

A bridge from last week's reading to today's as prepared by my colleague Teri Peterson and edited by me. Last week we heard from the first prophet Isaiah, who spoke to the southern kingdom of Israel after the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrian Empire. For about a hundred years, the southern kingdom of Judah alternated between anxiety that something similar would happen to them, and hope for a restored united kingdom. Ultimately the northern kingdom was consigned to history as the "ten lost tribes" of Israel. The rise of the Babylonian empire brought new threats to Judah, and God called the prophet Jeremiah, when he was still a young person, to speak out about how the unfaithfulness of the leaders and people meant they were vulnerable. Jeremiah was unpopular as he criticized the moral, religious, and political compromises that were being made, and he was often imprisoned or threatened. About 30 years into his turbulent career as a prophet, in the year 597 BCE, the Babylonian empire won the first round and took many of the ruling class, merchants, and artisans into exile. One of the royal court prophets claimed it would last only two years, but Jeremiah knew he was just saying what people wanted to hear, not what was true. Today we read the letter Jeremiah sent from his home in a changed Jerusalem to those who had been taken to Babylon in this first round of exile, which can be found in chapter 29. I am reading from the Common English Bible. You can read along on your sermon manuscripts or at Biblegateway.com or in your favorite translation. I invite you to listen for the word of God to you.

29 The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the few surviving elders among the exiles, to the priests and the prophets, and to all the people Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon from Jerusalem.

4 The God of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. 7 Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to God for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

8 The God of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims: Don't let the prophets and diviners in your midst mislead you. Don't pay attention to your dreams. 9 They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I didn't send them, declares God.

10 God proclaims: When Babylon's seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. 11 I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares God; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. 12 When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. 13 When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. 14 I will be present for you, declares God, and I will end your captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have scattered you, and I will bring you home after your long exile, declares God.

(Common English Bible)

(Sung) Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.

A long way from home, a long way from home.

There are people all over the world, all over our country, all over our city right now who are singing this song. Singing it with sighs as they look around at a world they don't recognize. Singing it through tears as they meditate on all that has been lost. Singing it with short tempers exploding from awareness of great injustice. Some people are singing it because they are literally a long way from home— displaced by war or other violence or poverty. Think of immigrant families separated by choice or force. Think of all the people waiting in Mexico for a chance to enter the United States. But even people who are comfortably settled into homes, with family nearby, can feel displaced and disillusioned and far from home. Our neighborhoods are not what they used to be. Our city is not what it used to be. Our church is not what it used to be. *A long way from home, a long way from home.*

Our scripture reading today is a letter to exiles, written early in the days of exile, written at a moment when prophets disagreed about just what to expect of this exile experience. Some taught that it would be short lived, that God would bring the exiles back to Jerusalem quickly and conquer Babylon once and for all. But the prophet Jeremiah has quite a different interpretation. He tells the exiles, that being the leaders of the Judean people who were carried far far away in the midst of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, he tells them that the exile will last 70 years and offers them guidance for how to endure it. He suggests that they should settle in, create homes, cultivate gardens and eat what they produce, marry, birth children, and seek the good of the city in which they find themselves. Though they are "a long way from home," they are invited to create home and live peaceably with their neighbors, even their enemy neighbors.

In the midst of grief and anger, displacement and disillusionment, it is easy to resist, to complain, to push away... it's like the person forced to move against their will who never unpacks any boxes or invests in any furniture, so focused on what was left behind or preparing for what will come ahead that they never experience where they are. This is an extreme example, but many of us do something like this, at least emotionally. Perhaps you

did something like this in the midst the pandemic, pushing hard against the constraints of the time, never at peace with it, living as though a giant pause button had been pressed.

Jeremiah suggests that after several generations have passed God's people will be restored to Jerusalem; God will bring the exiles home. But in the meantime... in the lifetimes of the elders who were dragged from home... God wills them to live faithfully in this strange land, to be where they are, to create home, to be a light in the city in which they find themselves. Probably most of those who were taken into exile will not live to see the day of restoration, but this does not mean they are constrained to live out their years in misery and grief. Cultivate gardens and eat from them. Find someone to love and bear children with them. And serve your neighbors. Be where you are.

I heard a young woman this past week talking about the experience of losing her husband, suddenly, a year ago. She spoke honestly about the pain of this experience. She lost so much when she lost him. But she also found a new home and a new community of friends and a deeper joy than she has known in a long time. She has found a way to be where she is and feel all that one could possibly feel while there.

If we are feeling displaced and disillusioned, a long way from home, we can find our feet, be where we are, and seek the good of where we are. Part of being where we are right now means acknowledging the terror and grief of our immigrant neighbors. I invite you to join me in the Blue Christmas liturgy that will take place outside the ICE headquarters on December 1 and also to join me in the sanctuary for a healing time of song, candlelight, and prayer on the first three Wednesdays in December. God has something better for us; God's promises are for settled rest and abundant life at home. But we can only get to that promised land by living faithfully where we are today, by moving towards the light, and improving our immediate circumstances and surroundings by seeking the good of our neighbors and our city. We are not motherless children and we can find our way home even while we are still a long way off. Let's be here now, trusting in what God will yet do.