

Living in Babylon

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Note: This sermon came at a difficult time in America, which had invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq, and was thus pouring enormous resources into two simultaneous wars. George W. Bush was running for a second term as President, and would be re-elected the following month.

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. "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 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; 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."

Jeremiah 29: 1,4-7

This has been a rough year where I work. Over the past five years or so, our center split right down the middle, and polarized into two camps in a two story building: upstairs and downstairs. The specifics don't matter, but the squabbling got so bad that we did what no sane unit does, which is attract the attention of upper administration. Our director resigned, and when we were unable to agree which camp the new director should come from, the higher-ups did what no sane administration ever does, which is to appoint two co-directors, one from each camp, with co-equal authority. Needless to say, that didn't work either, so after two more years the administration stepped in again and announced that within two weeks they would appoint a single new director for the whole center.

Two weeks came and went with no announcement. Three weeks. Four weeks. Our camp grew increasingly restless, because no one from upstairs had been approached about stepping in. Around the campfire, we speculated on what might be happening, and arrived at three possible scenarios, all of them bad. First, perhaps they were looking for someone from outside the center to step in, someone with no history with either camp, and that's why we had heard nothing. Second, and worse, perhaps they were talking with someone from downstairs who they misguidedly believed had a chance of being able to communicate with both floors. Then third was the option that we all agreed was worst of all but least likely, that they would empower the ring leader of the downstairs, handing them a clear win. We agreed that even our administration could not do something so myopic, but nevertheless we discussed escape plans should the unthinkable happen.

You can guess what happened.

And it happened right after Palm Sunday. I spent Holy Week here stewing about what to

do, having vowed to leave the center in scenario three. It was in Easter Vigil that I felt clearly called to stay, to lay down my resentments and trust that God was in this. The right path that became clear to me was my least favorite spiritual discipline: submission. I gave my ego some bitter medicine, and I stayed.

A few weeks later, I opened up the lectionary to see what the readings were for October 10, when I was scheduled to preach. Jeremiah was waiting there to meet me.

Now, prophets had it tough at work, too. They were often required to say and do disturbing things that ran completely counter to the popular politics of their time. None of them seemed to be delighted with their call or their message. In Jeremiah's case, he had been preaching for 20 years the downfall of his own nation, a doom that would ultimately fall upon himself as well. Terrorized by the prospects of being attacked, the people of Judah clung to visions of national glory and assurances by the state church that God was on their side and would protect them. To kings whose heads were filled with visions of nationalistic glory, Jeremiah counseled negotiation and submission to the enemy. No surprise that he suffered ostracism, imprisonment, and attempts on his life. And then it happened.

Travel back to the sixth century BC, a dark turning point in the life of the Southern Kingdom, Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. They sat between two powerful warring empires: Assyria and Egypt. The nationalistic King Josiah, who had formed an alliance with Babylon, was captured and executed by the Egyptians. His son Jehoiakim placed his bets on Egypt, and stopped payment of tribute to Babylon. As a result, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem and exiled the royalty, the educated, the leaders, priests, and prophets, to Babylon, not far from modern Baghdad.

Imagine it. The city you have lived in securely all your life is conquered by a neighboring superpower, about as far away from us as Mexico. Many of your friends and neighbors are dead, as are some of your family. Your name appears on a list, and one night soldiers knock on your door, arrest you, and send you off to Mexico City as a prisoner. You don't speak the language. You don't like the food. You despise the national religion. Everything that is familiar to you – your church, home, city, work, loved ones, wealth – are all gone. A hated foreigner, you will always have only menial drudge work, no influence, and you will live in poverty until the day you die.

It is that forlorn group to whom Jeremiah addresses his letter. He was left behind in Jerusalem because he had been openly prophesying and advocating submission to Babylon, and was therefore regarded as a friend of the occupying army. So what does Jeremiah now say to his countrymen in exile, living in Babylon? Instead of "I told you so," he has words of advice from the Lord:

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; 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.

Some years later, Jeremiah would have the opportunity to live out his own advice. Jerusalem had again rebelled against Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar had again besieged the city, cutting off its supplies. Death roamed the streets, and this time starvation was so severe that the people had resorted to cannibalism. The Assyrian army was literally at the gates, and within a few days would breach the wall, slaughter its inhabitants, and burn the Temple and the city to the ground. It is on this day that Jeremiah receives news of the death of his cousin, which by Jewish law gives him first right to purchase a field that the cousin owned. Not exactly a seller's market. Yet obedient to God's counsel, Jeremiah assembles the required witnesses and purchases the field as a witness to hope.

Eighteen hundred years later, a young Italian priest also lived in a time of widespread fear of a terrifying enemy. The year was 1219, and Europe's adversaries were the nations of Islam, vilified as an evil empire. The Crusades had been a military disaster for a hundred and twenty years, destroying middle-eastern cities and countless lives on both sides. Blessed by the church, the armies of the Fifth Crusade had marched off to attack Egypt once again and reclaim the holy lands for God and Christ. In this fearful time, when any talk of negotiation suggested weakness, the young priest struggled with his conscience. If he spoke his mind and heart, he would surely be considered a fool and a traitor, perhaps even excommunicated. If he kept silent, he knew that he could never live with his own conscience. So he traveled to the front, to Egypt, to meet both with Islamic leaders and with the Christian leaders of the Crusade, to counsel peace and mutual understanding. He failed, as did the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Crusades for the next fifty years. He failed to stop the war, but he had been true to his conscience, and had done what he could to promote love and hope. His name was Francis of Assisi.

Seven hundred years later, a young Jew named Elie Wiesel would be among the survivors of the Nazi death camps, where eight million Jews were slaughtered. For the next fifty years of his life, Wiesel would struggle with his loss of faith in God, and with how one can live in a world where such monstrous evil is possible. In his book, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to Humanity*, the late Robert McAfee Brown recounts the stages of darkness through which Wiesel passed, as reflected in his writings. Is the world a hopelessly evil place, with no God? Should one withdraw into despair? In the end, after decades of spiritual struggle, Wiesel resolved that with or without God, the way to live with integrity in a world possessed by evil is to live against that evil, to commit whatever time and resources you have to make a positive difference.

Now our own nation seems to be at a vital turning point in both domestic and international affairs. We are at a decision point as to how we will care for the poor among us, where we will place our trust, how we will relate to other nations of the world. As for myself, I am heart-sick that we continue to see war as a solution - to drug problems, to terrorism, to war itself; that we practice human torture as a reasonable means if we judge the end to be worthy. I am distressed that we seem willing, for the promise of security, to sacrifice the very freedoms that America at its best represents. I am ashamed that in one of the richest nations in the world, we worship at the altar of greed; that we act as though it is the ultimate good that individuals should be able to stockpile for themselves as much personal wealth as possible, to squander on needless luxuries while fellow citizens go without food or shelter and beg for health care. I grieve that we continue to invest our trust and national fortune in ever more lethal weapons of mass destruction, while decrying other nations who follow our example.

Whatever the outcome of next month's Presidential election, there will be despondent members among us, to whom the new political terrain may seem nearly as bleak as the plains of Babylon did to those exiles twenty-six centuries ago. If you can imagine yourself an exile on November 4, Jeremiah's word tells us that God is in even this, and we have work to do:

Build homes, plant gardens, fall in love, and nurture your family. Seek the welfare of the country where you find yourself a stranger, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its well-being you will find your own.