Seek the Welfare

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-10

Grace Hills Baptist Church

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 Have you ever known someone who was deluded? I mean, have you ever known someone who just didn’t see the world clearly, who was utterly convinced they were right when you knew, just *knew*, that they were dead wrong? What am I talking about, of course you have – it’s political season, after all, and anyone on the other side is deluded, right? And it isn’t just in the realm of politics; we’ve seen it in pretty much every area of life. We all know that parent who is convinced their kid will be the next baseball superstar or breakout player on the women’s national soccer team…and their child is about as a coordinated as I am, that is to say, not. We all know that person who is convinced, just CONVINCED, that they are going to be the person to beat the odds and win the Powerball Lotto jackpot. Champions of a particular author or actor or celebrity become offended when anyone else criticizes them. And even this week, a media personality questioned warnings about Hurricane Matthew as a conspiracy – even though the hurricane had already done tremendous damage and caused great loss of life in Haiti before turning towards the Florida coast. We can bring ourselves to believe all sorts of things that have no basis in reality.

 Jeremiah knew something about that. You see, Jeremiah was ministering to the people of Judah in the midst of a drawn-out national disaster. In the late seventh century BC, the Assyrian Empire fell apart, creating a vacuum in the Middle East’s political landscape. Judah, a sometime-ally, sometime-enemy of Assyria, was caught between two massive empires, Egypt and Babylon. First Egypt defeated the Judean army in battle, installing a puppet king. A few years later, after Babylon defeated Egypt, Judah fell under the sway of Babylon. Eventually, around the turn of the sixth century BC, Judah rebelled against Babylon and paid the price: its king and upper classes, including many artisans and innovators, were taken away to Babylon. The cream of Judah’s population was in exile, and the land of Judah became a vassal of Babylon, subject to its laws and under its control.

 In the struggle to make sense of this calamity, there were all sorts of people trying to come up with answers. One very popular response to the defeat of Judah’s armies and the exile of some of its best people was that this was short-lived. Hananiah, another prophet in Judah, proclaimed in the temple, before God and everyone, that he believed God would make things right in short order. [READ Jeremiah 28:2-4] Here was a message of hope! Here was a word of restoration! God would make Judah the great nation it had been, and this exile would be a mere blip in the history of the Jewish people. Two years? That was nothing! Things would be turning around quickly.

 This message of consolation and optimism was wildly popular. Why wouldn’t it be? And like most popular messages of hope, it spread rapidly. Hananiah had proclaimed the apparently prophetic word in Jerusalem, the occupied capital of the defeated Judah, but soon enough it was being proclaimed by others in the midst of the Jewish hostages in Babylon. Men and women, whole families, had been displaced, and they had a decision to make: would they set up housekeeping, putting down roots into the soil of this new, albeit different, home where they had to stay? Or would they live out of boxes, refusing to hang any pictures on the wall or making any new friends in their neighborhoods, hoping that they would be back home in Jerusalem soon? As they wrestled with this, they heard this message of hope – two years? We can put up with anything for two years! Why set up shop here in Babylon, when we can go back home soon?

 The problem is, that wasn’t what was going to happen – and the people should have known it. Why? Because there was this other prophet, a man named Jeremiah. He had been a prophet in Judah for years, ever since the reign of the last good king, and he continued to minister to God’s people, listen for God’s voice, and proclaim God’s message as things fell apart. When the first prisoners went off to Babylon, Jeremiah had a 30-year record of faithfulness to his calling and a reputation as someone who told it like it was, not as people wished it would be. It got him in trouble from time to time – he was called unpatriotic and thrown into a cistern a little later in the book of Jeremiah – but he didn’t waver. And that’s why when Jeremiah heard the report of prophets in the Jewish community in Babylon proclaiming a quick end to the exile, he got out a scroll and sharpened his quill: because Jeremiah knew that they were delusional. Things were going to get worse before they got better, and he wanted to set the record straight among the Jews in Babylon.

 What was the word Jeremiah brought to the exiles? It was a written bucket of cold water on their enthusiasm about a short time in Babylon. “For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord. For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon’s seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Put another way: this isn’t going to be a short layover in Babylon; you’re going to live out your lives there, and probably your children will, as well. So don’t be deluded by preachers and pundits and politicians who say what you want to hear with no real knowledge of what God has in mind.

