

Looking Forward – Part 1
What is our purpose?
Psalm 40:1-10, Jeremiah 29:1-14 NLT

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A Letter to the Exiles

29 Jeremiah wrote a letter from Jerusalem to the elders, priests, prophets, and all the people who had been exiled to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. ² This was after King Jehoiachin,^[a] the queen mother, the court officials, the other officials of Judah, and all the craftsmen and artisans had been deported from Jerusalem. ³ He sent the letter with Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah when they went to Babylon as King Zedekiah's ambassadors to Nebuchadnezzar. This is what Jeremiah's letter said:

⁴ This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: ⁵ "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. ⁶ Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away!" ⁷ And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare."

⁸ This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let your prophets and fortune-tellers who are with you in the land of Babylon trick you. Do not listen to their dreams, ⁹ because they are telling you lies in my name. I have not sent them," says the LORD.

¹⁰ This is what the LORD says: "You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² In those days when you pray, I will listen. ¹³ If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," says the LORD. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land." PRAY

INTRODUCTION

Last week when we considered Ezekiel's vision of dry bones, we recalled that the occasion for that vision was the judgement of God on Israel. After repeatedly defying warnings via the prophets, to return to worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God allowed the Babylonian armies to attack, lay waste the city of Jerusalem, destroy the Temple, and carry off many of the Israelites into captivity in Babylon.

Jeremiah was a contemporary of Ezekiel's during this same time period. What is striking about this letter to the Israelites in captivity is that twice, Jeremiah reminds them that their captivity is God's doing—God's judgement as a result their previous infidelity to God by worshipping other gods and ignoring the prophet's warnings (v.4,7).

READ SCRIPTURE

Exile. Hard to imagine being far from home and all that is familiar, in a foreign land and culture, surrounded by strange customs, language, food, religious practices, etc. Everything is different. No longer at home, they are strangers in a strange land.

Have you ever felt like that? An experience of exile can happen even to us. Not a literal exile, but an "interior" exile -- when change occurs, we often no longer feel at home. We have to cope with change—and the feelings that come with it, which may include a sense of disorientation, uneasiness, dislocation. A job change. Relocating. Moving. Divorce or death of a spouse. Retirement.

A fellow named John was seated at a table with men that he did not know at a community prayer breakfast. The man sitting next to John, who appeared to be in his early fifties, brought up the subject of retirement. He was quite excited about it and relayed a recent conversation he'd had with his wife about it. She asked him what he was going to do all day. He replied that he was going sit on the couch and watch TV all day.

The others at the table were silent, but John couldn't keep quiet. "If you do that, you'll be dead in a year."

"Why in the world do you say that?" he asked.

John replied: "If the lack of purpose in your life doesn't kill you first, your wife will take care of that!" (John Beukema)

Having a sense of clearly defined, meaningful purpose for being in this world is important to individuals, and to a nation. It was critical if the Israelites were going to survive the exile, and it is important for us as well.

Their captivity is complicated by the fact that there are false prophets (v.8)—liars—who are misleading them—offering false hope by telling them what they want to hear: That their captivity will be over sooner rather than later! By so doing, it indulged the self-pity of the people who could then justify their lazy, indifferent attitude, and irresponsible behavior.

In fact, Jeremiah's letter sets the record straight. Pay no attention to these liars! They are not to be believed! Instead, hear what the *LORD* says!

First: Bloom where you're planted!

⁵ "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. ⁶ Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away!"

Jeremiah says, you're going to be here for awhile, seventy years, an entire generation, so get used to it. While not your first choice, you are here, so make this your home. Enter into the rhythm of the seasons, as you get busy providing food for yourselves.

Furthermore, God instructs them to marry and procreate! In other words, they are not to remain aloof from others in this strange culture, but make them apart of their families. Welcome them. Embrace them. What you have in common is more significant than what separates you. Your task as people of faith is to cultivate not only the soil, but cultivate relationships with these strangers, to the end that they become family!

Second: Pray for the welfare of the city, for in it's welfare you will find your own.

⁷ And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare."

The Hebrew word "shalom" is generally translated "peace", however it means considerably more. Here it is variously translated as "peace", "prosperity", "welfare". It means "wholeness"; "the dynamic, vibrating health of a society that pulses with divinely directed purpose and surges with life-transforming love." (p. 152 E. Peterson)

Shalom cannot happen without personal involvement and God's involvement! These are two essential ingredients for shalom! Seek the of the city, and pray for it. "Throw yourselves into the places in which you find yourself, but not on its terms, on God's terms. *Pray*. Search for that center in which God's will is being worked out--which is what we do when we pray—and work from that center!" (p. 152 EP)

Again in verses 12 and 13 the people are instructed to PRAY, with the promise that God will Listen! Would that encourage you to pray more often and more specifically, more boldly—if you were assured that God is listening??

