

# Under Duress

The Life and Times of Jeremiah

## Letter to the Exiles

Jeremiah 29:1-14

I try not to tell *too* many stories about myself in my messages, but this morning my opening story *is* about myself, in particular, about the time Connie almost left me.

We had been living in Oregon for four years where the average rainfall in the Willamette Valley is 40 inches a year, where all this rain nourished beautiful shrubs and flowers, where our garden plot had some of the richest soil in the country, and where we could see snow-capped Mount Hood in the distance.

Then we moved to New Mexico to work among Navajo Indians. In the high desert, where we lived, the annual rainfall is 10 inches. The predominant color is gray-green, the color of sagebrush. We lived along a gravel road that was rutted in the winter and nearly impassable in the spring. And there was nearly always a breeze, if not wind, that blew the sandy soil everywhere. Since we lived in substandard housing, which was quite porous, the wind continually blew dust into our house so that *every day* there was a new film of dust on everything.

One morning, after the wind had blown hard all night, so much sand had sifted through the seams of our front door that there was, literally, a sand dune, with an edge along the top, coming from the door onto the linoleum of our living room. Connie looked at that sand dune, and said: "That's it! I've had it! I'm going home to my mother!" I rushed to the closet for a broom and dust pan, swept it all up . . . and saved our marriage!

After that low point, we became acclimated into life in the high desert. We learned to enjoy the unique terrain and scenery, which included one of the sacred mountains of the Navajos in the foreground and the snow-capped mountains of western Colorado in the distance. We discovered that for two weeks in the spring, the desert bloomed in unexpected places in glorious colors. And we settled in to serve the Navajo people—the Navajo Nation, as they call it—with diligence and joy.

Wherever we live—in whatever community, city, or nation—  
as people who follow Jesus, we are to work for the good of that place  
and, as we do, we are promised “a future and a hope.”

### **Setting**

While Jeremiah preached, and the people mocked,  
the international scene was ominously shifting.

The power of Babylon was growing  
and Egypt mobilized to head off this challenge.

The first battle was a Babylonian victory.

The next battle, three years later, was a draw.

When the Babylonians won the first battle,  
Judah’s king, Jehoiakim, promptly transferred his allegiance to the winner.  
After the second battle, when the Egyptians forced a Babylonian retreat,  
Jehoiakim gambled on a strategy independent of Babylon also.

It was a fatal miscalculation.

Babylon was unable to respond immediately in full force,  
but deployed guerrilla bands create havoc with quick, brutal attacks.

For three years, the roving guerrilla bands devastated the countryside.  
Then the full Babylonian army marched against Jerusalem.  
Four months later, king Jehoiakim was dead and Jerusalem had surrendered.  
Apparently appeased by prompt capitulation of the city,  
Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, behaved relatively leniently.  
He deported the new king, the queen mother, the court officials,  
military leaders, and skilled craftsmen to Babylon;  
and permitted the people left behind to continue as a nation.

For the people who were deported,  
exile was abrupt, traumatic, and terrifying.  
They were uprooted from their homes,  
forced to travel 700 miles across the desert,  
and resettled in Babylon  
with an unknown language, unfamiliar customs, and strange food—  
without pretzels or chocolate or pecan pie.

Understandably, the people wanted to go home.  
They were grief-stricken, homesick, and totally unhappy.  
They talked among themselves about escaping and fleeing.  
False prophets compounded this discontent  
with wild promises of an early return to their homeland.

Into this situation of sorrow, frustration, and ferment, Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles— once again, urging the opposite of what the false prophets were preaching. If you have your Bibles, or a Bible app, turn to Jeremiah 29:4-14

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their 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. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your 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, declares the Lord.

“For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

What an extraordinary letter!

First of all, Jeremiah tells the exiles to settle in for a long stay, 70 years! He urges them to work for the good of the cities of Babylon, their enemies! And he promises that, even in these difficult circumstances, they will find a relationship with God that is deeper and richer than ever.

At every one of these points, Jeremiah confounded and angered the false prophets. One of the lying prophets, wrote this letter to the priests in Jerusalem:

Now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who is prophesying to you? For he has sent to us in Babylon, saying, “Your exile will be long; build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat their produce.” You should put him in stocks and neck irons!

Jeremiah's message was not just contrary to the other prophets; he was consistently ahead of his time! He preached disaster long before it came. When disaster did come, he announced hope for the future. And, incredibly, he anticipated the teaching of Jesus, centuries later, as we read it in Matthew 5:43-45:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.

Jeremiah's counsel to the exiles was this:  
For your own good, settle in, just as you would at home:

- care well for your family
- do your day-to-day work well
- and, as you can, work for the health of *this* nation.

Jeremiah offered his counsel in Babylon, of all places— a nation known for ruthlessness and cruelty, for immorality and decadence, and for evil so pervasive that the word "Babylon" in the book of *Revelation* is used as a metaphor for all that is wrong in the world.

This leads me to think that Jeremiah's counsel is good in *any* nation where followers of Jesus, by God's sovereign will, find themselves today.

If we can equate Babylon with the worst nations in our time, followers of Jesus, within the constraints of Christian faith and practice, can be "salt" and "light" even in these dark and difficult places.

