

Nov. 24, 2013
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

“How to Make a Home”

Have you ever tried to convince an older person to move out of their home and into a place that makes more sense? It ain't easy. No matter how sensible it may be in terms of being more suitable to their physical condition, easier to maintain, more conducive to having people around instead of being so depressingly alone all day every day, no matter how sensible it may be, it ain't easy to convince someone to leave their home behind for good.

Why? Because as I said to my bishop when he asked me why in the world would I want to leave this new congregation I had come to start when things were going so well, “I know, Charlie, but home is home.” So, I think I get it. I myself have irrational emotional attachments to places because of what happened there. Home is home. On 9/11, when I learned that the United States had been attacked, my first impulse was to go home. Home is a word that evokes strong emotions.

Today's Scripture is a letter the prophet Jeremiah wrote to people who had been displaced from their home. Quick historical context: Jehoiachin, King of Judah, had refused to pay tribute to his Babylonian overlords. They had come with their armies and carted off the king, the Queen Mother, the chief priests, the government leaders, and all the skilled craftsmen. They had transported them to Babylon and put them to work as cheap labor. *That's* to whom Jeremiah's letter is written.

One last bit of historical context: The Biblical texts suggest that those who suffered this defeat expected the exile to last only a short time. Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah say the exile was punishment for the sins of that particular generation. So these exiles expected their time away from home to last, at most, the length of one generation, or about twenty years.

In other words, they were engaged in magical thinking. When faced with an emotionally tough situation, they dealt with their discomfort by convincing themselves that there would be a quick and easy fix. People do that in times of adversity. It's easier to believe in some quick or easy or used-to-work fix than it is to face reality. I recall reading just a couple years ago an account in *The Sun* of what the steelworkers at Sparrows Point were saying when their plant shut down yet again. They were saying that it was certain that somebody would buy it and re-open it, and they would go back to their jobs. Magical thinking

One more thing before we're ready to hear Jeremiah's letter. A personal question” What similar situations have you had, are you dealing with, or are you anticipating having to deal with in your life? It's a serious question. No, none of us has ever been carted off to exile by the Babylonians. But many of us have experienced displacement. You who shall cart yourselves off to college next fall may experience some homesickness, some emotional displacement to go along with physically being in a different place. Or maybe your emotional displacement results not from a change in physical location but a change inside your home that has left you unsettled.

Now we're ready to hear Jeremiah's letter. It's both realistic and encouraging. Here's my paraphrase: "you who have been displaced, you who have been carted off into exile, I have a word from the LORD for you: Quit your magical thinking. This exile's going to last a full 70 years because it's going to take that long to change the hearts and minds that need changing. And this one's, by the way, on you. You refused to listen. You refused to love justice, do kindness, and walk humbly with your God, so it was I the LORD who sent you into exile.

Now that you're there in that unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and you think unholy place, here's what I want you to do: first, no whining and no feeling sorry for yourselves. Sit up, look around and do what is right. Bloom where you're planted, and make where you are planted bloom. Instead of wishing things were different, embrace what is, and love it into life. *Seek the welfare of your new foreign city.* God is active in it. Surprised? Don't be. Just because you're the chosen people doesn't mean you're the only people God cares about or works amongst.

Now hear this loud and clear: God is claiming the future. Don't listen to the quick fix prophets. Don't listen to the magical thinkers. Don't waste your time in trying to get things back to the way they were. Instead, know this: God is present and active where you are now—even in this dislocation. God is claiming the future. At the right time, when hearts and minds have been mended, you're descendants will be restored to your homeland."

Jeremiah's message is the God is sovereign and reigning, even though it doesn't look like it. That's why we call it faith; that's why we need eyes to see and ears to hear. "To give you a future with hope." Having hope based on faith in a God who is sometimes fully visible and sometimes seemingly hidden makes a difference. Having hope makes a difference. If you're having trouble believing in God's Sovereignty, believing that God is claiming the future, then maybe you can start by just believing in the difference that hope makes over despair.

Your sermon challenge this week—and they are getting harder—is to bring Jeremiah's words of hope to a displaced person, a person experiencing some form of physical, emotional, spiritual, or relational exile. Help them hear God's call to embrace what is, to bloom in it as best one can, to help it to bloom to the best it can be. Fill them with the hope that comes from knowing that God owns the future. And if for whatever reason they cannot now believe in or trust this God, help them start out by just believing in the power of hope so that God can work on mending hearts and minds until the face of Jesus can be fully revealed to them.