

Jeremiah's Letter to Exiles (26Nov17)  
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

"My home is in heaven. I'm just traveling through this world."

Billy Graham is among those to say things like that. It may not surprise you that I dislike this notion, locating faith as bound for far away, not here amid this world, amid creation. As an escape from our reality, not as God's presence and engagement with us. I believe this world *is* our home. You're not destined for someplace else. God created you and put you here, and our faith has its heart and essential vibrancy in that God is traveling through this world with you. Not only is this your home: the home of God is among mortals.

Yet that leaves some explaining to do. Not just for disagreeing with Billy Graham. Much more because this world is obviously so far from perfect and heavenly. We yearn for something much different, something better. That is what this heavenly notion points to—that suffering and worry is temporary, that those who are against you won't be around forever, that the diseases infecting you and strains pulling at you and sadness drowning you will pass, won't win, and besides coming to an end, must be replaced by wellbeing and peace and joy. Even if it's having to wait until this life is over, still, if heaven were your home, then wrongs would by definition be a fluke, with bigger and better intentions for you.

I can't just rule that out. The tension is that we do hope. We don't simply resolve ourselves to say this is the best of all possible worlds, as bad as it is. We don't put up with what's not right as if pretending there's nothing better. Our faith needs to say that God does not intend pointless suffering, that God is neither incompetent nor uncaring.\* There must be some

repair, some refreshing, some restoration and renewal. Whether elsewhere and later or here and now, we want something to hope for, to hope in.

Last week we heard hope with children, in a statement "unto us a child is born," the possibility of the future, the very existence of a child's life as a sacrament of God's good intentions for life, with hope beyond the power of the fiercest empire, the ongoing turning of history, the sense of fresh beginnings.

Yet from Isaiah's word then at the birth of Hezekiah, from his hopefulness that military might would not remain the determining factor against the people, from his declaration that even if you feared the darkness a light would dawn, as Isaiah's vision was looking past the terrors of the Assyrian Empire, they ended up staring a short while later directly at another threat. Isaiah may have been right that the Assyrians wouldn't conquer the southern Kingdom of Judah. But the Babylonians did.

That meant the King and queen mother and family, the officials, the elders, the leaders, the priests, those with prestige or power, as well as pretty much anybody with talent or skills or crafting capabilities was deported, exiled to Babylon. They left behind the dregs of society, the poor and least talented, which included Jeremiah as sort of a remnant prophet, seen as not up to par with the others. And they left behind vast destruction. Much of the capital city of Jerusalem got obliterated.

That eventually included the temple, which bears a few extra words. A month ago, we heard about King Solomon building that temple, viewed as the dwelling place of God. Inside the Holy of Holies, seated on the ark of the covenant, was God's place. That was where to go to get close to God.

Which raised the confounding question for Jeremiah's people in exile: what happened to God? It wasn't only a question of where to

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\* <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=44>

worship; they had to ask *whom* to worship. They were far from God's place, but it may have even been that God was defeated, was gone. So what to make of life then?

Some counseled brief patience, that things would be brighter before long. These so-called false prophets—because they offered false hopes—said that the exiles would be home within two years. It's a variation on being a stranger here traveling through this world, that you just need to put up with it, grit your teeth, grin and bear it for a little while, because it would soon pass. I read a phrase this week referring to their work as "merchandising nostalgia."<sup>\*</sup> Whether looking to the past or offering an impossible future, there is this business of trying to convince people of what will be, or could be, or anything other than present reality.

In the church, this it its own cottage industry, harkening back to the good ol' days, when Sunday School classrooms were full and Wednesday night was church night and theologians had an important voice in shaping society and Christian values helped inform the norms of culture.

Those days aren't coming back. One parent said this week that her child may be the only one in his class who goes to church. Lives are so fully programmed with activities that Sunday morning serves as another slot for more, or else the only pause during a hectic week. You know well you're apologizing too often for allegedly "Christian" morality that's perverse and shameful, like among those who remain vocally supportive of a senate candidate with predatory sexual tendencies. No, none of that points to a very immediate return to glory days of the church in America.

