

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

Following Isaiah's story, we skim over a couple of centuries to bring us to what is arguably, along with the story of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, one of the two most important events in shaping the identity of God's covenant people: the Babylonian exile. After the defeat of the Assyrian empire by the Babylonian empire, there were three separate deportations of Jews to Babylon, which took place in the years 597 BCE, 587 BCE, and 582 BCE. In today's passage, the prophet Jeremiah is addressing those removed from Judah in the first of these deportations.

Judah had "rebelled" against its status as a client-state of Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar had laid siege to Jerusalem and pillaged the temple, installing Zedekiah as a puppet ruler. In the first wave of deportations, the upper classes (the elders, priests, and prophets), were sent into exile in Babylon.

The immediate audience of Jeremiah's letter is the community in exile in Babylon. The second audience is those who remain in Judah and face their own coming day of destruction.

Home - a word that evokes strong emotions, an idealized place even in the face of harsh reality. We yearn to feel "home", a place full of love, security, and comfort. Sometimes "home" is found in a domicile, sometimes in a familiar landscape, sometimes even in another person. Even church can feel like home.

Jeremiah's letter focuses on the yearning for a *home* that is far off, a loss of

home that has shaken the very identity of the ancient Israelites. The passage offers cold comfort in its prediction that this loss will last a very long time.

This letter to the exiles, which brings comfort and much needed advice to those who find themselves under imperial rule a long way from home, emerges as a powerful testimony to resilience and survival. It reflects a traumatized community that has lost everything: family, home, language, culture, the beloved city of Jerusalem and its temple, and the familiar expressions of their religion connected to the temple.

Having been conquered, humiliated and deported, the exiles are embittered, vengeful and dream of an imminent return. So Jeremiah writes: *“Seek the good of the land to which God has banished you; seek the well being of the land of your enemies, for their well being is also your well being, their peace is also your peace; pray for their land.”* It is an illustration of the political significance of love of one’s enemies. It applies not only to private enemies but also to collective, national enemies. It requires us to think of their well being, their peace, their shalom, and to be concerned for it.

The generation who suffered this defeat expected the exile to last only a short time. Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah indicate that the exile was punishment for the sins of that particular generation, setting up the expectation that the exile would last, at most, the length of one generation. But as that generation began to die out, the people worried about the exile lasting so long. There was now a whole new

generation that had either been children when Jerusalem fell, or who had been born in exile, never knowing the grandeur of their “home”.

Biblical scholars have studied refugees in the contemporary world in order to understand the challenges facing multiple generations of refugees. These studies show that, while the first generation always feels like an outsider in their new “home”, subsequent generations begin to assimilate, creating a kind of hybrid identity.

The “1.5 generation”, those who had been children when migrating, reinterpret their own traditions in light of their new home. Second generation refugees, while maintaining some traditions from their family’s originating home, begin to lose markers of identity such as language, dress, and music.

Assimilation and hybridity cause tension among the refugee community, as the older generation worry about later generations losing their sense of identity. “Home” becomes displaced. So what is “home” to a second or third generation refugee? Jeremiah’s letter reveals this anxiety. It both redefines “home” as the new place of residence, while maintaining a notion of the “true home” back in Judea.

God tells the exiles that they should settle and make new homes, even if they are temporary, in their place of exile which will last seventy years, or 3-½ generations. This means that when Jerusalem is finally rebuilt and they can return home, it will be the great-grandchildren of the original exiles, along with their children, who will return.

In the ancient world, cultural markers like music, art, and even the names given to children had religious significance. Most of the music that is preserved in the Bible, in the Psalms, was liturgical music, which formed an integral part of the rituals. Literary texts suggest that some assimilation began to creep into the Jewish culture. Esther and Mordechai, in the book of Esther, are named after the Babylonian gods Ishtar and Marduk. So, at what point does *assimilation* become *obliteration* of the Jews' identity? And what parts of their culture are adaptable without threatening their identity as covenant partners with God?

The prophecy states that it is not a betrayal of God to fully assimilate into the “home” life of Babylon. Here “home” is defined as land and family. They should own land, plant gardens, arrange for marriages. They should even work for the welfare of their host country. God tells them to become model citizens or model Babylonians.

