

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who restored us to God and gave us hope for the future, Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen.

We begin this new Church year with a wonderful letter of hope from the prophet Jeremiah to the people of Judah who had been defeated by the Babylonians and taken into exile 1500 miles away from their precious homeland and their beautiful city of Jerusalem. The year was 594 BC and Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed. Their beautiful temple lay in ruins. The crem dela crem of Judean society had been carried off to a foreign land and now found themselves in the same exiled territory as their fellow countrymen from the larger, northern tribe of Israel, who had been conquered by the Assyrian army and taken into exile 200 years before. Many of them, longing for their former ways, wept by the rivers of Babylon and wailed the anguished question, "How could we sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1-4). They were in total despair. Into this context Jeremiah writes this letter from God promising these beleaguered people they still have a prosperous future because their God still reigns and will rescue them in God's time, not their time...

Jeremiah for some reason was left behind in the devastated city of Jerusalem with the poorest of the poor. It was from his vantage point, living in the ruined remains of the once great city that he wrote this letter to his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters. They wanted to wallow in their sadness and give up, but Jeremiah

gives them a reason to hope. He tells them while you're in exile, work for the improvement of the place where you live. Back in my days as an Assignment Officer for the Air Force, we had a saying we would tell our fellow officers when they would call us at the Air Force Personnel Center. They would complain that their current assignment wasn't to their liking. The location wasn't anywhere near where they wanted to be, or the job itself wasn't challenging enough. The first piece of advice we were instructed to give them was to bloom where you're planted. The most important job you will ever have in the Air Force is the one you currently have. Unless you excel where you are right now, there's little chance we can find a better position for you.

I think that's essentially what Jeremiah was saying to the Jews in exile. Bloom where you're planted. God wasn't defeated by the Babylonian god Marduk, rather Jeremiah tells them God allowed them to be exiled because of their disobedience to God's commands. The Word of God given through Jeremiah lets those desperate, depressed, and despondent exiles know their term of exile won't be forever and that one-day God will allow them to return to rebuild their wonderful city and temple. In the meantime, Jeremiah says bloom where you're planted. Don't give up. Carry on with your lives your religious traditions.

By way of comforting those who are stranded in a foreign land, Jeremiah writes words that will become some of the most misinterpreted words in scripture.

“¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart...” Have you ever noticed this verse from Jeremiah is inscribed on numerous graduation gifts? It’s widely interpreted to apply directly to each and every graduate from high school or college all over the United States. I’m pretty certain Jeremiah wasn’t thinking about his words being used to encourage 18 year old’s that God has their future all planned out ahead of them. It was meant to encourage the remnant of God’s chosen people not to give up in the face of humiliating defeat. Don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing wrong with allowing God’s Word to come alive when you read the Bible for your personal devotion, the trouble comes when a single verse or a couple of verses are taken out of context and then applied to all of us individually. In the case of these verser every verb and pronoun is plural. Every you in this passage should be read in my Texas accent and pronounced y’all. If we never hear the plurals in this passage we would conclude this applies to me myself, and I. The reality is Jeremiah addressed this letter to all the exiles together. He is relaying God’s promise that He will always be with the people when they as a group pray and call on His Name. We’re in danger of missing that point when we read all the yous and the verbs as singular...

So, with that in mind, what might Jeremiah, aka, God have wanted us to understand from this letter of encouragement. If we're trying to be even a little more faithful in how this might apply today we should at least acknowledge it's addressed to all of us and not to just any single one of us. Then we might ask ourselves if we're facing a time when we're in danger of losing our faith as those exiles so long ago. If we face tough times as a congregation what is the Word of God that speaks to us in that kind of situation? I know we're not faced with exile from our homeland and our loved ones, but as a congregation we have been facing some pretty difficult times over the past couple of years. When the Pandemic hit we were all afraid of what would happen to our small family Church. As the weeks went by I wondered if we would survive as a viable congregation and if we did, what would that look like. Even after all these months, wearing masks for a long time, trying our best to stay socially distanced, and sanitizing everything we look at, we're still not back to our pre-pandemic norm. Are some people staying away from Worship because they feel we're being too restrictive or are some staying away because we're not restrictive enough and they are still too afraid to return. Your Church Council and I have done everything we can think of to make this a safe place without adding unnecessary burdens. In the end, I still wonder if we can get back to our former normal.

If I'm listening to the words from Jeremiah, maybe we should stop agonizing over the former things and remember to bloom where we're planted. When I think in this way, I'm reminded that last year we couldn't gather together as we've done so many years at Bev and Eldon's home for the Annual Christmas Auction. Instead, we brought in items for a silent auction and made the best of our situation. While we may not have had nearly as much fun, we did raise more money in that silent auction than we had raised in previous years and many local folks enjoyed a nice Christmas because we bloomed where we were planted and made the best of our situation. This year we're hoping to do the same. Today we're tying this beautiful Quilt. Lovingly created by our Quilting Ladies. That group has surely bloomed where they were planted. All during this pandemic they continued to work to provide quilts and school kit and personal care kits to refugees and exiles all over the world. These gifts of love extend the same promise of hope to these modern day refugees and exiles that Jeremiah's letter from God made all those years ago. Thank you ladies for doing God's work even when times are tough!

I don't know when, or if we'll ever get back to the way it was before the Covid hit. At this point I'm not sure we should go back. We've discovered so many new and exciting ways to worship and even added to those who we can reach with the Good News of the Gospel that to go back would mean losing those gains.

Either way, I believe our challenge for the post pandemic church is to figure out how to continue to bloom right here in spite of all the things the devil and this world continue to throw at us to slow us down or stop us in our tracks all together... I think the message from Jeremiah to us is this: do not get discouraged. Continue to live your lives as God's Children. Continue the mission we inherited from our forefathers and mothers until the day we leave this earth for the next or until Jesus returns with the hosts of heaven to make this place the new heaven and the new earth and God himself comes to live among us. Luther once said when asked what he would do if he knew Jesus was returning tomorrow that he would go outside and plant an apple tree. I guess he was the original Johnny Appleseed... The point is that until our sentence is served on this planet, the best thing we can do is to try to make this place a little better after we're gone for the next generation and for those who are in need now.

May God's voice speak to us through these ancient prophecies. May the voice of Jeremiah help us understand what God is calling us to do in our present situation and culture. May this congregation continue to be an instrument God uses to make the Gospel known to those who have not heard and to those who need a second or third chance to hear it again. As we prepare for the coming of our savior, may we listen to the voice of our savior as He calls us to live out the hope we have in Christ Jesus by blooming right here where God planted us. Amen.