

MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Jeremiah 29: 1,4-7; Ephesians 2:12-22

In a land far away and a time long ago, 597 B.C. to be precise, Israel was in exile in the evil empire of Babylon.

It was not the same kind of captivity that Israel had known in Egypt. Not slavery as such. No making or baking of bricks without straw. No Egyptian taskmasters with whips under the fiery sun. But it was captivity nonetheless. What else do you call it when you cannot go home? They managed, and they learned how to live in this strange new land, but it was not where they wanted to be.

We know that exile was not easy for those who had left so much behind, family, friends, possessions, holy places. Psalm 137 tells us of the anguish and sadness they felt,

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."

They had been taken under duress. Uprooted and *disappeared*, as if they were the *desaparecidos* of Argentina, or even like those nameless souls taken from their families in Baghdad in recent years, submitted to extraordinary rendition, and held without representation in a foreign jail or one well known in Cuba. The *disappeared* have been with us always, like the poor, the bargaining chips of the powerful.

In 597 B.C. the power was in the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the Ahmadinejad of the Babylonian Empire. He had taken the cream of Israel's society, its elders and priests and prophets, and herded them into the equivalent of cattle cars and sent them away, to Babylon; their life no longer their own. They lived and worked for the benefit of the oppressor, supporting the economic and political underpinnings of the empire.

Without the worry of world opinion or the negative effects of internet communication that so bedeviled the military leaders in Myanmar recently, Nebuchadnezzar knew the value of allowing at least some communication with the outside world. So mail came at the least *from* Jerusalem *to* Babylon, allowing the exiles to hear what they were missing back home, an ingenious way of pouring salt on the wounds perhaps, and of reminding the exiles that they were indeed exiles.

It was under this permission that there came a letter addressed to the exiles from the prophet Jeremiah. A missive from on high, a word from God's prophet to the ex-pats of Israel.

What might you expect Jeremiah to say? Something, no doubt, like the encouragement of St. Paul wrote much later to the early churches struggling to form and thrive in a hostile Roman Empire in the first century A.D. Jeremiah would surely want to fortify their courage. Strengthen their weakness, bolster their sagging spirits, and admonish them to stay true to the faith.

“Do not be lured by the idols of Babylon,” he might have advised, do not fall prey to the eyes of those enticing women or succumb to the arms of those strong warriors. Keep yourselves pure. Do not eat meat given to idols. Do not worship false gods.”

That would be what you might expect from Jeremiah. But instead, he writes, “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.” In other words, make yourselves at home. Settle in. Things could be worse. Get a life.

On the one hand this might sound like the voice of reason, the wise advice of an accommodating and moderating influence. It might, except for the fact that Israel had wandered the desert for forty years seeking this homeland, longing for the promised land of milk and honey, yearning for an abiding place, a city where the temple might be established on Mt. Zion and all its people worship there, only to have it stolen from them as the Babylonian conquerors descended upon them, overrunning them and taking their brightest and best back to Babylon.

It was insane to counsel moderation in the face of such bitter disappointment, yet for Jeremiah it made sense.

In part, because I think, Jeremiah had the long view in mind. He did not look at the present moment’s disadvantage as the ultimate defeat of God’s purpose. When faced with overwhelming odds, its people taken into exile, and no sign of overthrow or change on the horizon, Jeremiah counseled moderation. “Make the best of the situation. This is not forever. Build houses, plant gardens. Marry and have children. God is working his purpose out, so do not lose faith, and do not stop living.”

Jeremiah points to the heart of the matter, or perhaps better said, to the heart of the believer. He raises the issue of “home” and where it is that we find ourselves to be *at home spiritually*. He suggests that home is not a matter of geographic position but of the heart’s location. In other words, one could be faithful, even in Babylon if Babylon is where you find you are living. And this is advice that should not be lost on us. For in a sense we are exiles too.

We may not be a people who are in overt captivity or exile, but we are a people often surrounded by an alien environment, sometimes hostile to our faith. And I wonder if there is not a parallel in our life today as Christians to the exile experience of Israel living in Babylon so long ago.

