

# A Future with Hope

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Jeremiah 29:4-14

Sermon Series:  
Gospel in Life

*How can a  
2,600-year-old  
story of exile  
speak to our  
modern day?*

**E**xile has become something of an edgy word in our day. It's a popular name for rugby teams, rock bands and a fictional group of characters who inhabit the Marvel Comic Universe. Exile is also the most seminal event in the Old Testament. The Jews, God's chosen people, are led into the Promised Land, only to be forced into exile for 70 years.

Living in exile isn't merely a thing of the past. There are more refugees in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, 43 million, than any other period in world history. Some of you count yourself among this number.

There is another kind of exile more existential in type. Some of you are living a life you could never have imagined for yourself. You feel estranged (exiled, if you will) from the life you envisioned for yourself. Perhaps your high school years are playing out differently than you expected. Maybe you fantasized about being married or raising a family by this stage in life. Perhaps marriage and family life are playing out differently from the way you expected them. Maybe you envisioned a different career path or more progress up the corporate ladder. You pictured

yourself more settled or content by now. Maybe you imagined amassing a personal fortune or attaining a certain standard of living.

If I am describing your situation, Jeremiah 29 can speak into your life. How can a 2,600-year-old story of exile speak to our modern day? Just you wait and see. This passage offers hope for any of us living in exile.

Jeremiah begins his prophetic ministry in 627 BC. In Michelangelo's rendition of Jeremiah that he painted onto the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Jeremiah's posture suggests weariness and despair over the events that are about to unfold in his life.

Assyria is a world superpower when Jeremiah arrives on the scene. In 607 BC, Assyria collapses and a new superpower bursts onto the world stage: Babylonia. After Assyria's downfall, Israel finds itself situated precariously between two nations vying for world supremacy: Babylon to its east and Egypt to its south. Israel's kings frequently side with Egypt, inciting Babylon to go on the offensive and rout Jerusalem in 586 BC. Jerusalem now lies in ruins. Its walls are destroyed, its temple is

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ransacked and its people dragged into exile.

Our Scripture lesson contains a portion of the letter God communicates to His exiled people through Jeremiah. It begins, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon" (29:4). God's people erroneously assume—we are God's chosen people. We can do pretty much anything we want. Nothing will happen to us. God is still on our side. Israel's prophets are eager to reinforce this message and tell people what they want to hear. Jeremiah offers a dissenting opinion. The pronoun "I" refers to God, who is somehow behind this exile. God has allowed the Babylonians to carry His people into exile as a judgment upon their apostasy. They have turned away from God and must now suffer the consequences.

The quick fix prophets of Jerusalem predict a speedy return from their exile, perhaps a year or two at most (28:2-4). But the curmudgeon Jeremiah declares, "Thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's 70 years are complete...will I bring you back to this place" (29:10). Seventy years in the Bible represents a lifetime (Psalm 90:10). This present generation won't see Jerusalem; only the next generation will be coming home.

God's directives to His people, in verses 5-6, are filled with imperatives: "*Build* houses and *live* in them, *plant* gardens and *eat* what they produce, *marry* and *have children*." You might as well unpack your bags and make the best of it. You'll be living in Babylon for the foreseeable future.

Verse 7 contains the most shocking words in this letter: "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." Do you see the incongruity? God wants His people to promote the welfare of the ruthless nation who carried them into exile. Jeremiah sounds like a spokesman for the Babylonian Chamber of Commerce! Welfare is the Hebrew word, *shalom*, which is comprehensive in scope. It refers to the peace, health, safety and well-being of these pagan Babylonians. Pray for them, because when Babylon prospers, you'll prosper also. The proverb often attributed to John F. Kennedy comes to mind here, "A rising tide lifts all boats."

Jeremiah offers, in verse 11, these gracious words, "For 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." Biblical hope isn't wishful thinking; it is unrealized certainty. Israel's present

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predicament isn't fatal. Even in exile God's people have certainty. God has a long-term plan for His people.

