

August 11: [Exile] (*Jeremiah 29:1-14*) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Welcome, fellow travelers on the way, to another stop on our summer journey into displacement and finding home together. This series is meant to be a sojourn into the biblical story, and a tool to help each of us identify the displacement in our own lives, and find and follow God in that displacement.

To be displaced is to be moved from our usual or proper place, from where we belong, & it can apply to tangible things like individuals or intangible things like emotions. Displacement happens to all of us, and whether it's temporary or permanent, chosen or thrust upon us, the same underlying feelings often apply: a sense of disorientation, confusion, and loss of control. We might feel adrift or lost; anxious and afraid; or maybe insecure or bitter. So if you are going through an experience of displacement or identify with any of those feelings, I invite you to enter into this time of meditation with an openness to God's presence and God's loving voice speaking to you where you are.

In June and July, we focused on examples of involuntary and voluntary displacement—and now we are bringing this series home by turning to passages that will give us insight into what it looks like to find home together in the midst of displacement. Let's pray before we begin.

God of hope and promise, thank you that you can always be found, even when we are lost and displaced. May we find you and be found by you this morning, in this space and through your words to us. Amen.

How many of you tuned into the Opening Ceremonies of the Olympics a couple weeks ago? They took place in the heart of Paris, and instead of the traditional parade of nations where all of the athletes march into a stadium bearing the flags of their respective countries, this year the athletes sailed down the Seine in a long flotilla of river boats, waving national flags from the decks. The very first boat carried the athletes from Greece, in recognition of the Olympics' origin in ancient Greece. But the second boat was a surprise to me. It carried athletes who are not citizens of any country and were gathered together under a flag that displayed nothing but the Olympic rings. This was the IOC Refugee Olympic Team: 37 athletes who had to leave their home countries and find sanctuary in foreign nations. They represent the more than 120 million displaced people around the world: who, like them, have lost their national

identity and are trying to find home and belonging in places that are unfamiliar and not always welcoming. Their participation on the Olympic team is meant to be “not only a testament to their resilience and excellence but also a powerful message of hope, belonging, and inclusion.”¹

As I read more about this team and listened to interviews of some of its members, I sensed a common theme of in-betweenness shared by the athletes, of struggling to define their identity and where they belong, and of choosing to identify with an in-between family that spans national borders and ethnicities and shares the lived experience of journey and displacement. This sense of in-betweenness is common to the millions of people around the world who have had to leave the places where they feel at home, including many here in our own nation. A Vietnamese-American immigrant describes his in-betweenness this way:

To be betwixt and between is to be neither here nor there, to be neither this thing nor that thing completely. It is to dwell at the periphery or at the boundaries. Politically, it means not residing at the centers of power, but rather occupying the precarious and narrow margins, and being denied the opportunity to wield power in matters of public interest and self-determination... Psychologically and spiritually, the person does not possess a well-defined and secure self-identity and is often marked with...an inordinate desire for belonging. An American Vietnamese will never be American enough; on the other hand, a Vietnamese American is no longer regarded by his or her compatriots in Vietnam as authentically Vietnamese.²

Adding to this betwixt-and-betweenness is an intense longing for home, coupled with an inability to define what home is. Most asylum seekers have no safe home to return to, and many face hostility and suspicion in the countries they turn to for refuge. Taunts of “go back home” are especially cruel when home no longer exists. At the end of her poem titled “Home”, British-Somali poet Warsan Shire writes this:

i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun

¹ <https://olympics.com/en/olympic-refuge-foundation/refugee-team>

² Peter C. Phan, “The Dragon and the Eagle,” in *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans*, p.165.

and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home tells you to
leave what you could not behind,
even it was human.

no one leaves home until home
is a damp voice in your ear saying
leave, run now, I don't know what
i've become.³

There are many parts of the Bible that were written from the context of displacement and exile, by in-between people who ached for home, and these texts speak profoundly to the lived experience of Christian immigrants and refugees. One of the most powerful of these texts is Jeremiah's letter to a community of exiles recorded in chapter 29 of the book named after him, and as we dive into it, I hope that you will not only understand why it speaks powerfully to immigrants and asylum seekers, but will also help see how we are called today, as a community of Jesus-followers, to live into these verses.