If such fears aren't exactly where we'd set our sights at Advent and MCC anyway, if we're

pleased with Sunday School and using our voice for positive influence in culture and figuring out how to be Christians at this time and to live well, still we know the struggle.

On this day observed as Christ the King Sunday, we remember that this isn't triumphal success or getting swept up in the endtimes, but is Jesus who loved to death, who told us to see him in the poor and hungry and imprisoned and ill and outcast, who revealed God for us not through visions of the future but within our own lives. We say he'll come again. But we need him for now.

That's also what Jeremiah's talking about. He won't claim everything will be alright, or same as it ever was, or all glittery and happy. Neither will Jeremiah suggest remorse that puts up with misery for the meantime. In this letter we heard today, he lets these people know they won't be coming home anytime soon. It will be several generations before the exile is over. Throughout their lifetime, then, God's word is to go ahead—to plant gardens, to have weddings and celebrations, even to strive for the good among their captors, to seek the good of the city where they didn't choose to live.

It's notable within this that Jeremiah doesn't direct them how they ought to practice religion without the temple, when life won't allow for weekly worship. Neither is there the standard biblical injunction not to get tied up risking intermarriage with foreigners. Indeed, before the people leave from Babylon they'll have assimilated enough to take on Babylonian names and adopt some of the language as their own. They'll have had to deal with the rest of life, like other foods and jobs and changed social standing.

With this, I read plenty this week on society receiving strangers, on what it means to be a refugee or immigrant, how they adapt to new cultures and maintain old identities. Those are important cultural conversations.

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<sup>\*</sup> Peterson *Run with the Horses* p150 (cited by Andy Twiton)

But I'm most invested in what God's word means for your lives, especially those places you'd prefer not to find yourselves, for what's not going perfectly, for what seems too often boring or frustrating or, indeed, hopeless. I hear dissatisfaction with jobs and worry at how family gatherings play out and the feeling of wasting valuable time that has been given to you, wondering what else may be and where faith fits into it.

I'm not immune from those things, whether with family friction ill-resolved by me or with spending my vacation day working on this sermon with diversions putzing with laundry and ridiculously mowing my lawn after Thanksgiving while distractedly and desperately pondering selfish wishes and seriously speculating on what would be more important, how I could really make a difference, what exactly life is supposed to be.

In that way, there's a verse in our reading that gets an awful lot of attention. Verse 11 said, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not to harm, to give you a future with hope." This verse suffers the inspirational merchandising of posters, graduation cards, mugs, blogs, and more. I take that to mean people like to focus on what those future plans of God might be, trying to figure out what is in store, to get geared up for it. It could easily lead to the sense that heaven is your home and this world is only an inconvenient temporary holding area. Or, maybe less supernaturally, that God has big intents and purposes to prosper your life, so you probably should be doing something else, more important and exciting, or even just dreaming about it.

Those reading the Reinhold Niebuhr book might have come across the quote that Christians shouldn't presume to know too much about the temperature of hell or the furniture arrangements of heaven. It's the sense that we

can't predict much of any of what is yet to come.

Jeremiah 29:11 says you don't need to predict it. Your future is entirely secure with God. There is no reason in the world to doubt God's unfailing goodness and unconditional love for you. God will give peace more than you can possibly understand. You are secure in God's blessing and promised life. Even if you waste your time or miss the point or blow it completely. Even if you try your hardest and nearly succeed. If you meet everybody's goals or fail at every last expectation. If you feel comfortably at home or like everything is foreign and you're far from where you'd prefer to be, still God's assurance remains with you.

Since you don't need to be elsewhere or elsewhen, the remaining question is, what do you do for now? One good set of answers: don't just pass through. Instead, care for the city. Celebrate life. Build your house and cultivate your garden.