A few years ago, I was talking to someone from Dallas on the phone about our church. I think he was a software salesman, who was selling Bible software for my computer. Now Dallas is a city with a lot of big churches and a lot of church people. I remember that after making small talk the man asked me how things were going in New York. And I said, “Great.” He said, “And how’s your congregation.” And I said, “They’re great too.” “And how large is your congregation?” he asked. And I said, around 1100 members. “Really?” said the incredulous voice at the other end of the line, “I didn’t know there were that many Christians in New York City.” At which point I hung up!

I don't know what that says about either the caller or about the reputation of our fair metropolis, but it was news to this man that New York might be a place where Christians could thrive, or gather in any numbers, or even more, live a Christian life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Those of us who live here might have a right to say that it is not easy to be faithful. This is, after all, the capital of capitalism, and this is the city of Madison Avenue which tells us what we need and how soon and how much, whether we need it or not. We are nothing if not materialists in this material city.

Our newspapers have full page ads for the latest in Dolce and Gabbana shirts, Lauren outerwear, Fendi handbags, and Manolo Blahnik shoes. Every week the Style page tells us what we should be wearing and Page Six tells what we are missing. All of this unfolds in our city of contrasts while some people rummage through dumpsters to find slices of half eaten pizza, others order \$60 hamburgers in chic cafes. It is a town of many values not all of which are Christian!

We are to some extent no less exiles from our heavenly citizenship today residing in a land that worships other gods and reveres other values than were those exiles taken by Nebuchadnezzar in the 5th Century B.C. far from Jerusalem and removed from the primary means of their spiritual encouragement.

In a land where violence touches too many lives, and possessions define human worth, and race determines whether justice can be achieved, we must make our peace and find our way.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians gives us a clue as to how we are to live in this tenuous time and this awkward place where *more* is regarded as *not enough*, and *less* is considered *too little*. The writer of the letter to the Ephesians reminds us that we are citizens of the household of God, subjects of the kingdom of heaven.

His is a glorious and expansive vision that affirms the glory and expansiveness of God's sovereignty over all the earth. A hopeful reminder that we hold dual citizenship as God's children, citizens of earth, but also citizens of the commonwealth of God.

If we are ever to live in harmony and in peace on this planet it will not be because we have accepted the world's values, because we hoard and acquire and gain more than everyone else, but because we have learned somehow to live with what we have and to see that it is more than enough.

In spite of the adage that whoever has the most toys in the end wins, it is still the case that no matter how many toys you have in the end, when the end comes, there are no more toys, and what toys we have are useless.

Sometimes the only way to survive in a foreign land (especially when that foreign land is home) is to keep your bearings, to remember whose you are, and where you will return once your exile is over.

This morning we will baptize nine children. It is an amazing thing to do that all in one fell swoop; a glorious affirmation of life, a celebration of the goodness of God's love expressed in the birth of children, a sacrament welcoming the most vulnerable and dependent of us all into the body of Christ.

Today these children become citizens of the kingdom of heaven, quite literally. “Children of the covenant” as John Calvin put it so concisely, the covenant of God’s grace, the covenant of God’s promise that God will be our God and we will be God’s people forever. They will be marked with a watermark invisible to the eye, but indelible to the spirit, and from this day forth they will be God’s as much as ours, which of course they have always been anyway, but from now on even more so.

I think about the kind of world that these children are inheriting from us, a world which at its worst is sorely tested, environmentally out of balance, becoming ever more jingoistic and xenophobic, vying for weapons of mass destruction, scrambling for the earth’s resources – oil and energy and water and medicine.

It’s a hell of a world sometimes. But it is also God’s world in spite of that. And we who are older, and who have been baptized longer, and are more experienced in navigating the dual citizenship of heaven and earth owe it to these little ones to keep working as best we can to help God make the world more like that kingdom to which we all are called, where God is all in all, and all God’s children are one.

That is the task that is ours, a dual citizenship. That while at the same time we build houses and plant gardens, and marry and are given in marriage, we also remember that we are citizens of the household of God, and participants in the commonwealth of heaven.

One foot on earth and one in heaven, belonging for awhile to both. So make yourself at home, build houses, plant gardens, enjoy your life, but do not make yourself so much at home that you forget whose you are and ultimately where you will return.

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