Jeremiah's counsel applies directly to exiles and refugees in the world today; currently, 70 million displaced persons, more than ever before.

Jeremiah's counsel is certainly good in nations that enjoy political freedom, so his counsel to exiles can *also* benefit us who live in a democracy.

Wherever we find ourselves in the world, Jeremiah has given a prescription for the health and welfare of our household, our community, and our nation, with the promise that, by taking these actions, we can find *wholeness in Jesus*—for ourselves and others.

**First of all, we are to care well for our own household.**

In Jeremiah 29, verses 5-6, this is the prophet's counsel:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their 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.

Many households today are *broken* or *blended* or *challenged* in one way or another—which makes everyday home life difficult, just as it was for these exiles.

One of the exiles who was carried away from Jerusalem, Mordecai, was raising an orphaned cousin, Esther, as an adopted daughter. When Esther was caught up in the king's search for a new queen, and taken into the palace, Mordecai set aside his normal activities, and went to the palace every day, to see how Esther was getting along, and to offer encouragement and counsel.

As it turned out, his care for Esther resulted in the rescue of Jews throughout the country, and, quietly literally, contributed to the health of the nation.

The outcomes for us may not be that dramatic, but in the day-to-day work of serving our household, as best we can, whatever unique challenges this may involve, we can raise up *people of character, followers of Jesus, and good citizens*—all of which undergirds the health of our community and nation.

**Second, we do our work well.**

In the next verses in Jeremiah 29, verse 7, the prophet says:

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

God's *love* and *mercy* and *compassion* are so great, the he cares for everyone, as Jesus explains in the "Sermon on the Mount:"

[Your Father in heaven] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Matthew 5:45

*God's cares* for humankind *directly* by sun and rain; and he provides rain and sunshine for *everyone*—the *evil* and the *good*, the *just* and the *unjust*—whether they *deserve* it or not.

God cares for the cities and nations of the world *indirectly* through us—by the work that we do—in day-to-day life at home; in agriculture, business, technology, education, medicine, or the arts—*whatever it is we do* as our vocation.

Daniel and his friends *were* also among the deported exiles. When we first meet them, in the book of *Daniel*, they are students, learning the language and literature of Babylon. Later, they were placed in civil administration and, still later, promoted to positions of great responsibility, all the while doing their work exceptionally well, always in accord with their faith—*which is the same balance we want to maintain.*

At one point, Daniel and his friends wisely and successfully appealed to their captors for permission to eat only kosher food.

Another time, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship an idol even if it meant being burnt to death in fiery furnace.

Most famously of all, Daniel did his work so well that he was promoted to be one of the highest roles in the kingdom without ever compromising his faith, even when it could have meant being eaten by lions.

Daniel and his three friends, took Jeremiah's counsel to heart: in the vocations that opened to them, they worked diligently, and with excellence, for the health and welfare of Babylon and, later, Persia and they all experienced God's presence and deliverance, in extraordinary ways, just as God had promised through Jeremiah.

In places where personal freedom is limited, work like this, within the constraints of Christian faith and practice, is a *minimum* contribution to the health of a nation.

In a nation like ours, as a democracy, there are *more ways* open to us: voting, public service, community service, and much more.

How can we, in these privileged circumstances, contribute to the health and welfare of *our* nation?

For sixty years, our church family has been active in an ecumenical group of 50 like-minded denominations called the National Association of Evangelicals.

Four years ago, in 2016, this group produced a document called: "For the Health of the Nation: an Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility."

The document reads, in part:

The concerns we face in the United States are great, but they are not greater than God. . . . In reverence to God and with love for others, evangelical Christians engage in the public square — not for our own sake but for the health of the nation and world.

Evangelical Christians will not always agree on the specifics of governance . . . . However, from our understanding that all people are made in the image of God, we do hold many callings and commitments in common, including:

- protecting religious freedom and liberty of conscience;
- safeguarding the nature and sanctity of human life;
- strengthening marriages, families and children;
- seeking justice and compassion for the poor and vulnerable;
- preserving human rights;
- pursuing racial justice and reconciliation;
- promoting just peace and restraining violence;
- and caring for God's creation.

Today, there are 2.18 billion Christians in more than 200 countries of the world. In all of these places, according to the apostle Peter, we are “sojourners and exiles” because, above all else, our citizenship is in heaven.

At the same time, all of us who follow Jesus also live in an earthly nation. So Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles is good counsel to us, as well.

Like the exiles Mordecai and Esther, and like the displaced Daniel and his friends, we want to follow the good counsel of Jeremiah:

- to devote ourselves to the welfare of our household,
- to do our day-to-day work well; and as we can, beyond this,
- to work for the health of our nation and world.

Here in the United States, however the upcoming election turns out, whether we are *elated* or *despondent*, whether we are *hopeful* or *fearful*, this is *still* our mandate:

- to devote ourselves to the welfare of our household,
- to do our day-to-day work well; and as we can, beyond this,
- to *continue* to work for the health of our nation and world.

The reason we do this is so that our household, our community and nation, and all the nations of the world may realize the promise of God though Jeremiah:

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes . . .

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