Once when our younger son was about 6 years old, I was a busy, multi-tasking mom, sitting at the computer while Adam was trying to get my attention. He was talking to me, and I was responding verbally, but I was totally preoccupied and he knew it. I was never so humbled, as when he gently put both of his hands on each of my cheeks and turned my face to his. We were then, eyeball to eyeball. "M-o-m, listen!" Needless to say, he got my undivided attention!

Friends, God is NOT like a multitasking mom (or dad)! God gives us his undivided attention! May we be so bold as to pray as if God is listening, and as if God will respond, because God promises in V. 13 that if we seek God whole heartedly, God will be found, which is another way of saying that God will respond! God will show up!

The point? God is no less God, in Babylon as in Jerusalem, as in Enumclaw.

The people of faith are the people of faith, no less in Babylon, as in Jerusalem, as in Enumclaw.

God is calling us to live into our calling as God's disciples, right where we are.

Furthermore, God says he's got plans for the Israelites, plans for good; for a future and a hope! (v.11) This is one of the most quoted verses of the Bible, but often it is taken out of the context of the exile. Also there is something lost in the translation from the Hebrew to the English, because the idea of God having plans for them (and us) implies that God is thinking about the Israelites. God is thinking about those in exile. God has them on his mind then, just as God has us on his mind today!

The Israelites were going to be in Babylon for 70 years. Calvary has been here on the Plateau for 125 years. That is a long time. It could be easy to grow complacent. To just "get along", keep on keeping on, doing things the way we've always done them.

But Jeremiah tells the people of Israel—and us—*don't just survive, THRIVE!*

Live hopefully! Live as if we have a purpose!

Hope is often in short supply, isn't it? Did you know that "human beings can live about forty days without food, about four or five days without water, and about four minutes without air. But we cannot live for sixty seconds without hope!" (Andy Crouch, "The Gospel of Steve Jobs," Christianity Today (1-21-11))

God says through Jeremiah:

Live the life of faith, to the fullest! Don't hold back, pull out all the stops!

In my estimation, the church today is in an exile of sorts, within our culture. The church—and I'm speaking generically now—used to be the actual center of the community (right on the village green). Not only was it the spiritual center of the community, it was a major influence on morality and values. For many years, participation in church was the norm. It was the *expected* and *accepted* practice. All the community leaders worshiped regularly in local churches.

But there has been a gradual cultural shift which now locates the church on the margins of society. It is not mainstream. Once a majority, those who worship in Christian churches in the United States on Sundays, are now a minority. While it once was the norm, now it is the exception to the rule that people show up in worship on a regular basis.

In this situation, we must ask ourselves:

Will we pine away for the past when the situation was different? When our numbers were greater and the Sunday school was bulging? Will we complain about how hard it is to be in a culture that is often hostile to Christianity, and feel sorry for ourselves?

OR

Will we focus our energies on how we can live faithfully and fully here and now, where God has “planted” us? Will we pray boldly and expect God to show up? Will we risk building relationships with strangers and those who are presently unknown to us?

The key to the future—the key to Israel’s future then, and the key to Calvary’s future now—is PRAYER!

We must pray!

“And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”(v. 7)

The future welfare and prosperity of CPC is dependent upon our prayers for and engagement in providing for the welfare and “shalom” of Enumclaw!

The largest Christian congregation in the world, is in Seoul, South Korea. It began with five members in 1958 and now has well over 200,000 members has spawned multiple congregations and has sent missionaries to 67 countries! The church has daily prayer meetings at 4:30 a.m. (where people stay and pray for one or two hours!) and an evening prayer meeting every Friday. The focus of the church? Preaching Jesus Christ, emphasizing tithing, and serving others.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2012/08/10/august-10-2012-worlds-biggest-congregation/10162/>

The founding pastor of Yoida Full Gospel Church, Rev. David Cho, when asked the secret to his success, replied simply: “I pray, and I obey.”

Friends: I dare you (and myself) to do the same!

PRAY

God of Faith, Hope and Love:

May we dare to live as if we truly believe that

Not only are you listening, but that you are going to show up!

Help us to pray, to risk being a part of the shalom that is so desperately needed here in the CPC family, and in Enumclaw. We deeply desire to be

A part of the "the dynamic, vibrating health (of a society) that pulses with divinely directed purpose and surges with life-transforming love."

May it be so! In Jesus' name, Amen