced. The violence, the constant threat of death, the loss of homeland, the hunger, the brutal walk – and even though he originally received asylum in Thailand, he was still forced to live in camps

without many resources. He eventually accompanied the 4 children to San Francisco and then Seattle Washington, where the American born father of his four charges resided.

I don't have all the details right, I am sure, and the story continued – all of which I cannot tell this morning. But, what I can tell you is that upon arrival in the United States, and after eventually finding himself in New York City - after adjustment and change and upheaval, he decided to bloom where he was planted.

It was not the life trajectory he would have chosen for himself. And I am not sure what range of emotions he went through as he adjusted to an entirely changed future. But, within the “choicelessness” of his situation, he chose to make the best of his circumstances; to lament not necessarily the “why’s” of both his losses and his gains, but simply to plant himself in a new way and learn how to find welfare/God’s shalom in a changing world. One thing for sure, it was not easy.

Conclusion:

Sometimes, God calls us to actions that go against our natural inclinations, like loving our enemies and praying for the welfare of the place of exile we find ourselves in. Like walking for 4 days to save 3 young children when it is putting our own life in harms way. Exiles can come in many shapes and sizes. We can live in a personal exile (like being jettisoned from a relationship); emotional (like losing our beloved’s), communal (our unity dissolving in conflict) and national (a terror attack that leaves us feeling afraid). ... How do we make peace with the circumstances that feel like a captivity?

Our world is changing so fast we can't keep up and it's frightening, and we can feel as if we are held captive by it. Technology, global communication, environmental turbulence.... the economic policies of the 1950's and 60's no longer work in 2010; the “religion of the 1950's and 60's” seem no longer relevant to the emerging generation in the 2010's and above... This new world we are all living in can feel like an exile. The prophet tells us to stop feeling sorry for ourselves, to stop looking *backwards to what was* for our hope for what will be. He advises us to hunker down, build houses, plant seeds... find the blessing in our uncertainties and remember that God's vision of our lives is far greater than what we perceive.

What does that mean to us as a community of faith – as church when we are rocking like a big boat on the turbulent sea of generational change? Do we look backwards, as beautiful as it was, for the vision of what we will be? Do we bolt down the pews, hang on and sink with the ship as the fierce, but perhaps even liberating winds of change threaten what we've always known? Or do we find a way to sail on the waves that both frighten us, yet also lift us at the same time?

What we must remember is that God's vision of our lives is far greater than what we perceive. The prophet Jeremiah asks the people to trust in God's promise, especially in times of dislocation like we are feeling now. During difficult times that stress us, and make us feel as if

everything we've ever counted on in the past is dying, we must remember that God's vision of our lives is far greater than we perceive. In trusting God, we will most likely be led to plant new life in unexpected places. Tied to Jesus' words, we are encouraged to give thanks for what we have, and have been given – even if it not what we think we want. 2 Timothy records that “the word of God is not chained.” It can be proclaimed anywhere, in any language, in any culture – even in Babylon! We must learn to proclaim God's vision where we are, whether we like it here or not. Our shalom is tied to this kind of gratitude.

What message of hope is God uttering to you in the silence of your heart? How is God equipping you to plant and nurture new life where you are?