If you read further, you'll find God directing Jeremiah to buy land in Jerusalem at precisely the moment when they are driven into exile. God wants Jeremiah and his descendants to invest in their eventual return. "I will bring you back to this place and I will settle you in safety, for you are my people and I am your God" (32:38). "I'll never draw back from doing good to you" (32:40).

This sermon, as I've said before, is for people living in exile; for any among us who are living a life you could have never imagined for yourself. Don't live your fantasy life or your idealized life or your previous life. Stop living someone else's life. Let go of the life you laid out for yourself and start living your life.

There are lessons to be learned in exile. I think here of Alexander Solzhenitsyn who was exiled to a Soviet labor camp for eight years. As he boarded a train for this work camp, a woman handed him a pocket New Testament which altered the course of his life. When he emerged from eight years in labor camp, he didn't lament his exile. He blessed it, knowing it was there that he discovered that "the meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we have grown used to thinking, in

prospering, but in the development of the soul."

I feel like an exile in this increasingly secularized culture. Unlike Israel's exile, the process of secularization is not marked by a sudden hostile takeover. Instead, the Christian church is losing ground by a thousand little accommodations to a growing secular world view.

We may feel like exiles living in a foreign land. But the danger is regarding this exile as an excuse for ignoring essential dimensions of the church's calling. There is a "the-world-is-not-my-home, I'm-just-a-passing-through" mindset in the church. Sure, we are pilgrims and sojourners on this earth, but during our time here, this world is precisely our home.

What did God say to His people in exile, far away from their homeland? Build houses and live there, plant gardens and raise families. As long as we are living here, God calls us to seek the welfare of this city.

Washington, D.C. is an immense, diverse city. There are so many competing beliefs and values in this metro area; so much so that we are tempted to retreat to our homes and churches. God says through Jeremiah to invest in D.C. Embrace where you live. How else are we going to know how to speak into our culture unless we invest in it? Build houses and make yourselves at home.

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Coach, teach and act neighborly. Plant gardens and care for the earth. Christians ought to be leading the charge in creation care, yet we have allowed environmental reform to become so politicized that we ignore God's clear call to stewardship of the earth. Marry and have children. Increasingly, I hear people say they wouldn't ever want to raise children in this violent, crazy, sex-saturated world. Pshaw! It's arrogant to assume this present generation is harder to raise than previous generations.

We are embarking today on an eight week journey called *Gospel in Life*. We'll be utilizing a workbook in small groups and classes with the same title. *Gospel in Life* is a curriculum written by Pastor Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.

Let's unpack these three words: *Gospel in Life*. The first word gospel originates from an Anglo-Saxon word "godspell" meaning good story. The four gospels in the New Testament tell us a really good story of salvation and redemption. The second word in the sentence, the preposition "in," acts as all prepositions do as a connecting word. "In" connects gospel with our third word "life." Our very life is the place where God intends this good story to be lived. God wants us to live this good story in our hearts, homes

and communities. We talk often about discipleship in this church because we are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus. We are not seeking to live a fantasy life; we are seeking to live out this gospel in our real life.

Let me take you back to our mission as a church: "In Christ Together for the World." Our goal is to center our life "in Christ." Disciplines like reading Scripture and prayer help us focus our life in Christ. We are "in Christ together." We're convinced we can be better Christians together than we can be alone. That's why we ask you to make worship a priority each Sunday and engage with each other through small groups and classes. Picture this church as an equipping center. Our job is to equip you for service in the world. We are "in Christ together for the world." The welfare of this city is central to our mission.

Stop living your fantasy life or someone else's life and start living your life. An early Hassidic rabbi named Zusya said it best. "In the world to come, God will not ask me, 'Zusya, why are you not more like Moses?' Instead, he will ask me, 'Zusya, why are you not more like Zusya?'"