

“Urban Hope in Exile”
Jeremiah 29:1-14
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When life as you know it is taken away from you, the first instinct is to want it all back as soon as you can get it. Certainly this must have been true of the Israelites at the beginning of the exile. They wanted the land back. They wanted their temple and their faith back. They wanted the order back. They wanted their dreams back. It’s the dreams that are especially hard to let go of.

Dreams are what we’re taught to follow from an early age. Carpe Diem! Follow your dreams! The sky’s the limit! We feed this to our children in bite-sized pieces that grow with our appetites, because dreams are what nourish our futures. I shudder to think what our nation would be like without Dreamers who stood on mountain tops and to proclaim the promised lands they saw in our future. And we don’t have to wonder what the death of dreams looks after seeing it expressed by some of our children right here in Baltimore.

The church is especially good at nurturing those kinds of dreams, at preaching hope in the face of cynical resignation, which is probably why there were so many prophets during Jeremiah’s time opposing his bleak forecast. Jeremiah told the people to get ready for 70 years of exile. Most of the other prophets refused to accept that timeline.

Church folk want to preach good news. Fear not! Hannaniah the prophet preached, the exile will last only 2 years.¹ “Don’t listen to Jeremiah,” the priest Shemaiah told the exiles. God won’t let the exile last that long.² Hannaniah the false prophet falls down dead, and Shemaiah the priest is stripped of his office, but still, we prefer false prophets preaching hope to downer prophets telling the truth. We prefer Hannaniah’s promised 2 year exile to the 70 years Jeremiah proclaimed. We prefer news of the end of our exile even when it’s not true. We’re afraid to accept the realities of where we find ourselves. It feels too much like giving in. When life as you know it is taken away from you, you want it all back as soon as you can get it.

But almost 70 years into the decline of our city, and the corresponding membership decline of our congregation – from more than 1000 in the postwar years to just around 300 today, Jeremiah’s truth telling is hard to deny. Exile can’t be dismissed with casual words of hope. And the church does no one favors by leading them to believe otherwise.

There’s a time to dream and there’s a time to face life as you find it. The life that you’re actually living instead of the one you’ve been chasing after. It’s the lesson most of us do not teach; the one we’d rather not learn. You can run from your alcoholic parent but you still have to face the dysfunction that clings to your life. You can run from the spouse who mirrors back to you all the things about yourself

¹ Jeremiah 28:2-4.

² Jeremiah 29:24-32.

that you cannot stand but you still have to face your own issues. You can run from the need on the city corners but you have to face the isolation that we choose when we turn away from suffering in the world or in our lives. There's a time to dream and there's a time to accept your own exile and learn how to live there in the place you did not choose.

You cannot run from exile. You cannot move out of it. That place you did not choose where your faith's answers don't address the pain that you feel. That place no one chooses where all the preparation that you put into living life is ripped out from under you by events you did not choose. That place the church in our time did not choose where the faith of old doesn't connect with a culture that has decided it's not going to slow down anytime soon. Exile is the opposite of choice which is what makes it feel so wrong to accept.

The church doesn't know what to do with exile. We're afraid of it. Even though we've got Job in our holy book warning us that some kinds of suffering have no satisfactory theological explanations. Even though we've got Lamentations to teach us that we'd better make space in the church for raw weeping over losses of every kind. Even though we've got Jesus – the perfecter of our faith – hanging on the cross with the words of a Psalm on his lips, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We're afraid of exile. A lot of us prefer to be told “God won't give you more than you can handle.” A lot of us prefer to be told, “just slog on through and things will return to normal.” A lot of us prefer to pretend that our exiles will be shorter than the ones of the past. We prefer Hananiah's prediction of a 2 year exile over Jeremiah's 70 even if it's not true.

The church is afraid to confess the absence of God, the dark night of the soul, a future that might be empty of the hymns that we sing and filled with more unoccupied pews. We are afraid of exile even though the entire Old Testament is organized around this event. Even though the cross is at the center of our Christian faith. We sometimes think lies bring us more comfort than truth. Church folk want to preach good news.

But exile is never without hope. That's the mistake that Jeremiah's prophetic contemporaries made. They only believed hope was something that could be found *outside* of exile. They only believed that hope was something that promised *escape* from their reality. They only believed that hope was something you could experience at the *end* of the place you did not choose, the life you did not want, the situation you did not select. They defined hope as the opposite of exile instead of the very thing that God promises in the midst of it.

It's the mistake we make all the time. I'll only know fulfillment when my circumstances change. I'll only know fulfillment when I get the job, or the spouse, or the church family that fits the dreams I came up with years ago. Our city will only know wholeness when it gets the Mayor, or the business community, or the citizens, or the middle class tax base that is the prerequisite for hope. Our church will only know fulfillment when it gets the budget or the pastor or the elders or the music or the people that I would choose. That's the mistake we make all the time. Fulfillment is always out there – on the far off horizon of my choices – choices that haven't come to fruition and maybe never will.

