

Sunday October 12, 2025

Jeremiah 29:1, 4 –7

Church of All Nations

This Sunday we return to the prophet, Jeremiah who we spent a couple of weeks with prior to the Season of Creation. Remember he had been variously denouncing the evils of his people, shedding buckets of tears over their hardness of heart and prophesying calamity if they continued in their rejection of Yahweh's justice. Well during the Season of Creation it has all come to pass. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian hordes have descended upon Jerusalem, captured the city and in a few instalments it appears, carted off the leading citizens to Babylon, the greatest city on the face of the earth.

Imagine this dystopian scenario... Our national government has just collapsed as the result of an invading foreign power. There is no remnant of the military. There is no government. The Prime Minister, Cabinet and all Parliament have all been exiled. All of the academics, scientists and business leaders are gone and even skilled labourers have been separated from their families and exiled as well.

This happened to Israel in 587 BCE. Known simply as The Exile it was the second formative event in the history of the nation. The first being The Exodus. You can use those two events to construct salvation history within the Hebrew scriptures. First, after 430 years of slavery, God liberated Israel from Egypt in the Exodus some time around 1400 BCE. Then, eight hundred years later, there is tragic Exile to Babylon in the year 586/7 BC. These seminal events of exodus and exile reverberate throughout both the Old and New Testaments as two pillars of the way God works in human history, and even in our own personal histories. Interesting that both involve international events. Significant because in this period of nations worshipped multiple gods, thinking of their god as lording it over particular aspects of life, and, if supreme, only supreme in the geographical area where they were worshipped.

Yet in Exodus and Exile Israel is proclaiming and witnessing their God, Yahweh, is the Supreme Lord not just of Israel but able to impact and work through the rise and fall of other nations.

Show slides of journey from Jerusalem to Babylon

For the ancient Hebrews, the destruction of Jerusalem and deportation to pagan Babylon was unthinkable, beyond comprehension. What had

happened? Where were Yahweh's mighty acts of power? Was not Israel God's inviolable and elect people, and if so how could He surrender them to a pagan nation? Exile to Babylon began a period of subjugation and captivity. It signalled failure and even punishment. Certainly it meant despair, for the elite Jews who were deported and for the common people of the land left behind in the rubble of Jerusalem.

How was a Hebrew deported to Babylon, torn from home and everything familiar and dear, to understand exilic life? Jeremiah offers advice that few people probably wanted to hear. Writing from besieged Jerusalem, he sent a letter to the exiles who had been deported to Babylon.

The questions asked by the exiles were: how long was this humiliating exile to continue and what are we to do, trapped as we are in a heathenish city, characterized by customs and practices that are both repulsive to us and just as surely repulsive to YHWH? Certainly the prophet will say to us that we must not give in to them, that we must keep ourselves free from their pagan taint, that we must worship YHWH alone and avoid these disgusting Babylonians in all things! The letter from the prophet comes as a shocking surprise. It begins with a very formal announcement that its words are straight from the mighty YHWH. "Thus says YHWH of the armies, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon."

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Jeremiah tells the exiles to embrace their disaster rather than to resist it. There was salvation in the strange place of Babylon as well as in the familiar place of Israel.

Living in exile also requires hope about the future, no matter how dark the present. That, too, was part of God's message - in verses just after today's passage (29:11): "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." That future was far off for those Babylonian exiles, seventy years and two generations before the Persian king Cyrus would rout the Babylonian regime and permit the Hebrews to return home (a story told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah). Hope for the future is

also an admission that we can't have it all now in the present. Some of the exiles never returned home

It's easy to imagine that Yahweh, who called Israel as His elect people, worked only in Israel, on "home turf." That's not true. Jeremiah reminds us that He's at work always and everywhere, in Exodus from Egypt to be sure, but also in Exile to Babylon. This is nothing less than a call for the exiled Judeans to open their lives and hearts to the people among whom they now have been forced to live. Rather than close their lives to the Babylonians, Jeremiah asks them to open up their lives and to learn and grow in the new reality of Babylon.

Cyrus the Great, a Persian King, conquered the Babylonians in 538 BCE and after 70 years gave permission for the Hebrews to return to Palestine. This is significant and why there is a nation of Israel today. The northern tribes that got carted off to an earlier exile in Assyria did not return. Those who stayed in the land did intermarry and became what are referred to in scripture as the Samaritans. The so-called "lost tribes" of Israel. But from Babylon, some did, but it was not the great cascade of jubilant homecomers you might imagine and scriptures suggests in some places. 70 years! Very few would have ever been in their home country. They had done precisely what God had commanded through the prophet - put down roots, planted, married, borne children.

The Babylonian exile was hugely formative in the life of the nation. Despite the prayer for the good of the city instruction Jews did not lose their distinctive identity. It has been said the religion of Israel comes to an end and Judaism begins. What that means is it was during the exile "Synagogue prayers and personal piety instead of temple sacrifice, the creation story, distinctive Jewish identity centred on monotheism, the Sabbath and dietary laws, the composition and editing of the Hebrew bible all were developed as the stalwarts of Jewish religious life.

Faith in God becomes faith in the universality of God. When Jeremiah says, "Pray to Yahweh," he is affirming the fact that *Yahweh can be found even in this distant and foreign land. You can call on Yahweh even without temple and sacrifice and Yahweh will answer.* It is vital for you to ask for God with all your heart—then God will be found in a foreign land, in exile, in an unclean land. For God is present everywhere, even at the margins among the broken, the dejected, and the subjugated. This viewpoint is revolutionary, for Jeremiah shows that their religion does not depend on access to power, to the existence of the temple or the offering of sacrifices.

This City . . . of God

You are the God who has set us

In families and clans and tribes,

In communities and finally in cities.

We give you thanks this day that you are

Lord of this city and all cities.

We pray for this city today,

and for Jerusalem and

Baghdad and

Belfast and

a thousand other cities.

In all our cities this day

there will be crime and sharp moneymaking

and compassion and forgiveness, and generosity,

and regulations about justice and injustice.

Be our God this day and prosper our city.

We pray in the name of the one who wept over the city.

(Walter Brueggemann, [*Prayers for a Privileged People*](#), Abingdon

Played for reflection

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYb_BOcvfpU&list=RDfYb_BOcvfpU&start_radio=1)

[v=fYb_BOcvfpU&list=RDfYb_BOcvfpU&start_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYb_BOcvfpU&list=RDfYb_BOcvfpU&start_radio=1)

By the waters, the waters of Babylon

We lay down and wept, and wept, for thee Zion

We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee Zion

By the waters, the waters of Babylon

We lay down and wept, and wept, for thee Zion

We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee Zion
By the waters, the waters of Babylon
We lay down and wept, and wept, for thee Zion
We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee Zion