



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

## **“Hope in the Darkness”**

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Carrie Veal at Myers Park Baptist Church*

*On December 1, 2024, from Jeremiah 29:1-14*

Miriam Webster defines exile as:

- the state or a period of forced absence from one's country or home
- the state or a period of voluntary absence from one's country or home

Exile. As I've sat with this word over the last several days, I keep coming back to the word grief. After all, how can you be in exile and not have grief? I have been on the journey of grief for the last 13 months, beginning with the death of my mother, five months later the death of my husband, and now today the departure of our senior minister, and the effects that is having on my beloved community. So, I have been in exile, and now many of us are in exile together. We are in grief together.

One of the most common themes with exile is the word “home”. It is the hope of all of us that home is a place of refuge and belonging; a place where you host your people, whoever they are and however they come into your life. Home is a place where you can let your guard down, put your feet up, laugh loudly and take a break from the weariness, the challenges, the demands of life.

And so is church.

- Church is a place of refuge and belonging, like home.
- Church is a place of centeredness and grounded-ness, like home.
- Church is where you find your people, those who you want to break bread with, tell stories with, and do life with.
- Church is a place where you deepen, strengthen, and discover new parts of your relationship with God. A place for understanding how God is working in your life, in the lives of others, and in the world.

At least this is what I want church to be. I want and need church to feel like home. Perhaps you also need this. And maybe you are wondering what has happened to your home.

The morning that my husband Neal died, I came home, literally being held up by my dear friend, and former associate minister of this church, the Rev. Chrissy Williamson. I walked into a house that suddenly felt foreign, it suddenly felt alien and desolate. Nothing in the appearance had changed, and yet everything had changed. My home no longer felt like home. If you have been coming to MPBC for a while, perhaps you are sitting here today feeling the same. Feeling that this place is no longer your home. And it can FEEL that way. It is still your home, your place of refuge, it's still your church.



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Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

And in the same way I had to find new ways to make my home feel like home, so will you. I had to find new patterns and new modes. And while I did this, I smiled at the memories I had made in that home with Neal. I was and am grateful for the life we had there.

I could not just throw it away and move to a new house simply because he was no longer there. I just had to walk in every day, look around and say, “this is my home and this is where I want and need to be. And something beautiful can happen here.” And there were and are people who walked with me, helping me make new and beautiful things. And just as I walked and continue to walk with others, you are not expected to do it alone.

Jeremiah 29 has been described as Jeremiah’s letters to the Babylonian captives. The Babylonians had risen to power in the region and deported several groups of Judeans. The temple is destroyed, their home is in ruins, and they remain in exile with no idea if or when or how they can go back or what life will look like on the other side. They can’t help but wonder what happened to God’s promises to make them a great nation, to give them a land and a name and a blessing. It looks as if all that is coming to an end. The earlier chapters of Jeremiah specifically chapters 27 and 28 asserted that the exile in Babylon would extend over a long period of time. Jeremiah is telling his audience to find a way to live faithfully and hopefully in the midst of exile. In his commentary on Jeremiah, Walter Brueggemann says, “as the texts are now presented, chapter 29 characterizes Jeremiah as practicing pastoral care among the exiles. That pastoral care is expressed around two convictions. There must be a realistic and intentional embrace of the exile as a place where Jews must now be, and where God has summoned them to obedience, and that there is a long-term hope for return and restoration that can be affirmed and accepted. Both affirmations are important for the exiles. The first which enact a tearing down and plucking up offers an alternative against romantic escapism, and abdication, the second which enact a planting and building speaks against ultimate despair.”<sup>1</sup>

This pastoral care piece speaks to the love of God that the people NEEDED to hear. They needed comfort. I am sure they were aghast that God would even propose such normality. After all, they have had everything they know ripped from them. Maybe they could see it coming. But maybe not. Perhaps they were not surprised but perhaps they were. Possibly they thought there was a way to undo it all. No matter where they were in their grief, they definitely did not want God telling them what to do. After all, they are not just sad, they are angry. They are trying to figure out how a God who they strive to live in covenant with would lead them into this place. How has this happened if they are following, worshipping, and doing the work of faithfulness? And yet, God is giving them a purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, p255-256.



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When I first read this text, I was immediately thrown back to my teenage days of church. Jeremiah 29:11 might be the most memorized verse in the Bible after John 3:16. In fact when friends asked what my text was for today, I automatically said, Jeremiah 29:11 because all the numbers are just ingrained in my head to be together.

Then when I dug into the text, I was not drawn to the usual part, verse 11. Rather, I was pulled toward verse 4-7. Hear them again:

<sup>4</sup> Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.