 Instead, Jeremiah says, there is a word from God – and it’s not one they want to hear. Because the people in exile will remain in exile for the foreseeable future, God wants them to do something that probably made little sense to them. “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Jeremiah tells the people of Judah who are stuck in Babylon that they are supposed to plant themselves there, to put down roots, to become part of the community there in Babylon. They are to build houses there – and these houses will become their homes. Home is where the heart is, we say, and where your home is, you will be invested. Rather than cast their hopes and dreams on homes left behind in Jerusalem – homes that are not as wonderful in the aftermath of all that happened as they were in memory – Jews in Babylon were encouraged by the true prophet Jeremiah to claim Babylon as home.

 Not only were they to build homes there, they were to plant gardens and eat the produce of those gardens. Place was important in Scripture, and there were certain places that carried added meaning, like the wilderness or the mountain or the sea. And few places were more important symbols in Scripture than gardens. A garden recalled the beginning of all things, where God walked with his creation in perfect intimacy. A garden was a place dependent on God’s grace for growth and provision. A garden was a place of beauty and joy. And, perhaps most importantly to Jeremiah, a garden was a place of longevity. You don’t plant a garden in a place you plan to leave in 3 months. Gardens are long-term commitments. If the Jewish exiles were to plant gardens, they were admitting to themselves and signaling to everyone around them that they planned to be there for a while.

 The third instruction Jeremiah had for the exiles was also the most powerful and, thus, the hardest to accept: God wanted them to have families there in Babylon. Anytime we are in unsettled situations in life, temporary situations, we are reluctant to start a family or have more children. We’re also reluctant to encourage our children to marry and start their own families; this was even more of a concern in ancient times, when marriages were not just the joining of two people, but of two families. A people in exile who thought they would be going home in a year or two wouldn’t try to have babies or arrange marriages – but that’s exactly what Jeremiah encourages them to do.

 What is the result of all of this? What do all of these things lead to? Simply what Jeremiah says in verse 7: the Jews in exile were to seek the welfare of Babylon. “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Think about that for a moment: the Babylonians had defeated the people of Judah in battle. They had levied oppressive taxes on the people of God. They had crushed the Jewish rebellion three years later, and carted off the best of the best to Babylon in chains. The king was a prisoner, as was most of the government, the wealthy, and the educated of Judah. And those who were left behind to farm the land and struggle to survive suffered the indignity of enemy occupation. How would we feel in that situation? Would we be seeking the welfare of Babylon? No! We’d most likely be starting a rebellion of our own, or at least not going out of our way to help the city where we were in exile. Yet Jeremiah tells the people in Babylon to seek the welfare of the city.

 Why? Well, part of it is what we find throughout the Old Testament, going all the way back to Abraham: God wants the people of God to be a blessing to others, even those who are their enemies. Abraham is told God will bless him, so that he can be a blessing.[[4]](#footnote-4) Joseph sees his suffering as an opportunity for God to provide leadership for the people of Egypt so they could be prepared for a devastating famine, saving his family in the process.[[5]](#footnote-5) The prophet Jonah, a couple of hundred years before Jeremiah, was sent to the hated Assyrians to warn them of coming calamity.[[6]](#footnote-6) So Jeremiah’s command on God’s behalf to seek the welfare of another, even of an enemy, is hardly unusual.

 Why would God want to use his people to bless others who not only didn’t worship him, but who had defeated and oppressed his people? I think we get a hint much later in the Bible, when we turn to the pages of the New Testament, most explicitly in 1 Peter 2: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light…Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they may malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In other words, God expects his people to bless others so that they may see the goodness and glory of God. Through his people, God is trying to reach even their enemies.

 But it isn’t just the Babylonians Jeremiah says will be blessed when the exiles accept the reality of their situation and put down roots in Babylon. The end of verse 7 in our Jeremiah passage spells this out: “for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”[[8]](#footnote-8) When the exiles put aside their antagonism and their uncertainty over the future and start *living* in Babylon, seeking its good, they improve their own situation as well. They benefit in this case when Babylon benefits! It may be that God sends extra blessings upon them, but even without divine intervention, it just makes sense. Exiles in Babylon who aren’t causing trouble have more freedom and more opportunity to thrive. Exiles in Babylon who aren’t worried about heading back to Jerusalem are able to invest their lives in pursuits that make life worth living – like working, building homes, starting families, and pursuing joy. When they accept that God has them there for a purpose – and that purpose isn’t to fight against Babylon – then they are better able to live the life God wants to give them.

