

Nobody Planned on This

Jeremiah 29:1-7

August 2, 2020

Center Church, Hartford

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

If you don't have a piece of paper or an electronic device on which you can write while you are in worship, take a minute now and get something because today I'm going to ask you to make some notes.

Let me tell you about Jeremiah. He was different from the other prophets of his time. The other prophets liked to tell kings and powerful people what they wanted to hear, whether or not it was actually a word from God and whether or not it was true. Those prophets got promotions and nice houses. Jeremiah, on the other hand, was a pain in the neck, because he told it like he saw it and like he heard it from God. From time to time a ruler would throw him into jail for a while because they didn't like what he had to say and that he said it publicly, so everyone would know. But he just kept doing what he knew he had to do.

Now, when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon decided to invade Jerusalem and cart off the rulers, the wealthy, and the very best artisans, leaving behind the poor, most of the prophets who were still in Jerusalem and those in exile in Babylon assured those in exile and those at home that this would be a brief exile because God was going to make a miracle and get them all out fast. Babylon would just fade away into history. Yes, you heard that right.

But not Jeremiah. He perceived that this exile would last a long time, and he saw one of his missions as helping those in exile understand what God needed of them over the long haul. If everything changes fast and you think things will change back quickly, you just sort of wait it out. But if you have to put up with the change for months or years, it's different. You've got to decide how you will live in the new reality.

Jeremiah wrote a letter to those in exile and told them to pick up their lives and move forward. You see these exiles were not in prison or enslaved, it wasn't like that. They were captured to keep them from making trouble for Babylon's rulers. But they were essentially free within the bounds of the territory in which they were placed. So, Jeremiah instructs them that God wants them to build houses. Now you don't build a house unless you plan to stick around for a while. God instructs them to plant gardens that will produce food. Any of you gardeners know that it takes a while for a garden to produce a crop. By its very nature, a garden is a hope for the future. God instructs them to get married and have children and encourage their children to get married (so this was going to last at least a generation, and we think waiting a year for a vaccine is a hardship!). In other words, be the people you were in Jerusalem in this new place; be the people of God wherever you are.

Then the last instruction: "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." Wait, what? Seek the welfare of this place inhabited by our enemies? Shouldn't we be trying to sabotage it instead? Shouldn't we be angry and uncooperative? But, no, God instructs them to help make the city strong because if the city is strong and healthy, then they will be, too. Seeking the welfare of their place of exile does not mean being disloyal to Jerusalem or to God; it means that they are ensuring their best chance at survival and, eventually, returning home. Living like this will be hope in action.

Now I am no Jeremiah, but I can pretty safely say, along with Dr. Fauci, that our version of exile, this pandemic, is not going away soon. For the first couple of months, I think most of us were kind of biding our time, trying to figure out how to make ends meet, cleaning out our basements, helping our children study, learning how to bake bread, all hoping we could get back to normal soon. Not gonna happen, is it? For some of us, that is dire news, because our jobs have not come back and that extra \$600 from the

government is going to stop and the \$1200 was spent long ago. This is when your community, with you in exile, can step up and help you. This is when we need to be there for each other, seeking the welfare of people we know in this situation and people we don't, for all our well-being is tied up together in the midst of all this. If you need help, please ask. And if you know someone struggling and you can help them, this would be the time to seek the welfare of those in our community in need.

That's one way we can hear Jeremiah's call in our own situation of exile. Another is that we need to keep getting more and more creative with how we can be church in this time. This is not a temporary change; it's long term. It is pushing us to change faster than we had planned, but that's how it happens sometimes. How can we adapt ourselves to our current situation and actually be a church that worships, that reaches out into the community in actions for justice and charity, that reaches out to people who are spiritually exhausted by this pandemic and offers them the living water they need to survive, that loves one another, that helps form the faith of our children, teens and adults for **these** times? Simply sitting back and waiting will not do, because the welfare of our congregation and of our cities and towns is threatened.

Here's where your list making comes in. Jeremiah's list for the exiles was: build houses, plant gardens and eat the food, enter into relationships and form families, seek the welfare of the city.

If we are in this for the long haul (hopefully not for a generation), then what does our list look like? What is God calling us to do and be for each other and for others out there, including those whom we might term enemy or at least not "one of us?" We're going to have a time of silence for you to begin to think about this and begin to make notes.

Even though we receive Holy Communion apart from one another, we still are made by it into the body of Christ. We are called to be that body of Christ in pandemic or out of pandemic, wherever

we are. What does that look like for you? And if your list includes ideas for the church, please send them along to me and add what you would like to do to make those ideas reality! Let us seek the welfare of the places we are and the times in which we live. Amen.