

## **“An Exile Mission”**

November 26, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-14

### **Prayer of Illumination:**

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,  
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,  
lead us to deeper understanding of you,  
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

I once worked with a congregation that was having a hard time sorting out its identity in the changing context of the church. They once had been a bustling suburban church that was known for all the weddings they did. Things had changed, the suburbs had expanded, so now this church was seen more as inner-city. The neighbourhood around them had changed. There was a large concentration of indigenous people. The value of housing had decreased. When I was at meetings with them, the dominant theme was fear. More than once there was discussion about improving the locks on the church doors. A new minister came and tried to change the relationship with the community, the culture of the congregation - but there was resistance and he didn't last very long.

The minister's name was not Jeremiah ... but it might have been.

Today our journey through the prophets has us stopping over in the book of Jeremiah. Prophets have an important role in the Hebrew Narrative - not as predictors of the future, but rather as interpreters of the present and ones who hold up the larger vision in comparison with current reality. Prophets seek to be voices that proclaim hope. Prophets remind people that God has not given up on them.

As we continue to move through the Hebrew narrative, the political and historical situation is changing. King Nebuchadnezzar had begun to send the people off in exile to Babylon. This is the beginning of one of the most important and transformative chapters of the Hebrew story.

They are being sent away from Jerusalem, away from the temple, away from the familiar rituals and symbols of the faith. This is a time of crisis - physical displacement and spiritual separation.

As we join the story, Jeremiah has emerged as a prophet doing his best to offer comfort and assurance - but there is another prophetic voice - Hananiah - who is proclaiming that this political trouble won't last long. Hananiah is encouraging the people to isolate themselves and wait it out - perhaps it will be all over in a couple of years.

Jeremiah offers a different view - as it turns - a more realistic one and that is probably why there is a biblical book named Jeremiah and not one called Hananiah.

Jeremiah is talking about the preparing for 70 years - in other words beyond their lifetimes. He speaks of grandchildren being born in exile. And he says build houses and plant gardens. You could do all that and still live isolated from the new community, the new landscape. But

probably, Jeremiah's most challenging words are to seek the welfare of the city, where you are sent into exile. Pray to God on the city's behalf, for its welfare will be your welfare.

The exile does indeed extend into multi-generations of the people. As I mentioned it is a transformative time and it is a couple of chapters later when Jeremiah speaks of the covenant of God being written on their hearts - not back in Jerusalem, in the temple, in the arc of the covenant. This image offers a portable understanding of faith that sustains and enables the story and identity to continue.

Well, all that was centuries ago. What would Jeremiah say today?

One of the commentators on the podcast that I listen to weekly spoke of how this passage offers an urgent message to the church today. It is not that the church in North America is being uprooted and sent into exile. It is that the church is exiled as the culture pushes beyond the traditional models of church into irrelevance. The church has enjoyed a prosperous time over the past 60-70 years, and so it has been natural to work at preserving that understanding, model and culture - but the culture around us has shifted.

The congregation that I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon - just couldn't seem to find away to catch a vision of what it would mean to seek the welfare of their neighbourhood. And they are not alone.

A new book appeared in our house the other day. It is called The Great Spiritual Migration written by Brian McLaren. I haven't had a chance to read it yet, but the back cover describes the book by saying:

"The Christian story, from Genesis until now, is fundamentally about people on the move - outgrowing old, broken religious systems and embracing new, more redemptive ways of life. It's time to move again."

The exile was one of those moves in faith story. Brian McLaren says that it is time to move from a religion organized for self-preservation and privilege to a religion organizing for the common good of all."

An example of this reality is how many Christian voices in the States are lining up in support of the political leadership of that country. However, I saw this week that over 300 Christians theologians were meeting and issued the "Boston Declaration: A Prophetic Appeal to the Christians of the United States of America" which challenged some of the support of the right wing fundamental and evangelical leaders who have aligned themselves with the Trump presidency.

One of the key organizers of The Boston Declaration, Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey, Associate Dean at Boston University School of Theology, contrasted the Gospel teachings with what is being peddled as Christianity today in some conservative circles, both religious and political. She said:

*We are here because Jesus taught us to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” We are here because we take the parable of the Good Samaritan to heart. We are here because we refuse to allow Christianity to be co-opted by the likes of people who support abuse of women, the closing of our nation to the immigrant in need and the normalizing of lie after lie after lie. “*

I think Jeremiah would have signed the Boston Declaration.

Things may not be so extreme in Canada, but I am anxious to read Brian McLaren’s book because I think he really is inviting us to find a way to sing God’s song - not in a foreign land, but in a new way in a familiar land.

Here at Riverside, our Mission Forward continues to unfold as we reflect on our values and culture as a congregation and now are engaging with various community agencies to listen and to discern the needs of the community and to see if there is a ways that we can find new and renewed ways of serving. One of the things that I have noticed over the past few years, is that when I talk to people about being part of church is that increasingly people don’t know what that mean. There was a time when we assumed that everyone knew what church was - they might not go - but they would know kind of what it is about - but that assumption doesn’t hold anymore.

So how do we seek the welfare of the city? How do we engage and partner with other faith groups, with other helping and caring partners? Part of the response to that is to think deeply about the faith journey and the ways that our faith can be transformed in this time of exile. To discover an exile mission.

Brian McLaren speaks of three migrations that are underway and need to continue. Again this is information off the back cover - I am definitely going to be reading this book!

One is “Spiritually - focusing less on a system of beliefs and more on a way of life rooted in love.” As I ponder the meaning of that one, I think of those who say they are spiritual and not religious. I have taken awhile to sort out what is meant by that statement, but I think one of the things is not so much a rejection of community but rather a rejection of not having the freedom to think.

The second migration is “Theologically - rejecting the image of God as a violent Supreme Being and embracing instead the renewing Spirit at work in our world.” As I have said before, when someone says they are an atheist, I try to engage them in conversation about how they would describe the God they reject and usually I say that I reject that image of God as well.

The third one is Missionally. (A word that captures vision, mission, purpose) and McLaren is suggesting “identifying less with organized religion and more with an organizing religion of Jesus followers dedicated to healing the planet, building peace and working for the common good of all.”

Those three migration are not new in one sense, they have been involving in our understanding of faith and life, but I just found this put so succinctly that I want to read more

Today, the liturgical calendar tells us that it is Reign of Christ Sunday. Often the images and resources for this Sunday proclaim a triumphant message of how Christ will reign in the world. It is not my favourite Sunday of the year - I am not sure that Jesus would be content with all the theology proclaimed in his name. If we speak of the reign of Christ being about serving and loving neighbour than I find it compelling.

The Spirit of God is at work in our world, and we are a people on the move. As we move from broken and tired systems and ideas towards something new, may we remember that we are the body of Christ and so with great gratitude and humility recognize that Christ has no body now but yours, mine, ours, and many other human beings seeking healing, hope and blessing. May it be so. Amen.