

*A sermon preached by The Reverend Canon Dr. David J. Anderson at Evensong, Sunday, October 16, 2022, at St. Jude's Church, Oakville. (Psalms 114, 115; Jeremiah 29.1-4-14; Matthew 16.13-20)*

I speak to you in the name of The Most Holy and Blessed Trinity. Amen.

We are quite accustomed to think about the God's ancient people as inhabiting their own land, but that was not always the case. The later chapters of the Book of Genesis tell of the time before nationhood when the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob only had the promise of a land. The Book of Exodus, begins with the nation that had grown from that family in slavery in Egypt, and ends with that nation on the edge of moving into the Promised Land.

There are also several Old Testament books that are set in the times when the land of Judah and Jerusalem have been overrun and its people carried away in exile.

The prophet Jeremiah began his ministry some time around the year 627 BC and died some time after 587. His message to God's people was not always welcome. While false prophets brought a popular message, preaching, "peace, peace," Jeremiah was warning the people of the destruction coming at the hands of the Babylonians.

We read, for example, that during the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah, the Lord instructed Jeremiah to make a yoke with a message that the nation would be made subject to the king of Babylon. This led to a sort of high noon showdown between Jeremiah and the false prophet Hananiah, who removed the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and broke it and prophesied that within two years the Lord would break the yoke of the king of Babylon. But Jeremiah responded, prophesying: "You have broken the yoke of wood, but you have made instead a yoke of iron (28.13).

Jeremiah was persecuted for his unpopular message. After Jeremiah had prophesied that Jerusalem would be handed over to the Babylonian army, the king's officials tried to convince King Zedekiah that Jeremiah should be put to death for disheartening the soldiers and the people. Zedekiah actually gave them permission to proceed and they threw Jeremiah into a cistern where he sunk down in the mud. The intent seemed to be that Jeremiah would die of starvation and therefore the officials would not be directly guilty of his blood. For his part, Jeremiah was eventually rescued by an Ethiopian who pulled him out of the cistern, however, Jeremiah did remain imprisoned until the time that Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army in 587 BC.

When we come to our First Reading, many of the citizens of Jerusalem have been taken away in exile to Babylon. Solomon's Temple had been torn down and the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins. Their city destroyed, God's people find themselves in exile, far from home, living as outsiders, strangers in a foreign land. Their homes, their livelihoods, and in some cases, their families are gone.

In some ways their situation resembles that of those in our world today who suffer displacement either because of the violence of war, the rise of despotic rule, or because of the fire, storms, or floods caused by climate change. Many suffer displacement because of changing economic circumstances. Many people find themselves with no soft place to land.

When lives are so drastically changed, it is easy to feel like the foundations are falling apart; we are tempted to chase after any bit of good news in the midst of catastrophe if it offers any sense of hope.

That is what happens to God's people in their exile in Babylon. False prophets tell them that their predicament will be short-lived; things will soon return to normal when they return to Jerusalem. When we feel that all is lost we are vulnerable to fall prey to false promises, conspiracy theories, and become victims of all sorts of scams and lies.

This is where Jeremiah begins his unpopular message, telling the people that things will not return to *normal* for a long time. “For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon’s *seventy* years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil my promise and bring you back to this place” (v.10).

With the COVID-19 pandemic we have been through two years of disruption. In some ways our experience was also one of exile. We were exiled from our communities, from our extended families, from our regular activities, from our faith communities. In some ways our exile has left us with broken walls that need to be repaired. Things are not quite the same and we are aware that it will take a while to build things back.

Imagine the effect of being told that we would endure a seventy-year exile. A multi-generational exile. It would be hard to underestimate the sense of trauma, loss, and grief.

However! However there is a reason to hope, even in the midst of shattered dreams. The prophet Jeremiah tells the people of God that they can bloom where they are planted, making the best of their present circumstances. They can create a *new normal* as they learn to live in their new reality, making it their home, building houses and settling in, planting gardens and enjoying the produce, establishing families and strengthening community (vv.5-6), not only for their own sakes but also for the sake of their neighbours (v.7).

In a world turned upside down, the people of God are called (encouraged!) to remain faithful no matter where they are or what circumstances they face. In contrast to the false prophets, Jeremiah tells us that the news doesn’t have to be good in order for us to live out the good news, and in this way to experience God’s blessing and be a blessing to others.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.