Jeremiah encourages the exiles to begin establishing roots and work towards building a possible life in community, a “home away from home” – in a distant place! For the time being, they should accept that this place, where they were settled within Babylon, was home; they needed to stop living out of their suitcases, begin establishing roots, affirm, maintain and continue ties of family, and work towards peace and community-building in their own neighbourhoods. For Jeremiah, the key to survival and hope lay in joining God in the “*creation of a just and compassionate counterculture, a place of new shapes and social alternatives where violence, exploitation and idolatry do not reign*”. They are in this for the long haul. There is no imminent return offered here, no saviour on the horizon.

Given the transformation that is envisioned, what is promised is that perfect “home” that we all yearn for. It is that place, that status, where we no longer feel like we are an outsider. It is a place of safety because someone good is in charge. In Jeremiah, it is deliberately ambiguous inviting each of us to think about how we are all refugees in this land, waiting for the promise of our ideal home.

Jeremiah’s letter exhibits something of the drive present in many refugee communities, both then and now, a drive that refuses to give up. It speaks of the desire to pick up the pieces of their lives and to start living again. The focus is on a range of activities that signal a return to some kind of normalcy – such as building houses, planting vineyards, celebrating weddings – serving as a powerful testimony to resilience. These ordinary activities express the basic yearning for being safe and secure in the comfort of your own home, having enough food to eat, wine to gladden the heart, and the return of joy as evident in the reference to wedding celebrations expressing hope for the future.

The exiles are advised to actively work for the well-being or peace of their newly adopted city – even praying to God for the city to prosper. Immigrants all over the world are struggling to survive, and perhaps, hopefully, to thrive, in the cities and towns in which they find themselves.

The human activity of surviving and starting to live again is framed by God’s action of fulfilling promises, of bringing back the exiles to their own land, of providing them with a hope-filled future. God’s actions, that frame the people’s attempts to

survive, compellingly demonstrate that God continues to be involved with the people, even in the far-away land of Babylon. The reference to “finding God” is testimony to the act of recognizing God’s presence even in exile in Babylon. It is in the midst of those ordinary activities of building, planting, and celebrating, that people see God’s hand. And even then, the emphasis falls upon God’s action. It is God who will allow the people to find God.

Jeremiah warns the exiles not to listen to false prophets: *“Do not let your prophets and fortune-tellers who are with you in the land of Babylon trick you”*, for they are false prophets who deceive the exiles. Even when they say that it is God who is sending them, the people are told to not believe what they say, for, according to Jeremiah, they are lying. The prophets in Jerusalem are preaching words of hope. Their view of the future is that the effects of the destruction will soon be reversed and that there is no threat of future judgment. Hananiah specifically states that the reversal will occur in less than two years.

The opposition to Jeremiah’s prophetic preaching started with the leadership denying the possibility of divine judgment. Jeremiah was labelled unpatriotic and disloyal. It will not be the two years Hananiah prophesied or the quick turnaround implied by the prophets Jeremiah opposes. Although there is a future that does not include Babylonian captivity, that future is not now and it includes praying, searching, and calling that is not answered in the moment of petitioning.

When the time is up, when the exile is completed, then God will be find-able

and will respond with deliverance. During “the 70 years” the people are to invest in life, but it will be a life also characterized by the non-visiting of God. There is no imminent visit of deliverance, unlike that promised by the false prophets and their dreams.

The contrast between Jeremiah and the voices of false hope is not simply a matter of imminent reversal versus far-off restoration. A positive message is announced for the present life of the exiles. In the form of imperatives to build, plant, and live out the cycles of family life, there is an inherent benediction. Shelter, food, and family life – the basics necessary for life – will be sustainable in the present. There is abundant blessing – enough to even seek the welfare of those not directly members of the community. Deliverance from exile and return to Jerusalem is intertwined with the eventual demise of Babylon.

To be commanded to build houses, plant gardens, raise children, and seek the welfare of the city into which God has sent them into exile is to be blessed in the midst of punishment. The exiles are given a vocation as they await the “visit” of divine deliverance. Accepting this vocation is a rejection of the false hope of the rebellious voices back in Jerusalem.

