

“Needful Facts” Rev. Michele Ward Psalm 66; Jeremiah 29:1-7

June 14, 2020 Second Sunday after Pentecost

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore City, MD

Here we are, again. The Israelites are back to wandering through the Near East, this time as prisoners of war in exile. The Babylonian Empire ransacked Jerusalem and took the Israelites with them back to their capitol, Babylon. This was a common practice in ancient empires as it allowed their leaders to exercise control of their newly conquered counterparts. When they lived in Canaan, the land God sent them to after being slaves in Egypt, the Israelites obeyed the law that God gave to them through their leader, Moses. The law gave the Israelites direction, stability, and protection. Not all of their kings or their members of society obeyed the law, but everyone was accountable for their actions. In Babylon, everything they knew about the law and how God formed them in community looked different. They were living in Babylon now, in an empire without all of the same laws and beliefs. Their king was no longer their king. The priests had no temple. In days of chaos and uncertainty, God speaks to the Israelites in exile through one of the prophets, Jeremiah. Known as the ‘weeping prophet,’ Jeremiah’s prophecies tend toward the somber and the unsettling. But this one is different.

The author of Jeremiah makes the point that this prophecy is for everyone--it is for the elders, the priests, the prophets, the king, and every last Israelite in Babylon. This is not a ‘selective audience’ prophecy meant for one person, but it is for an entire nation of political refugees. This prophecy being for everyone matters because there isn’t a list of suggestions for a few people--this is a prophecy for the entire nation of Israel to follow.

But Jeremiah opens with a downer. He tells them that *God has sent them there. God has sent them into exile? God did this? God put the Israelites back in a foreign nation?* I imagine this did not go over well for people who found comfort in the stories of God leading them out of slavery in Egypt into freedom in Canaan. But, you see, this is an important distinction to make at the beginning of the prophecy because the Israelites need to know that they are not going anywhere any time soon. God sent them to Babylon. The means of sending them to Babylon were degrading and full of suffering, as they lost everything they knew that was familiar. But this is still the place where God has sent them--and this needs to sink in before they can receive the rest of the message.

They have been optimistically waiting for a prophet to tell them that they were allowed to return to Jerusalem and that it was time for them to go back.

Yet God delivers this message to Jeremiah, who then shares it with the Israelites far away from home: stay in Babylon. Build houses. Live in them. Plant gardens. Get married. Have children. Watch your kids get married. Pray for Babylon. Seek the welfare, or the common good, of Babylon. In the common good of Babylon is your common good.

“Needful Facts” Rev. Michele Ward Psalm 66; Jeremiah 29:1-7

June 14, 2020 Second Sunday after Pentecost

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore City, MD

Their dream of returning to and rebuilding Jerusalem is not to be right now. That dream has unraveled, fallen apart, as they hear Jeremiah’s prophecy and the words sink in. Jeremiah wants them to know this so they will put down roots. He wants them to settle in for the long haul. They are in a city of multiple languages, nationalities, and religions. Mosaic law is not the law of Babylon. Yet God is telling them to stay, flourish, and live fully present to the city and the people where God has sent them.

According to political philosopher Melissa Dow, : “We, too, should root ourselves where God has placed us and establish a life that leads to a flourishing community in the future as well as the present. We, too, should learn to see the common good which unites us to the other members of our communities as we work to make that good manifest for all around us.”¹

Ah yes, these are nice ideas, but what do they look like in real life? What does it mean to see the common good in America, in Baltimore City? In days of unrest and uprising all over this country and all over the world, where is the common good now?

Just over the past week, two more black men, Rayshard Brooks of Atlanta² and Derrick Sanderlin of San Jose,³ were shot by police. Rayshard Brooks was asleep in a Wendy’s parking lot in his car. He failed a blood alcohol test, took one of the officers’s tasers, and ran. The officer shot him when it appeared he was turning the taser towards the officer. Rayshard died after undergoing surgery, and protestors lit the Wendy’s on fire. The officer was fired, and the police chief resigned.

Community organizer Derrick Sanderlin was participating in a protest and was trying to protect a teenage girl from being shot in the chest by rubber bullets. He was part of a volunteer team for the last three years with the San Jose Police Department Academy that trained officers in “procedural justice and implicit bias.”⁴ The officer shot him in the groin with rubber bullets and has possibly left him infertile, unable to have children. Derrick also volunteers on

¹ Melissa Dow, “[Politics of Exile—Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7](#),” *Political Theology Network*, October 7, 2019.

² “[Atlanta Police Officer Fired And Wendy’s Set Ablaze After Fatal Shooting Of Rayshard Brooks](#),”

³ Alex Wigglesworth, “[Community organizer Derrick Sanderlin injured by police rubber bullet](#),” *LA Times*, June 6, 2020.

⁴ “Community organizer Derrick Sanderlin injured by police rubber bullet.”

“Needful Facts” Rev. Michele Ward Psalm 66; Jeremiah 29:1-7

June 14, 2020 Second Sunday after Pentecost

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore City, MD

the independent police auditor’s community advisor board for San Jose and tries to build relationships of trust between police officers and the community.

