

The Plans I Have For You
Psalm 137:1-8, Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14
First Presbyterian Church
June 27, 2021

Introduction to the First Reading

Our first scripture reading comes from the Psalms. Psalm 137 is a “Song of Lament.” As we have learned these past three weeks, the people of God were in Exile – Israel had been conquered, the capital of Jerusalem had been destroyed, and most of the people had been deported to Babylon. In these words, you can hear their anger and their pain.

Psalm 137:1-8

By the rivers of Babylon—
 there we sat down and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
 we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
 asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
 “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the Lord’s song
 in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
 let my right-hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
 if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
 above my highest joy.
Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
 the day of Jerusalem’s fall,
how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down!
 Down to its foundations!”
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
 Happy shall they be who pay you back
 what you have done to us!

Introduction to the second reading:

Our second scripture reading comes from the Prophet Jeremiah. Again, Jeremiah had been warning the leaders of Judah about the impending destruction of their country... but they wouldn’t listen. Now the country had been conquered, the city destroyed, and the people sent into exile. Our passage this morning describes a letter Jeremiah sent to the people in Exile with a word from the Lord about how to understand their situation, and how to live through it. It is an extraordinary word of comfort, challenge, and hope. Listen again for the Word of God:

Jeremiah 29:1-14¹

These 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.

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

⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD. ¹⁰For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Sermon

Deep within our biblical and theological tradition there is a unique word about the relationship between God's people and the PLACES where they live.² This word originates in a story that we are coming to know well as we spend time with the prophet Jeremiah. It's the sixth century BCE. Jerusalem has been leveled by the vile King Nebuchadnezzar... and its people, its leading citizens, are carried back to Babylon to live in exile. Actually, there were a total of three deportations over a period of almost 20 years which left much of Israel far away from the land that God had given to her ancestors.

Surely you heard the anguish and rage in this morning's Psalm reading: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us." Those are the words of a severely traumatized people... a people who have lost everything: their loved ones, their beloved city and temple, their language and culture and religion everything that was familiar and comfortable and made life worth living.

Jeremiah, himself, was not deported – he remained in Jerusalem... as did another prophet named Hananiah. Hananiah had gotten everyone's hopes up by promising that the exile would be over in just two short years.

¹ I found very helpful background and commentary on this text in articles by Stan Mast and Doug Bratt on the website of the Center for Excellence in Preach from Calvin Theological Seminary. Their insights inform this sermon.

² Rev. John Buchanan, "Jesus Comes Through the Line," a sermon preached to Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL. October 14, 2007.

Babylon would fall, he said... the people would come home, and Jerusalem could start rebuilding. And his message was “Don’t give in to the Babylonians... live apart... isolate yourselves... have as little to do with this place and its people as possible... for they are not part of God’s will for you.

Well, as it turned out, Hananiah was listening not to God, but to himself – and it fell to Jeremiah to set the record straight. Jeremiah agreed that Israel would return to the land – eventually. But not for a very long time... not for 70 years. So, if that was true, the obvious question was “What do we do? Since God has put us here (and Jeremiah was crystal clear about that – GOD had put his people there!) ... since God has put us here for the next 70 years... how then shall we live? How do we carry on? How do we live as God’s people in this foreign land... this alien culture... this strange city?

Jeremiah answered this question in a letter addressed to the exiles early on... soon after the first deportation. He wrote them a letter in which he spoke the word of the Lord to them. And this what he said:

Build houses and live in them;
Plant gardens and eat what they produce;
Take wives and husbands, have children.

That is to say, settle in... put down roots... be part of the community. And then he offers this surprising mandate:

Seek the welfare of the city,
pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

So, contrary to Hananiah’s false prophecy, God doesn’t want Israel to hunker down in a Jewish ghetto... or to revolt against her captors. God doesn’t even want her to camouflage her religious practice so she can blend in. Remember, God says, I put you there... exile is my will for you right now. But don’t think for a moment that I am done with you, because I am still the God of Israel... I am still your God! You are exiled, you feel lost, you are suffering, yes. But you are not forgotten. So, take the long view... make Babylon your home away from home... bloom where I have planted you. You’re gonna need shelter so build houses. You’re gonna need to eat so plant gardens. And you’re gonna need to so marry and have children and make sure your children marry and have children (be fruitful and multiply like you did back in Egypt) because the day will come when I bring you back to the Land and to myself.

Settle down... settle in. “Seek the peace and prosperity of this place to which I have carried you into exile. Because if it prospers,” Jeremiah adds, “you too will prosper.” It’s an extraordinary message of both blessing and of challenge. The key, he tells them, is not WHERE you live, but HOW you live. Settle in, but don’t settle for the way things are around you. Live, he says, as God’s people... which means to seek shalom (that’s the word here) ... seek the peace and prosperity and wholeness and well-being of this place and its people. Even for the ones who are your enemies, seek shalom. Or as Jesus would eventually say: “Love and pray for your enemies.” Not that they may succeed in their goals of harming you, but so that together you may flourish. It is an extraordinary message of challenge.

Few, if any of us, will ever live-in exile, thank God. Few of us will face anything close to what these people faced... or what any of the world’s 82 million displaced persons face.³

³ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

But there are challenges enough for all of us.⁴ Challenges about what it means to be faithful when the world seems to turn upside down. Challenges about believing God is with us, when it seems like God is nowhere to be found. Challenges in times of loss, or when we are living in a new time, or a new place, and nothing seems familiar. Those times when our very identity is shaken... when our faith is shaken. Don't lose hope, the Lord tells us. Don't look for easy answers, they will always disappoint you. But look for my presence. Because even here, even now, in whatever trial you face or trauma you experience, even there, I am with you. And wherever I am, you are home. Jeremiah put it this way (in a verse that has become a "go to" for many: "I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord: "plans for good, and not harm, to give you a future filled with hope.")

Charge

In one of his poems, Wendell Berry writes:

So, friends, every day do something
that will not compute.

Love the Lord.

Love the world...

Love someone who does not deserve it.

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.

Laughter is immeasurable.

Be joyful - even though you know the facts....

Practice resurrection.

⁴ From a sermon by my friend, Rev. Karen Chakoian, preached to First Presbyterian Church, Granville, OH., July 29, 2018.