



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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**A Sermon by
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"Build, Plant, Seek"

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. It said: ⁴Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take 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. ⁷But 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.

If you could live at any time in history, in any place, where would you like to be and when? It is an interesting and revealing discussion to have. People respond in a number of ways.

- They would like to live in Philadelphia in 1776.
- They would like to live in Jerusalem when Jesus paraded into town.
- They would like to live in the 1800's in the "Old West".
- They would like to live in Greece during the time of Plato and Aristotle.

If you could live at any time in history, in any place, where would you like to be and when?

I wonder if any of us would respond, "Poland 2016." Would it even come to mind? My guess is that most of us would choose a different place and a different time. Perhaps we have an image of an easier life, a more interesting life, or an exciting time. Would any of us pick Poland, OH in 2016? The reality is we are here, now. With all its faults, with all its challenges, with all the improvements that we feel should be made... this is where we are. How should we live?

This is the challenge of the text today from Jeremiah. The prophet was addressing a large group of people who wanted to be somewhere else, at a different time in history. This morning I would like to examine the context for Jeremiah's message. Then our own context, and conclude by addressing the question, how are Christians to live when we feel trapped by time, chance and circumstance.

I

Jeremiah was not addressing a happy group of people. His message was for Jewish people who were taken to Babylon in captivity. They were taken from homes and routines. But most importantly, they were taken from the center of their faith and being. Their faith was absolutely focused on the Temple in Jerusalem, because it was the dwelling place of God. They believed if they were removed from proximity to the Temple, they were away from God. Can you imagine the pain and grief of a people who are not only torn from their homeland but also from their God? Psalm 137 tells of their sorrow:

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs...
How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?*

How could they sing to God, when they were away from the Temple and the Holy City? How could they worship God and sing the songs of joy in this strange land, with its different customs, its different language, its different way of life, its different beliefs?

The Jews in captivity in Babylon wanted a message of hope. They desperately wanted to hear something that would give them the reason to live.

Jeremiah knew that the people would be in captivity for a long time, for generations. Consequently, they should build houses, plant gardens and start their families because they would be there over 40 years. *"Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."*

God, the Lord of the Temple, was with them, even in exile. This message was not only a word of hope to the Jews in exile, it would become the paradigm for Judaism for nearly 25 centuries. As the Jewish people were scattered throughout the globe, they survived, and were resilient because they sought the welfare of the city where they were. They knew that in its welfare, they would find their own welfare and their life's purpose. Their religion, formerly focused on the Temple, could exist, (even thrive!), in the world outside of Jerusalem.

II

Our context is different than the people of Judah during the Babylonian Captivity. We have not been removed from our homes and dragged to Canada. Yet, there is a sense on the part of many of us that we are truly aliens in a strange land. We may not be captives in Babylon, but we find ourselves prisoners in a life that pulls us far away from the center of our being:

- Captives to a life that lacks meaning.
- Captives to a life that does not satisfy.
- Captives to living where we would rather not be, in a time we don't like.
- Captives, believing that there should be something more.
- Captives deprived of hope.
- Captives, pulled by life's circumstances away from what gives meaning and life... alienated from God!

We may be far from Babylon in the 7th century before Christ, but many, today, are captives, chained to circumstance: victims of time and chance; living without hope. We too find ourselves raising our voices with the ancient people of Judah: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in this strange land? Our modern Babylon takes many forms.

- We may be captive to an illness or injury. How do we sing the lord's song from a hospital bed?

- We may be captive in our professions, our life's calling. It may take the form of unemployment, under-employment, or just work that lacks joy and purpose. How do we sing the Lord's song at a job we hate, or worse yet, without a job?
- We may be captive to the alien land of habit and addiction. This is the insidious control of powers that seem greater than we are. They direct our lives, and we soon become enslaved by them. How do we sing the Lord's song when we have surrendered the control of our lives to something so alien?
- We may be captive to our cultural obsession with consumption. This is the emptiness that seems to pervade 21st century life. It is, what the poets of a previous generation called a "wasteland" of the spirit. Something important seems to be missing and leaves a hole in our being. We try and fill it with things, and things, and more things.... But the emptiness lingers. How do we sing the Lord's song in a land of plenty, where we still feel lacking?
- We may not be in Babylon with the captives from Judah and Jerusalem, but each of us is intimate with our own modern captor, and we cry out through our tears the old lament, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in this strange and alien existence?" We are often not where we want to be. Does God speak to us there and then?

III

Yes! It is a strange message upon first hearing:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they 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 ... seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you... for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

In other words, live fully in the world where you find yourselves! Bloom where you are planted!

My father spent the last two weeks of his life under hospice care in a nursing facility on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. I went down to visit him and stayed in the room with him for an extended period of time. He had an orderly who was entrusted with his personal care. I got to know this man better. He was in his late 40's, perhaps 50. He spoke English with an accent that betrayed a Middle-Eastern background. The cross that hung from his neck betrayed his faith in Christ. Whatever joy and comfort my father experienced in his last days came from his interactions with this individual.

The tasks were not pleasant: taking care of hygienic needs, feeding, moving my father around, and yet this individual did it with a sense of joy and purpose. He was there, in that room, to bring healing and hope to one who was dying. I would show up in the morning to see my father and this orderly would greet me with a big smile, an open hand, and as things became grimmer, a comforting hug. I was happy that he was there for my father, and also for me.

It was only later that I learned more about this man's story. He was from a middle eastern country that was in political ferment and as a Christian he left with his family to escape persecution and death. When he came here, the one job that he could find was working as an aid in this nursing facility, doing the menial tasks of that position. I learned that he was a physician in his former country. He enjoyed the prestige and comfort of that position, yet circumstances took him away.

But here is the thing... He was not a captive! He was not where he wanted to be. He was not doing what he wanted to do... but somehow he knew that this is where God placed him. He sought the

welfare of the place where he was.. and thus found his own welfare, joy, happiness, and purpose. He built, planted, and sought. He sung the Lord's song in the halls of that nursing facility... He sung it in his attitude, his demeanor, the care that he brought to his often menial and routine tasks, the comfort he brought to the dying.

Build, Plant, and Seek.

If you could live at any time in history, in any place, where would you like to be and when? It is enjoyable speculation, but we live here, and we live now in 2016. The good news is that we are called to build, plant and seek God and the welfare of others.... here and now. In doing so, we find our hearts singing a joyous song: the Lord's song in a strange and alien land.... And we are free. Amen.