Many of us today may encounter situations that cannot be changed, no matter how much we would have wanted things to be different. The question then is how, amidst such difficult circumstances, one can live the best possible life, including daily practices that make life both possible and meaningful. Perhaps even more important

than figuring out how to live amidst these less-than-perfect circumstances is the question of how one manages to find joy while being in exile.

What kinds of exiles do you face? A sense of displacement because of having moved from a beloved hometown? The loss of the home associated with aging and the need to live in retirement communities or nursing facilities? A sense of exile from your own body as a result of illness, injury, stroke, amputation? An exile from your sense of self after the loss of a job or being laid off? The loss of a sacred place you can no longer connect with? The loss of “Christendom?”

With Christianity being but one faith in the vast marketplace of ideas and philosophies, some suggest that followers of Jesus’ Way are, themselves, in exile in this culture and in the church. So how are we exiles to trust God in the same way the Babylonians did?

God is not encouraging rebellion against the oppressive superpower. God is encouraging the covenant people to bloom where they are planted. To make the best of things. To thrive, despite their devastation. God goes on to explain through Jeremiah that anyone who prophesies otherwise is a liar. With a life expectancy of about 35 years, that means that the exiles could plan on their grandchildren returning home. Maybe.

Jeremiah envisioned a beginning to the healing needed, both communal and individual, in the openness and the courage to give up unrealizable hopes and other harmful practices that seemed to offer a false sense of security. *“The prophet of*

hope insists that the refugee community must surrender its old identity in the land and accept its marginal status in diaspora in order to survive and eventually flourish”.

Faith in God becomes faith in the universality of God. When Jeremiah says, “Pray to Yahweh”, he is affirming the fact that Yahweh can be found even in this distant and foreign land. You can call on Yahweh even without temple and sacrifice – and Yahweh will answer. It is vital for you to ask for God with all your heart — then God will be found in a foreign land, in exile, in an unclean land. For God is present everywhere, even at the margins among the broken, the dejected, and the subjugated. This viewpoint is revolutionary, for Jeremiah shows that their religion does not depend on access to power, to the existence of the temple or the offering of sacrifices.

We are first of all called to move away from any “doctrinal narcissism” and find ways to make our theology politically and socially relevant. This is possible if our theological insights evolve out of our cultural heritages and social resources, as well as our various Christian traditions, to address the contemporary social realities.

Second, the text calls for a movement away from the privateness of the church and into the world, into the public space to address issues affecting people, especially those on the margins, those that suffer from political, social and cultural insecurity and discrimination. Margins are the space of God’s visitation, for God is discernible and present in the margins. We are called to journey from the centres of power to the fringes of society to experience God in new ways and in new forms,

because God is present in the disturbing and unsettling questions raised by experiences at the margins. Our theology needs to be transformed into a public theology if it seeks legitimation from and by the wider society.

Social concerns, political polity, economic involvement, religious and cultural pluralism, symbolic and liturgical life, and the moral and ethical values of our people are some of the realms that concern our theological discourses.

Third, it calls for commitment to seeking shalom (life in all its fullness) and well being for our cities and our neighbourhoods. It has been defined as “progressive localism” — an approach that is outward and expansive. Staying together to work for and praying to God for the well being of our cities and nations are *our* imperatives. Our well-being and the well-being of our churches are bound up with that of our cities and our immediate locales.

This is a radical, new message for those Babylonian exiles! They had believed that they were God’s Chosen People; God was with them; they were special; therefore entitled to receive special favours and blessings from God. Now Jeremiah was saying: “Have I got news for you! You are not the only people that God cares for and blesses. Those Babylonians, your enemies, are also God’s people; the Gentiles are also blessed by God.” Jeremiah was instructing the Jewish exiles to engage in intercessory prayer for their enemies and work for their well being. This message underscores that God is the God of all people — Jew and Gentile. No single racial or ethnic group; no one nation can have a monopoly on the God of all

creation. God loves all people and cares for their well being.

In our state of exile, tossed and turned to and fro by a growing secular society on the one hand and a hostile fundamentalism on the other, God wants our prayers and action.

Rather than seeing “the other” as our enemy, may God grant us compassionate hearts and lives to see that we are all in this together; may we continue to be diligent in intercessory prayer for all people, including enemies; may we also be inspired by Jesus to continue to act with kindness and love.

Amen.