I actually stopped and said, “Seriously? You expect them to just keep on living? You know they are in exile. Because you said you sent them there. There has to be some reprieve for that! There has to be a little room for grief and sadness and permission to stop.”

Because that is what happens when you are in exile. When you are separated from all that you know, all that has brought you comfort and security, the last thing you want to do is act like everything is normal. That’s what happens when you are in grief and darkness and uncertainty. You want to stop. And you want the world to stop too. But you can’t and the world won’t. So, then you find yourself looking around hoping that someone will make it better and change the reality of your life. And quite often someone comes along and does just that.

The truth is we are all moving between home and exile, security and grief every day. Human existence is not just one thing all the time, and we would be foolish to pretend it is. And we would be foolish to forget the work that has been a part of our home, our church, our community, and to think that it will stop because we have experienced an abrupt, unexpected and hard-to-process change. Change can bring grief. It can also bring newness, abundance and the beautifully unexpected.

And 81 years ago, God called people to start something new. To build houses and plant gardens. In the middle of war, in the middle of uncertainty, in the middle of chaos, God calls us, all of us, to build and plant and raise families, in all the ways you can define those words. What God began we will continue. God has been working for the good of the world IN THIS PLACE for over 80 years.



- Our second Senior Minister Carlyle Marney advocated civil rights and desegregation in the late 1940s, well before he joined us in 1959 where he continued his advocacy.
- Member CD Spangler sent construction crews to the houses of four black Charlotte civil rights leaders to rebuild them the day after they were bombed by white extremists in 1965.
- Our support of Anita Stroud and other 1960s black activists.
- The leadership of our prominent members in the 1960s who helped peacefully desegregate Charlotte restaurants by organizing coordinated, same-day lunches with black community leaders.
- Carlyle Marney and member Billy Pinson bailing out the Charlotte Three - 3 black men unjustly accused of burning down a horse stable.
- Gene Owens supported school busing after Swann vs Board of Education in 1971. Dick Spangler doing the same by keeping his two daughters in public school where they were bussed to formerly all-black West Charlotte High School. Most wealthy Charlotteans took their children out of school and enrolled them in the newly formed private schools, also known as “segregation academies.”
- Steve Shoemaker attended countless protests (along with church members) focused on racial justice, including Moral Mondays organized by Rev. William Barber. Steve even joined other clergy in occupying the State Legislature buildings. (Email conversation with Bob Thomason, November 28, 2024)
- Ben Boswell worked with members and deacons to change the name of the Ministry of Outreach to the Ministry of JUSTICE and Outreach which led to new statements on Racism in 2019, Immigration in 2020 and an updated version of our LGBTQ Statement in 2022.



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We have been advocating for the rights of women, speaking out about climate justice, redefining what it means to be a member and removing barriers that other churches have. And these are just a few examples of the justice work, examples of the gardens, the houses, of the LIGHT that we have had in our midst. There are so many more. And we need to remember them, share them, BE THEM. This is the call of God. This is the purpose of our humanity.

It takes us being together to seek out the light, uniting together to be the light, uniting together to tell the stories of our past, to share our experiences in the now. Uniting together for the future, let us be like the Israelites, who finding themselves in exile, reached out to God asking, “what are we supposed to do?” Let us hear the same commands that God gave to them. Let us build homes, plant gardens, and have families. Let us continue to dream. Let us continue to build. But most of all, let us continue to do it together.

I am not going to stand here and tell those who are grieving not to grieve. I’m not going to stand here and minimize the pain that you may be experiencing. Because I would not want you to do that to me. What I can stand here and say is that we have a rich history of facing hard times and coming out on the other side. We have a rich history of coming together as a people, as a community, of deciding to have faith when we don’t have answers. We are people on a journey. And today our journey is hard. It has been hard before, and it will be hard again.

But like the Israelites, who were in exile, we must build community, not tear it down. We must find ways towards one another, not push against. We should ask questions and pause for the answers; we should seek clarification on our confusion and use those answers to find a way forward. We can be in exile, in grief and find ways to not let it stop us in our living, our dreaming, our seeking. We can live in the tension that two things can be true at the same time. We must live in that tension if we are in community with one another.

And one day we must plant gardens. We will gather the seed that we want to see grow; we will have the freedom to determine what we want that garden to look like tomorrow, next week, and 81 years from today. May we look at one another and see the face of God, may we remember that God is always in the business of creating new things, bringing about peace, Hope, love, joy, and reconciliation. May it be so.

Amen.