I tell you these two stories, different, yet the same, ones that took place with the span of a weekday on opposite coasts in our country. The common good does not look like shooting Rayshard Brooks as he runs in Atlanta, even though he fails a sobriety test and has a taser. The common good does not look like shooting Derrick Sanderlin in San Jose, with rubber bullets while he attempts to protect a minor from being shot with rubber bullets from 8 feet away.

There is no going back to the ‘way things were.’ There is no talk of ‘when things get back to normal.’ We do not have a normal to return to--a normal that was built on oppression and slavery is not the normal that I want to return to. The day dream is over--it is time to put down our roots and live here. Lauren Wright Pittman, artist and member of A Sanctified Art, tells us: “Maybe when our lives unravel in transition, the loose ends of our dreams ... and the paths untraveled can become the roots that stabilize us in the new place where we find ourselves.⁵ We find ourselves in the same place where we were before, but what is new for some of us is the way we see it. We cannot live under the illusion of the melting pot ideas, the idea ‘I don’t see color,’ the idea “I am not a racist,” the idea “All of us are equal now.”

We are transitioning from the laws that we knew to the ones that Jeremiah is giving us now. Jeremiah is unconcerned about practicing the typical laws. He does not tell them to remember to only eat foods that are clean and not to intermarry with their captors. Jeremiah tells them to live fully present in the confusing, mixed city of Babylon full of foreign languages and multiple cultures. Jeremiah tells them to pray for Babylon, not for their conversion or for their transformation, not so they become just like the Israelites and blend in completely, but for their welfare. Because when the city of Babylon flourishes, so will the people of Israel. The welfare of Babylon is wrapped up with the welfare of the people of God, and there is no way to escape that.

Jeremiah tells them to create a life with depth, to not put anything off because they don’t think they will be in Babylon long enough to make a difference there or to live with meaning.

The people of Israel are to seek the welfare of the city where God has sent them. And God has sent you to your community, too. God is telling you that

⁵ Lauren Wright Pitman, “Jeremiah 29:1-7,” *Unraveled Study Journal*, A Sanctified Art LLC.

“Needful Facts” Rev. Michele Ward Psalm 66; Jeremiah 29:1-7

June 14, 2020 Second Sunday after Pentecost

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore City, MD

you will be there for a season. So put down roots. Keep putting down your roots. Because the more you do the work of living fully, the more prepared you are to seek justice in your community. Melissa Dow also tells us that “Jeremiah’s words teach us how to prepare ourselves for political action” because our country is built “around faction and ideological division.”⁶

Jeremiah’s prophecy to the people of God in Babylon is in direct opposition to the ideals of our capitalist society where the strongest, wealthiest, and whitest tend to win the day. Wherever you are, do not forget that the common good exists⁷. We cannot bring about the political and social change necessary to unite us as a country and as a city unless we dig down deep, put down our roots, and thrive, making room for all kinds of flourishing regardless of how it looks or what it requires of us. These are the needful facts of our times. A needful fact is we all need room to breath and to thrive, no matter who we are.

A Small Needful Fact by Ross Gay⁸

Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department, which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,
he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do, like house
and feed small and necessary creatures,
like being pleasant to touch and smell,
like converting sunlight
into food, like making it easier
for us to breathe.

⁶ Melissa Dow, “Politics of Exile.”

⁷ Melissa Dow, “Politics of Exile.”

⁸ Copyright © 2015 by Ross Gay. Reprinted from *Split This Rock’s* The Quarry: A Social Justice Poetry Database.

“Needful Facts” Rev. Michele Ward Psalm 66; Jeremiah 29:1-7
June 14, 2020 Second Sunday after Pentecost
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore City, MD

Extra Quotes to Ponder:

Melissa Dow: “It is true that, in democratic societies, we are responsible for the rulers whom we choose. But democratic societies are often organized around faction and ideological division. Jeremiah’s letter is a bold admonishment to remember that we are all, together, members of the political community. Wherever we find ourselves, we must not forget that there is such a thing as the common good. We remind ourselves of that common good by putting down roots and by strengthening the ties that bind us to the places and people nearest us. We will only be in a position to bring about responsible political change when we can see that our welfare and the welfare of the whole community are bound up together.”⁹

Leah Thomas, a black environmentalist from California, describes intersectional environmentalism this way: “Intersectional environmentalism is an inclusive version of environmentalism that advocates for both the protection of people and the planet. It identifies the ways in which injustices happening to marginalized communities and the earth are interconnected. It brings injustices done to the most vulnerable communities, and the earth, to the forefront and does not minimize or silence social inequality.”¹⁰

⁹ Melissa Dow, “Politics of Exile.”

¹⁰ Leah Thomas, “[Why Every Environmentalist Should Be Anti-Racist](#),” *Vogue*, June 8, 2020. See also: Hannah Wallace, “[Race and Food are Intertwined. Here's How We Can Do Better](#),” *Civil Eats*, October 20, 2017.