 So what does all of this have to do with us? More than we might think. I don’t know how often over the past year or two I’ve heard people lament the world we find ourselves in. Sometimes, that person has been me. Our families are getting busier and busier. The economy remains sluggish 9 years on from a recession, and it impacts our lives on many levels. Changes in technology, international events, and culture have fundamentally shifted our outlook on the world and our place in it. And the news we see each night, the conversations we have each day, do little to give us confidence in the future. We probably long for the world we had in the past, the life we enjoyed as children or young adults. We want to go back.

 And yet the reality is that we can’t. The world has changed, and barring the return of Christ, it is going to continue to change year after year after year. That’s what we see happening in the Bible, that’s what we’ve seen happen over the entire history of the Church, and that’s what we see happening today. That’s part of what happens when God makes a world – and the people in the world – to be free. And do you know what? Since we don’t know when Christ is returning – and no one knows – then I believe the word of Jeremiah is as much for us as it was for the Jews of his day. God doesn’t want us withdrawing, huddling together and refusing to engage a changing world, and he doesn’t want us to spend all of our time speculating about when Christ will return and change everything back the way we think it should be. Incidentally, we may be just a little – or a lot – shocked by what God’s plans for the future look like, because it likely won’t be anything like what we imagine it will be.

Instead of worrying about it, then, we need to hear and heed the word of Jeremiah: live your lives in this place, in this world. Invest yourselves in your community. Build relationships with people, even people who think differently than you or believe differently than you or vote differently than you or worship differently than you. Encourage your children and your grandchildren to live as followers of Christ, yes, but as followers of Christ engaged with the world around them. And above all, seek to be a blessing to our community, to our neighbors, to our culture. As Christians, we aren’t in it for ourselves – we’re here as representatives, ambassadors of the Lord. As Peter said, live such good lives that it causes others, even those who have run from God, to acknowledge that following Jesus must be a good thing. If we can do that, we might just be surprised not only how much of a blessing we can be, but how much our lives will be blessed in the process.

The place I’ve seen this most impressively lived out is in the farming villages of Yendi, Ghana. While Ghana itself is a majority Christian country, the Yendi region is heavily Muslim. Now, this isn’t the sort of militant Islam you see on CNN or Fox News connected with ISIS or Al-Qaueda. This is a practice of Islam more like the practice of Christianity in much of the Western world: something that many people profess to believe, but few are fully committed. Yet there is a deep-seated allegiance to the faith of the family and tribal leaders in much of Yendi, and so many people identify as Muslim.

It is here, among the dirt roads and yam fields of Yendi, that one of the most dynamic Christian missions I’ve ever seen is thriving. Ghanan Baptists, led by a man many of you have met named Emmanuel Mustafa, affectionately known as Muss, have made tremendous progress in planting a church in every village in the region. How are they able to be so successful in such a traditionally Muslim area? Because they didn’t withdraw from those who believed differently than they did, and because they didn’t spend all their time denouncing or ridiculing the faith of those in their community. Instead, they have sought to bless their Muslim neighbors. The Baptist mission in Yendi has started a Christian school that is markedly better than the local public school – so much better that Muslim parents are ecstatic to send their children. They are working with women to better support their families. They are also distributing mosquito nets by the thousands to help defeat the scourge of malaria that claims many lives every year. And what has resulted from all of this? Villages across the region, led by overwhelmingly Muslim chiefs, are asking Muss and his coworkers to come and plant churches in their villages. The Gospel is spreading, lives are being saved, children are being educated, and thousands are coming to faith, all because some Ghanan Baptists were willing to put down roots in the place God put them and seek the welfare of their city – or community.

Could the same be said of us? Are we seeking the welfare of our community? Are we investing ourselves in the people God has brought into our lives? Are we looking to bless others, even if we don’t agree with them on everything? Are we seeking the welfare of others, even the people who have hurt us along the way? Are we embracing God’s call on our lives at this point in time and in this place, even if it’s not where we want to end up? If we can, we might not only be surprised at how much of a difference we can make in a broken world; we can find that we’ve been incredibly blessed along the way. Are we seeking the welfare of the city – and finding our own as we do? Let us pray.

1. Jeremiah 29:8-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jeremiah 29:5-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jeremiah 29:7a [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Genesis 12:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Genesis 45:5-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jonah [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 1 Peter 2:9, 11-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jeremiah 29:7b [↑](#footnote-ref-8)