Last Sunday, Pastor Meg preached about the ancient nation of Israel, and how they spent 40 years wandering about in the desert after God delivered them from Egyptian slavery. They were homeless during this time, but not adrift: God traveled with them in their displacement, filling the tabernacle/tent in their midst with divine presence. Once the nation of Israel became a powerful kingdom, though, with a land to call their own, King Solomon built a glorious temple in Jerusalem for God to dwell in, and it became the center of Israelite identity. They believed that it had become the permanent dwelling place of God. It was where you went to worship God, and God was committed to protecting and defending it, shielding God's city from danger and keeping God's people safe in the midst of military aggression. And for centuries, God did miraculously protect Jerusalem from external nations that crushed the kingdoms around them, and its people ignored prophetic warnings about the disastrous consequences of turning away from God and failing to pursue righteousness and justice. Then finally, the unthinkable happened: the mighty King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon swept in, besieged Jerusalem, breached its walls, destroyed the temple and the city, and exiled a sizable portion of its population to the land of their conquerors.

³³ <https://www.januarytwenty.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Home-Poem-by-Warsan-Shire.pdf>

This was an enormous crisis of faith for God's people. The exiles were deeply traumatized, and they were spatially, emotionally, and spiritually homeless, just like many refugees and immigrants are today. They were surrounded by foreign gods, a foreign language, and a foreign culture. They wondered if their God had been defeated by Babylon's gods, whether God could really be trusted to keep promises, and whether they'd ever be able to find God again. Like today's migrants, they were sometimes taunted and mocked. They weren't even sure who they were any more, or if they'd ever be able to reclaim their identity: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept," they lamented in Psalm 137. "How can we sing the songs of the LORD in a foreign land?"

Well, there were prophets among them who came up with answers. They told the Israelites that God was still for them, and would support them if they rebelled against their oppressors and retook Israel for God. They encouraged hopeful fantasies, dreams of going back to how things used to be, when Jerusalem was the joy of the whole earth and its citizens were comfortably secure.

This is the context in which the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exilic community, the letter we read this morning. And the good news in the letter is that Jeremiah did promise the exiles hope and a future – he assured them that God still had good plans for them. But – here's the kicker – those good plans were going to happen to them in the midst of the strange and foreign land where God has carried them into exile – they were going to remain in displacement. Ignore the false prophets and diviners among you, Jeremiah wrote – don't listen to the dreams they encourage you to indulge in. They are prophesying lies in God's name, and God didn't send them. Here are the instructions that God did send to this exiled, traumatized community, instructions that had to be simultaneously heart-wrenching and hope-giving: "Let go of your dreams. You won't see Israel again. You're in Babylon for the long haul, so put down roots and make home. Invest in your lives and your futures here. Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Go ahead and marry, have children, encourage your children to marry and then cuddle your grandchildren, born in Babylon."

But that's not all – God called the Israelites to not only focus on their own well-being, but to seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which God carried them into exile, and to pray for the flourishing of the very nation who invaded and burned their homes, who slaughtered their friends and family, who uprooted and displaced them, who destroyed God's dwelling place – because if this city you've been exiled to prospers, God said, you too will prosper. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., God's displaced people were bound up in an inescapable network of mutuality with their Babylonian hosts and oppressors. Their flourishing was intertwined. God's instructions to pray for the well-being of enemies are not only found in the New Testament.

But here's the best news of all for the exiles: they hadn't lost God. God was never confined to or by the temple. Just like God traveled with the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai in the tabernacle, God was with them now in the wilderness of Babylon: "You will seek me and find me," God promised, "when you seek me with all your heart." The exiles could learn to sing God's song in a foreign and "godless" land, because God is found in displacement. And then, finally, Jeremiah gave hope that this exile was not the end of their story. Like Moses, the exiles receiving the letter wouldn't live to return to the promised land, but they could hold on to the promise that a day would come when God would gather God's scattered and banished people, free them from captivity, and bring them back home again.

Throughout Jeremiah's letter, God called the exiles to embrace their in-between displacement in a both/and kind of way – to flourish in exile, becoming homeless homemakers who put down roots in Babylon even as they looked forward in hope to the home they wouldn't get to return to this side of eternity. They were called to find belonging in their sojourn and to actively seek the flourishing of the pagan city where they were planted, even as they sought the God of Israel with their whole hearts. They were stuck in an in-between time and space – between God's past judgment and God's coming salvation; between the old covenant which they failed and the new covenant of grace that was on the horizon; between banishment and homecoming – but it was precisely in the tension of this in-between space that they were invited to find God, to find home, to flourish, and to live out their faithfulness to God and God's promises.