And into that mistake God tells a stunned people in exile, “Seek the welfare (the shalom) 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.” It’s one of the most shocking decrees in all of Scripture. Work for the healing of the place where I have sent you into exile – work for the wholeness of the place you did not want to go, with people you did not want to be with, in a city you do not recognize as your own. Work for wholeness wherever you are, because that’s the way you will find your own healing. Not by waiting for circumstances to match up with your chosen dreams, not by waiting for a return to life as you had known it, not by giving up on life because it diverged from the way you had planned it. Seek the shalom of the place where you are because I have not left you alone there. You have a healing purpose in that place. You have a mission in that place. You have an assignment in that place.

It’s an offensive assignment to Israelites whose beloved city has just been torn up by Babylonians – work for the wellbeing of the city of your captors. It’s an offensive assignment and yet its truth continues to be born out in this church. The wellbeing of our church is inextricably intertwined with the wellbeing of our city. As the city goes so our church goes. And the future of our city is inextricably intertwined with the wellbeing of all of our neighbors. Bolton Hill’s wellbeing is forever caught up with the wellbeing of Madison Park. Roland Park’s wellbeing is forever caught up with Sandtown’s wellbeing. White people’s healing is forever caught up with people’s of color healing. The healing of Christians is forever caught up with the healing of Jews and Muslims. My healing is forever caught up with your healing and yours in mine.

And maybe that’s the purpose of exile, or at least the purpose that can be squeezed out of it. Whether you experience exile by being whisked away to a place you did not choose or staying put when your dreams are jerked out from under you. Exile teaches us that without neighbors to love, without justice to seek, without suffering to share we have no purpose. Maybe instead of lamenting the decline of church membership here and across this nation, we ought to celebrate the clarity of the church’s mission – to join the Spirit and brothers and sisters across our city in pulling out Jim Crow from the roots, to join the Spirit in BUILDing One Baltimore across our multi-centuries divisions, to join the Spirit in rebuilding relationships one person at a time. Maybe we ought to celebrate exile for the clarity that it brings about the priorities of our lives – in loving one another while we can through the pain of loss, through the death of dreams. Maybe we can do more than endure exile; perhaps we can even celebrate it for making it clear that God’s love that we share, the sharing that we undertake, the courage that we show – these are the only things that are eternal. These are the only things that bring true joy. These are the only things worth giving our lives for.

Because Jeremiah knows that exile sometimes lasts longer than you want it to last. Life doesn’t always go the way you want it to go. And this church is one of the few places that knows from direct experience that hope can still be found there; suffering and hope are never mutually exclusive. The church is one of the few places that knows that contemporary divisions can be healed because Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female have all been brought together before. There are few places that know that you don’t have to wait for the end of exile to find hope, the

hope that God is bringing into our city just as surely as God is bringing it into our lives.

This is one of those places. And none of us constructed that place out of thin air. It was gifted to us by generations of Christians who did their best to respond to the God who speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, the God who teaches city dwellers how to grieve the loss of their communal dreams in order to embrace new ones. The God who shows us what love looks like on a cross, and what justice looks like from an empty tomb. The God who breathes life into us at birth and welcomes us home at death.

None of us constructed this place. We were gifted with it by generations most of us never knew who gave their time, their money, their lives, and their dreams to nurture a hope in a future they would never see.

That gift hasn't ended. You are still giving it. You gave it to the family that buried a spouse and a parent here not too long ago – you gifted them with God's hope in the prayers that were offered, the hospitality given, the Word of hope that radiates from the millions of prayers absorbed through the ages in these stones. You give it to the children here on Sundays who know adults other than their parents who pray for them, and to the teenagers who will gather here tonight in one of the only places in the city where being a queer kid isn't queer. You're giving it to the lapsed Christians who wander in looking for an honest space to entertain the possibility that God is as real and mysterious and present as the ceilings and the choir that soars to meet them. You're giving it to godchildren in El Salvador, and Native Americans in the west and to all of us who have a chance to see with God's sight that red and yellow black and white truly are precious.

You're still giving it with the gifts of your money, your time, your prayers – your life; the same thing that was given to you: hope that doesn't depend on circumstance; hope that doesn't depend on you making all the right choices; hope that doesn't depend on who you are or who you love or where you came from or what color your beautiful skin is; hope that depends on the God of Job, the God of the cross, the God of exile. The God who taught us how to build a house in the middle of exile; who taught us to raise families in the middle of exile; who taught us to love one another in the middle of exile; who taught us to build the beloved community in the middle of exile. Who taught us to seek the welfare – the shalom – of the places where we find ourselves – for there we will find our own.