Can you see why this passage speaks powerfully and hopefully to the hearts of displaced people all over the world, who hear God's call and promise to them in a place and situation they did not choose? But I believe that this message also speaks powerfully to us as the church, the called-out community who have been led by Jesus, our displaced God, into an in-between existence: between the broken world we were born into and Jesus' upside-down kingdom of perfect justice and peace; between what we can see and touch and what we believe in faith; between what is temporary and what will last forever; between the now and the not yet; between a world that is organized according to national and ethnic and gender and socioeconomic and political boundaries and loyalties and a world in which we are all one in Christ Jesus. It is in the tension of this in-between place that we are called to live fully and to flourish and to follow Jesus. We are invited to find home in our sojourn, even as our hearts ache for the homeland we were created for, which we occasionally glimpse from a distance but won't be gathered to until we cross that river into eternity.

You can see this vision in the New Testament and early church writings. 1 Peter is addressed to "God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces" of the ancient world, and in that letter, he encourages Christians to "live out your time in exile in reverent fear" (1:17), and to live holy lives as "foreigners and exiles" so that people may see God through them (2:11). In the Hebrews 11 passage with which we started this series, the ancient heroes of faith are commended as examples because they admitted they were "foreigners and strangers [or exiles] on earth", welcoming God's promise from a distance and longing for the future home God was preparing for them (11:13-16). And the Epistle to Diognetus, a non-Biblical letter written by an unknown Greek author about 100 years after the church began, has this to say about the both/and, inbetweenness of the early Christians:

They live in their own countries, as if they were only passing through; they play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country... To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all the cities of the world, but cannot be identified with the world.⁴

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010522_diogneto_en.html

What does it mean to live and flourish in this space of in-between, both/and tension, right now, in our very concrete spaces and neighborhoods and communities? Christians have been criticized as being “so heavenly minded they’re no earthly good,” content to let the world around us burn while we keep our eyes on our eternal home. But that’s not what Jeremiah or the early Christian writers call us to. Jesus-followers are not meant to form a closed enclave that turns inward and shuts itself off from the world around it, but a community of belonging that actively seeks the peace and prosperity of the cities and neighborhoods in which we are planted, because our well-being is intertwined with our neighbor’s – we are caught up in the inescapable network of mutuality Dr. King spoke of. We must respond to injustice and involve ourselves in the political issues affecting our neighbors and the earth we live in.

But here’s the particular practice I want to call us to right now, as God’s in-between, both/and people, fellow sojourners brought together in this space – it’s the practice of hospitality & welcome. It starts with hearing and accepting the divine invitation to home, to welcome, and putting down our own roots and finding belonging as members of one family, the beautifully diverse *kin-dom* of God that extends well beyond the walls of this building. And then, we work to ensure that our community is a place of safety and inclusion for all who long for a place to belong – we adopt the “Big Tent Mentality” Pastor Meg preached about last week. This means making a particular effort to extend welcome and hospitality and safety to in-between people who are often excluded or marginalized, including refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers – not just because that’s what Jesus did, but because we need the wisdom and perspective of those who regularly navigate life in in-between spaces.

True hospitality is more than simply greeting somebody warmly; it means letting go of some of the power we hold as hosts to give those we welcome the freedom to be themselves, and being willing to shift and evolve and be displaced as a result. Hospitality means that we invite outsiders to actively join us in making home here so that this becomes a place where everybody belongs. We can show hospitality by listening to the stories of others, inviting their input, making space, discovering and meeting their needs, advocating for them, and receiving from them. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if, like the Refugee Olympic Team, our community embodied “a powerful message of hope, belonging, and inclusion”? May we become known as a refuge of safety and transformation, where fellow sojourners can rest together and encounter the God who invites us all to seek and find and follow and come home.

I want to close with Jeremiah's powerful, timeless message of hope from his letter to the exiles – a promise written specifically to people who were stuck in a place of pain and trauma that they didn't choose. If that is where you find yourself right now, may you hear these words spoken to you, and may you know that God is found with you in your exile, in the midst of your displacement and suffering, and that God is for you – God's goodness and mercy are following you and will find you. Your story isn't over yet. Receive these words (Jeremiah 29:11): “For I know the plans I have I have for you,” declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” Amen.